Mirrors for Mankind:
Readings in Art, Film, and Literature

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FOR SARA AND CHARLOTTE AND JEFFERY DAVID

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Part I

Essays on Miscellaneous Topics

Chapter 1

Museum Pieces: Poems About Art

Expressive poets, from the romantic period to our own, have labored under the double threat of belatedness and solipsism. On the one hand, their work can be seen as a struggle (Harold Bloom might term it Oedipal) to establish their identities in the shadows, as it were, of strong and influential precursors. At the same time, expressive poets are more or less constantly in danger of falling into a subjectivity that may prove an impenetrable barrier to their readers, and thus into a kind of voluble silence. Writing poems about paintings and other works of visual art has been one means, both of overcoming such subjectivity and at least side-stepping the issue of literary belatedness. Poetry about art is still, of course, belated, but it enjoys a more reassuring metalinguistic relation with its subject. Poets as disparate as Keats, Rilke, Auden, William Carlos Williams, Pound, and Richard Wilbur have used this approach at one time or another, as we shall see with differing emphases and differing senses of the possibilities of the form.

Remarkable as many of the poems about art have been, it is equally remarkable that there have not been more of them. There are definite limits to this kind of poem. No major poet has made poetry about art his life's work (as, say, certain composers have devoted themselves entirely to *Lieder*). Many poets have sampled the form, either as a corrective for intense subjectivity or to take the measure of a theme suggested by art, and then drawn back into what one might call the area of life studies. Yet the poems about art are more than just exercises; they include some of the most beautiful poems in the Western tradition. This essay proposes to investigate poetry about art as a distinct sub-genre with its own typical concerns, possibilities, and limitations of expression.

It is worth considering at this point the problem of such poems being, so to speak, at a second remove from experience. What I referred to as the area of life

studies is not really as simple as it might seem. In recent years, it has become fairly common to speak of a poem as *reading* other poems. This is perhaps the essence of Harold Bloom's elaborate theories of belatedness. As George Steiner notes, much of the "charged substance" of Western poetry "is previous poetry: Chaucer lives in Spenser who lives in Dryden who lives in Keats"(22). In a similar vein, Richard Poirier has argued that "the kind of coherencies we should start looking for" in literary study "ought to have less to do with chronology or periods than with habits of reading...and with the way poets 'read' one another in the poetry they write"(100-01). This amounts to a view of poetry as metalanguage, an operative form of critical discourse that takes as its object not "the real thing" but a system of signs itself covering "the real thing". Roland Barthes defines a metalanguage in *Elements of Semiology*, as "a system whose plane of content is itself constituted by a signifying system"(90). Semiology, of course, recognizes many orders of signs other than language itself, including the visual signs of painting and the visual and plastic signs of sculpture. Poems about art are thus distinguishable from other poems not because they are uniquely metalinguistic but because they take as their objects visual and sometimes plastic significations.

Poems of this kind share a number of defining characteristics. They attempt to mediate, first of all, not natural objects or linguistic objects but works of plastic art, paintings, sculptures, or in the case of Keats a painted vase. Though engagement of such art calls into play a number of senses, the initial stimulation of the poems is primarily visual. Interestingly, poems about music, where the auditory sense predominates, are much more rare. Indeed, language has a peculiar difficulty dealing with the experience of music. The attempt to describe sound invariably takes refuge in awkward visual metaphors. (Baudelaire's metaphor of the sea is among the best of these.) Poets seem more interested in and more capable with the music that, "when soft voices die, / Vibrates in the memory" (Shelley, "To — "), or "spirit ditties of no tone" (Keats, "Grecian Urn"), or even the "music" that is really a metaphor for the sounds of nature. Images and story, which the visual arts possess in abundance, come more easily into verse than the relatively abstract emotions, no matter how powerful, suggested by a piece of music.

And images and story provide an anchor in objectivity for the poet's feelings. Yet if a poem about art is to be more than a versified art history lecture, it must somehow get beyond the work of art itself, either by dramatizing the interplay of the poet's feeling with the objective image of the work, or by suggesting some other relation between what is inside and outside of the frame.[1] The frame of a

[1]Indeed, some poems, like "Lilith" by Dante Gabriel Rossetti (interestingly a painter himself),

painting provides useful limitations on the imagination of the poet (comparable in its way to the limitations of strict form), but what is interesting *as poetry* is the pull of his imagination against the frame, the tension between a static, objective image and the poet's dynamic, subjective response. Thus, when considering a poem about art, it is usually interesting but not essential to know the work of art itself. The poem provides a concrete linguistic equivalent of the images of the art work, with the important addition of the dimension of time.

The concept of time as it comes into play here is actually somewhat ambiguous. The work of art does not make use of the dimension of actual time, as music and poetry do, though it may imply time in its stilled motion. The poet may play with this implied time, as any apprehender of the work of art is expected to do. Richard Wilbur does this, for instance, in "The Giaour and the Pacha," based on a painting by Delacroix, by taking up the elements of the painting in time and presenting them as dramatic characters:

> The Pacha sank at last upon his knee
> And saw his ancient enemy reared high
> In mica dust upon a horse of bronze,
> The sun carousing in his either eye,
>
> Which of a sudden clouds, and lifts away
> the light of day, of triumph;...
> * * * * *
> Imbedded in the air, the Giaour stares
> And feels the pistol fall beside his knee.
>
> "Is this my anger, and is this the end
> Of gaudy sword and jeweled harness, joy
> In strength and heat and swiftness, that I must
> Now bend, and with a slaughtering shot destroy
>
> The counterpoise of all my force and pride?
> These falling hills and piteous mists; O sky,
> Come loose the light of fury on this height,
> That I may end the chase, and ask not why." (187)

---

treat the subject painting as a mere transparency. In "Lilith," Rossetti seems to ignore the issue of the subject as painting altogether, and proceeds to a conventional, "expressive" sonnet on Adam's first "wife." Rossetti dedicates quite a few of his poems to "pictures," but as he never really engages the issue of the subject *as* art, I have not considered them here.

Shifting from the past tense to the present, and then offering the speculations of a first person speaker (the Giaour), Wilbur suggests a past, present, and future for the painting's figures. The Pacha's killing evokes the moment past, while the Giaour's troubled thoughts at slaughtering "the counterpoise" of his "force and pride" effect the present moment (the moment of the image) and imply the future, into which his regret proposes to last. By providing such thoughts for the Giaour, of course, Wilbur is "reading" Delacroix's image, just as any critic or other viewer might, and expanding the image against the limits of its frame. He remains



Figure 1.1: Delacroix, *The Giaour and the Pacha*

comfortably outside the frame, however. The characters of the painting, under his direction, speak for themselves as objective entities. Unlike Keats or Rilke, Wilbur makes no overt attempt to interact personally with the images of the painting. The poem is one of any number of possible readings or translations of the painting,

each tugging against the necessary finiteness of the original work of art. (Indeed, much the same thing might be argued, in the manner of Walter Benjamin, about a translation of a poem.) Wilbur's poem fleshes out the dimension of time suggested by the painting, but it remains basically within the terms of the painting, and does not take up the other aspect of time that a work of plastic art may suggest: eternity, the work of art itself standing outside time and thus in a confrontational relation to the perceiver.

Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" deals extensively with this other aspect of time. Indeed, Keats plays also with the urn's time, in manner similar to Wilbur's, when he speculates, for instance, about the village that has been left deserted, or toys with the notion of the lovers who cannot consummate their kiss "Though winning near the goal," but he is ultimately concerned with the urn as a "Cold Pastoral," depicting the eternal landscapes of Tempe and Arcady. The poem opens with an invitation for the silent urn to speak from its pastoral seclusion outside time to its time-bound perceivers: "What men or gods are these?" The urn, of course, frozen in time and timeless at once, cannot speak for itself, and so Keats takes up one image after another, imaginatively recreating the time of the urn and then contemplating the urn as an object outside time: "Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought / As doth eternity." Indeed, this teasing out of thought, carefully limited by the images of the urn itself, provides the imaginative body of the poem. The second, third, and fourth stanzas represent the struggle (and play) of Keats's imagination with the silent images of the urn questioned in stanza one. The images provoke various moods in the poet, ranging from celebration of the urn's timeless estate ("Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard / Are sweeter") to a kind of envy of its timelessness ("Ah, happy, happy boughs! that cannot shed / Your leaves, nor ever bid the Spring adieu"), and finally to melancholy awareness of the urn's Arcadian isolation from the concerns of human beings in time ("little town, thy streets forevermore / Will silent be; and not a soul to tell / Why thou art desolate can e'er return."). Keats's ultimate judgment of the urn, much debated by the critics, is ambiguously negative. The urn, though "a friend to man," is still a "Cold Pastoral," whose speech, as imagined by Keats from the silence of its images, is self-referential, a tautology of its plastic form: "'Beauty is truth, truth beauty,'—that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know." It is not, of course, all that a human being needs to know, who knows in time. The urn, as a work of art, stands ultimately outside of time, and like Rilke's *"Brunnen-Mund"* speaks not to us, but murmurs endlessly to itself. Unlike the speaker in whom the voice of a nightingale induces a state between waking and sleeping, the speaker in "Ode on a Grecian Urn" is left distinct and untouched (in

a literal sense) by the art object of his meditation.

This is not the case in what is perhaps the second most famous poem (after Keats's "Ode") about a work of plastic art in the western tradition, Rilke's "Archäischer Torso Apollos."[2] The object of Rilke's meditation is interestingly a fragment, a headless torso that might easily seem simply "*entstellt*," or disfigured. Only an effort of the imagination, the poet/viewer's now as well as the sculptor's, can restore its energy. Unlike Keats's urn, whose soul is stillness and silence, Rilke's torso is perceived in terms of energetic movement and communication, its center being not the missing head, the *Haupt*, but the loins, the place of procreation, that "*Mitte, die die Zeugung trug.*" The torso is not easily read, however. The "*Augenäpfel*" of the "*unerhörtes Haupt*," which we might expect could be easily picked, read, and made our own, are not available to us, and so we must seek something more strange, the torso's *Schauen*, its deep gaze, within, which we can only imagine from the remaining suggestion of it. The torso still "glows" with this gaze, but it has been *zurückgeschraubt*, or turned down like the gas in a candelabra. The signification of the torso, lacunal in itself, must be completed by means of the poet's metalanguage. As in a teleological argument, we are expected to deduce the source of energy from its effects, the "bend of the breast" that "blinds" us, and the "smile" that still runs to the loins. Indeed, as a work of art, the torso is not Arcadian and timeless, but persisting in time, and challenging to us in time. The "translucent plunge" of the shoulders glistens "*wie Raubtierfelle*," like the fur of a wild beast. The living energy implicit in the metaphor of the wild beast's fur is now intensified in a second metaphor: the torso bursts out from all its borders "*wie ein Stern*," or like the wild flux of fire that envelops a star. The torso, as imaginatively viewed by Rilke, is not a self-enclosed, timeless entity, but something constantly testing and straining at the boundaries of itself. But the torso has this power only on the subjunctive possibility that we see it with Rilke's imaginative intensity. Then, and paradoxically, it sees us without eyes, speaks to us, and unlike Keats's urn, changes us irremediably. "*Du mußt dein Leben ändern*," unlike "Beauty is truth, truth beauty," is not self-referential, but aimed

[2]This is only the most famous of quite a few poems Rilke wrote about paintings, stained glass windows, and other works of art. Rilke had a number of important connections with the plastic arts; his wife and several close friends were artists. The form of the poem about art was particularly congenial to him at the time of his work for Rodin, the writing of *Neue Gedichte*, and his obsession with penetrating the essence of various "things." His method is thus to penetrate the work of art and identify with its subject so completely that it is often hard to determine if a particular poem is actually about a painting, or simply treats a "painting-like" subject. In "Archäischer Torso," the speaker and the object are more distinct than this, making it more clearly an example of the genre.



Figure 1.2: Brueghel, *The Fall of Icarus*

at the viewer in the full force of its meaning. The energy of the torso persists in its call on our attention—after this, *you* can never be the same. In our perceiving it, we bring the torso to life, and at the same time the torso meddles with us, and Rilke's poem dramatizes this experience of art and the energy that mediates the two constituents, viewer and object, of the experience.

Rilke was a poet to whom the ironic stance was utterly foreign. His torso is treated as if it existed on at least equal footing with its perceiver. Beyond the title, there is no suggestion of a creator and his artifice. When we move to a poem like "Musée des Beaux Arts" by W. H. Auden, we encounter a different set of coordinates, a different ordination. Auden insists, first of all, on an explicit aesthetic and ironic distance from the object of his meditation. The poem is about Brueghel's "Fall of Icarus," but its title focuses our attention not on the painting but the museum in which it hangs. There is no question of an intense, Rilkean engagement of the painting. We approach it quite consciously as museum visitors. The tone of the poem is dry, conversational, and ironic, almost that of an off-hand lecturer:

> About suffering they were never wrong,
> The Old Masters: how well they understood
> Its human position; how it takes place
> While someone else is eating or opening a window
> or just dully walking along...

Auden's free verse lines, with their casual caesuras and prose-like pace (the frequent semi-colons suggest a tumble of afterthoughts), set up and reflect the main point and lesson of the poem, what one might call the banality of suffering, the rather unromantic notion that even "martyrdom must run its course / Anyhow in a corner, some untidy spot / Where the dogs go on with their doggy life and the torturer's horse / Scratches its innocent behind on a tree." The painting is used, almost another afterthought, as an exemplum of this phenomenon of human nature. It is thus for Auden one subject among others (the museum, the myth itself, the suggested interlocutors at the museum), united only metalinguistically with these. Auden begins his contemplation of the painting with a quite ordinary and prosy transition: "In Brueghel's *Icarus*, for instance." The painting is not locked in a mystery of timelessness, nor does it challenge our own existence with its intensity of being; it is an artifact, to which we may point, and from which we may draw a lesson before continuing on our way. Indeed, the speaker, passing dryly through the museum, is only slightly more observant than the characters in the painting, who continue with whatever work they are doing and do not notice "Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky." Like the characters in the painting, the speaker's voice is "leisurely" and "calm," and like the situation of the painting, ironical.

Icarus, of course, is a highly charged, romantic myth of human aspiration, and was never treated by Elizabethans or Romantic poets with anything but high seriousness. Brueghel mitigated the intensity of his subject in a busy painting that shifts the focus from the impulsively romantic Icarus to the common people. Following Brueghel in this, Auden controls the powerful myth with filtering layers (such as his off-hand tone and indirect approach, the device of presenting the museum before the painting) which surround his experience. Part of this is the explicit presentation of the subject painting as a work of art, and even the mention of the artist's name. In this Auden goes beyond Wilbur, who treats the Pacha and Giaour as primary subjects of dramatic immediacy. Auden's Icarus is a secondary subject, whose moment of time stands aesthetically apart from the time of the poem, the speaker's trip through the museum.[3]

[3]To see this more clearly, one should compare Auden's poem with Stephen Spender's lyric



Figure 1.3: Brueghel, *The Kermess*

William Carlos Williams writes about Brueghel also, but without the distancing self-awareness of Auden. The typical Williams lyric aims at an ingenuous colloquial simplicity, which the best poems achieve. "The Dance," about Brueghel's "The Kermess," is not different from many other of Williams's poems in this respect. Although it explicitly names a painting as its subject, "The Dance" presents its *image* with simplicity and directness:

> In Brueghel's great picture, The Kermess,
> the dancers go round, they go round and
> around, the squeal and the blare and the
> tweedle of bagpipes, a bugle and fiddles

entitled "Icarus." Spender writes delicately and romantically about a hawk, "The aristocrat, superb of all instinct" who "almost had won / War on the sun," and who calls to mind the mythical character. Spender's poem deals with myth mediated through nature, Auden's with myth mediated through art. Spender writes with pure romantic feeling, Auden with ironic detachment. It can be argued, I think, that Auden, standing at an ironic remove from his subject, is less lyrical, but also less in danger here of having his wings melted.

> tipping their bellies (round as the thick-
> sided glasses whose wash they impound)
> their hips and their bellies off balance
> to turn them. Kicking and rolling about
> the Fair Grounds, swinging their butts, those
> shanks must be sound to bear up under such
> rollicking measures, prance as they dance
> in Brueghel's great picture, The Kermess.

As usual, Williams is busy breaking the back of the pentameter line, though here the "off balance" verses with their extreme enjambments echo, or reflect, the off balance positions of the dancers in the painting. In fact, the effect of the rhythm is of just such a continually deferred falling as we imagine for the characters of the painting. Williams's rhythms actually create, in a way none of the other poems we have considered do, the motion, and thus the time of the art image being described. In Auden's poem, the speaker's time and the moment of Icarus' fall are aesthetically distinct; in Rilke's poem the torso's presence in time invades and overwhelms that of the speaker; in Keats's poem the urn stands outside the speaker's time; in Wilbur's poem the speaker accepts the time of the painting's characters as a dramatic condition. Williams reinvents the time of the painting. The overall form of "The Dance," like the dancing it describes, is circular, and thus at once dynamic and static. This also reflects the condition of the painting, where motion is stilled and yet constant motion is suggested. The poem fairly twirls from its first line to its last, which being the same as the first, may be said to begin the poem again, and so on. Williams is not simply transcribing the painting, of course. His imagination is at work, implying the vigorous motion and suggesting "the squeal and the blare and the / tweedle of bagpipes," a far cry from Keats's "spirit ditties of no tone." We should remember, however, that the "ditties" of Brueghel's painting are in themselves "of no tone." The disposition of this poet is to provide them with one. The tone of the poem is one of festive intoxication with the human condition. Beyond the notation that the events described take place in a "picture," no distinction is made between the world of art and the world of human life. Simply by not recognizing a barrier dividing these worlds, Williams mediates effortlessly between them. Williams's poem would like to disappear in its subject; it can be seen as a metalanguage only in the sense that translation cannot help being at some level a metalanguage.

Ezra Pound, Williams's contemporary and friend, is not nearly so innocent or so comfortable with the border vaguenesses of life and art. The *Yeux Glauques*

section of "Hugh Selwyn Mauberley" deals in considerable detail with Burne-Jones's "King Cophetua," a huge painting that dominates one room of the Tate Gallery in London. Pound's concern, however, is primarily the ironic relation of life to art, specifically the tragically ironic relation of the model Elizabeth Siddal to the characters she portrayed in so many Pre-Raphaelite works.

> Foetid Buchanan lifted up his voice
> When that faun's head of hers
> Became a pastime for
> Painters and adulterers.
>
> The Burne-Jones cartons
> Have preserved her eyes;
> Still, at the Tate, they teach
> Cophetua to rhapsodize;
>
> Thin like brook water,
> With a vacant gaze.

Poor Elizabeth Siddal, Rossetti's wife, who modeled for "The Girlhood of the Virgin Mary"[4] as well as the Beggar Maid of "King Cophetua," and perhaps also the prostitute of the poem "Jenny," is seen by Pound as hopelessly muddled between life and art. "Questing and passive.... / Bewildered that a world / Showed no surprise / At her last maquero's / Adulteries," she is drawn to suicide. Most of the poets we have considered are concerned primarily with the relation of a work of art and its perceiver. Pound complicates this relation with consideration of the work's inspirer and progenitor. In other words, he would operate not only on the relation between language and metalanguage but the relation between language and "the real thing". Indeed, the weight of historical allusion is to this effect. The poem is at once a comment on the misunderstood reception of the Pre-Raphaelite movement. But the painting itself remains in focus. The effect of Elizabeth Siddal's eyes on the perceiver at the Tate ("The thin, clear gaze, the same / Still darts out faunlike from the half-ruin'd face") leads Pound back through the artifice of

[4]Dante Rossetti's own poem about "Mary's Girlhood," his first exhibited painting, is a straightforward celebration of the painting's symbolic values, a gloss that evades both the ambiguities of the painting's conception (his use of his own wife as a model for Mary) and the ambiguities of our perception (the clash of cultural and temporal views—Mary is depicted wearing a typical Victorian costume, for instance). Pound, on the other hand, is explicitly concerned with the interplay of three times—the Beggar Maid's, Elizabeth Siddal's, and his own.

the painting to its model and her very human fate. The poem thus imagines and articulates three distinct times: the time of the viewer, the time of the painting, and the time of the painting's model, as it were the mimetic object. Pound's lines are thus suffused with the human mystery of art, the magic by which the living human gesture is taken up, congealed into artistic form, and then released into living human perception. And Pound is acutely aware of the ways the humans—the simple, tragic model or the ironic, compassionate observer—suffer in their contact with the inscrutable timelessness of art itself.

What Roland Barthes claimed of the photograph, that death is its $\varepsilon\iota\delta o\varsigma$, its distinctive form (*Camera Lucida* 15), is true to some extent of any art representative of the fixed human image, as well of the poems that treat such art as their subject. The people in these paintings are dead and they are going to die (see *Camera Lucida* 95). The frozen timelessness of Keats's urn mocks at men as much as it befriends them. The invitation to change our lives given by the torso of Apollo is as terrifying in its way as the angels of *Duineser Elegien.* Icarus' death, amazing in its banal circumstances, dramatizes, more or less, our own. The Pacha and the Giaour, we needn't hesitate to say, are both now in their different afterlives. Even Brueghel's peasants dance over and over a *Totentanz,* which is after all the dance of life with centuries of dust upon it. Pound senses this too, perhaps even more clearly than the others. The Beggar Maid who still stirs us today is dead Elizabeth Siddal, whose body Rossetti once exhumed in order to retrieve the poems he had impetuously buried with her.

In their differing styles, all poems about art confront this fact of the deathly impenetrability of time. The imaginations of the poets range against it and assault it in different ways—passionate, ironic, innocent—and, indeed, this imaginative stir is the stuff of their poetry, but ultimately they are left with their own timefulness in the presence of images that last longer. Poetry about art constitutes, therefore, a tragic genre, a genre of human limitations from which most poets eventually turn away.

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Figure 1.4: Burne-Jones, *King Cophetua and the Beggar Maid*



Figure 1.5: Rossetti, *The Girlhood of the Virgin Mary*

Chapter 2

A Mirror for Mankind: The Pose of Hamlet with the Skull of Yorick

This essay proposes to discuss what I shall call the pose of Hamlet with the skull of Yorick as a motif of special significance in poetry and art.[1] My sense of "motif" here is similar to what George Steiner has called a "topology of culture." Drawing metaphorically on "the branch of mathematics which deals with those relations between points and those fundamental properties of a figure which remain invariant when that figure is bent out of shape," Steiner argues that there are also such "invariants and constants underlying the manifold shapes of expression in our culture."[2] This notion of cultural topologies grows out of Steiner's sense that culture is to a large degree "the translation and rewording of previous meaning"(415). The motif of the pose of Hamlet involves in its different manifestations all three of Roman Jakobson's categories of translation: intralingual, interlingual, and especially intersemiotic.[3]

A version of the vanitas or memento mori motif, the pose of Hamlet can be seen in three distinct though interrelated forms: a man or woman contemplating a skull, a man contemplating the head of a statue, and a woman gazing at a mir-

[1]Copyright ©1990 by Jeffery A. Triggs. All rights reserved. This essay first appeared in *The New Orleans Review* 17.3 (Fall 1990): 71-79.

[2]George Steiner, *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1975) 425.

[3]Roman Jakobson, "On Linguistic Aspects of Translation," *On Translation*, ed. Reuben A. Brower (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1966) 233.

ror. The skull and mirror function interchangeably as truth-tellers and reminders of time and death. The heads of statues, contrasted to the living heads of the observers, are essential skulls. A second division of the motif occurs along religious and secular lines. Saints are reminded of the death of the body by skulls from which they look away. Secular characters, on the other hand, contemplate the objects of vanity directly. A third and possibly a fourth division have to do with traditional and modern instances of the motif and its use in tragedy or comedy. Like the modern use of certain traditional symbols, the modern use of the vanitas motif is characterized by a fluidity which abstraction from the original cultural matrix enables. Tragedy and comedy, of course, involve different ultimate aims, though they may use the same images or language.

I begin, not with *Hamlet*, but a scene in Dekker's *The Honest Whore* (Part I), written four years later, where Shakespeare's motif of a man contemplating a skull is reprised to comic effect.[4] The Duke of Milan has faked his daughter Infelice's death, rather in the manner of Friar Lawrence, with the intent of preventing her marriage to the melancholy Count Hippolito. Hippolito, having made a "wild" show at Infelice's funeral, remains distracted at the thought of his beloved's death. His friends, who trick him into visiting a brothel, cannot console him. Nor can the "honest whore", Bellafront, whom he berates at length, and who answers him by falling in love with him and immediately repenting her sinful ways. Sometime later, alone in a room of his house, or rather trying to be (he is continually interrupted), he contemplates suicide as a means of being reunited with his beloved.

The stage directions call for various props suggesting a still life of the memento mori or vanitas variety. On a table Hippolito's servant has placed a skull, a picture of Infelice, a book, and a taper. Hippolito first takes up the picture. Admiring the artist's skill, he turns quickly to a favorite stock subject of the Elizabethans, the "painting" of women:

> 'Las! now I see,
> The reason why fond women love to buy
> Adulterate complexion! Here, 't is read:
> False colours last after the true be dead. (4.1.45-48)

"Painting" is one of the vanities of man, sustaining as it does, the fiction that man may overcome or at least disguise his fate. As such, it suggests the opposite of the skull or the mirror, both of which tell man the inexorable truth about himself.

[4]Thomas Dekker, "The Honest Whore, Part I," *The Chief Elizabethan Dramatists*, ed. William Allan Neilson (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Riverside Press, 1911).

It is interesting that Dekker links makeup here with the higher art of portraiture. We should remember that until the time of the renaissance, secular portraits were themselves considered a form of vanity. It is not long before Hippolito conjectures that the picture, "a painted board," is no substitute for the real thing, having "no lap for me to rest upon, / No lip worth tasting"(4.1.56-57). At this point, Hippolito takes up the skull and addresses it (just what the skull is doing there is never made clear):

> Perhaps this shrewd pate was mine enemy's:
> 'Las! say it were; I need not fear him now!
> For all his braves, his contumelious breath,
> His frowns, though dagger-pointed, all his plot,
> Though ne'er so mischievous, his Italian pills,
> His quarrels, and that common fence, his law,
> See, see, they're all eaten out! Here's not left one:
> How clean they're pickt away to the bare bone!
> How mad are mortals, then, to rear great names
> On tops of swelling houses! or to wear out
> Their fingers' ends in dirt, to scrape up gold!
> * * * *
> Yet, after all, their gayness looks thus foul.
> What fools are men to build a garish tomb,
> Only to save the carcase whilst it rots,
> To maintain't long in stinking, make good carrion,
> But leave no good deeds to preserve them sound!
> * * * *
> And must all come to this? fools, wise, all hither?
> Must all heads thus at last be laid together?
> Draw me my picture then, thou grave neat workman,
> After this fashion, not like this; these colours
> In time, kissing but air, will be kist off:
> But here's a fellow; that which he lays on
> Till doomsday alters not complexion.
> Death's the best painter then: they that draw shapes,
> And live by wicked faces, are but God's apes.
> They come but near the life, and there they stay;
> This fellow draws life too: his art is fuller,
> The pictures which he makes are without colour. (4.1.63-94)

Hippolito is now interrupted again by his servant, who introduces Bellafront, come once more to woo Hippolito, and the comedy moves on its way.

Taken in its rather gratuitous context, Dekker's scene reads like a hilarious parody of *Hamlet*, as well as other Shakespearean plays ("What fools these mortals be..."). But parody, of course, is one indirection by which we may find direction out. Hippolito's rather overwrought soliloquy takes up and plays, for all a knowing audience knew they were worth, the basic themes of Hamlet's address to Yorick's skull. The motif of a man holding up and addressing a skull was irresistible material to Dekker. The theme of memento mori, here in a comically painless form, is perhaps most obvious: "And must all come to this?" All life, surely, is as brief as Hippolito's taper. But Dekker presents this theme, more pellucidly than Shakespeare, as being linked to the theme of art and its presumed conferment of a kind of provisional immortality. This is suggested in a number of ways: by the still life setting of the stage props, by the portrait of Infelice, by the introduction of the "painting" motif (an art through which we disguise our mortality a while), and finally by the consideration of death as an artist, "the best painter." The skull, then, is a supreme work of art, challenging with its permanence our own transient existence. Fools and wise, we read in it, as in a mirror, the truth about ourselves. And as a work of art, it overcomes our mortal weakness of being locked in the limited perspective of time. The skull, of course, represents the past, but Hippolito, a creature of the present, reads in it not merely the past, but the future as well: he, too, will come to this. The skull, therefore, involves past, present, and future in a continuum of experience (which may be predicated also of enduring works of art), testing the timeful limitations of the human imagination.

As I suggested above, the interwoven themes of mortality and art are present also in Shakespeare's use of the motif in *Hamlet*, and as we shall see in a number of diverse works in the European tradition that draw their strength from this motif as well. I have begun with Dekker rather than Shakespeare because the motif in Shakespeare is more thoroughly subjugated to his dramatic purpose, and therefore less obvious in itself. But it is audible even in his more subtle application.

The graveyard scene has long been recognized as one of the most significant in *Hamlet*. As Maynard Mack suggests, "here, in its ultimate symbol, [Hamlet] confronts, recognizes, and accepts the condition of being man."[5] The scene provides us with "the crucial evidence of Hamlet's new frame of mind"(Mack 62), which will enable him, finally, to engage in the "contest of mighty opposites"(Mack 63)

[5]Maynard Mack, "The World of Hamlet," *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Hamlet*, ed. David Bevington (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1968) 62.

awaiting him at court. Cast in a sober prose rather than the heated verse of the earlier soliloquies, the scene objectifies Hamlet's resignation to the human condition through the vanitas motif of a man holding a skull.[6] Hamlet and Horatio watch as the grave digger throws up one skull after another. At first Hamlet responds with wittily ingenuous questions:

> There's another. Why may not that be the skull of a lawyer? Where be his quiddities now, his quillities, his cases, his tenures, and his tricks? Why does he suffer this mad knave now to knock him about the sconce with a dirty shovel, and will not tell him of his action of battery? (5.1.91-96)

The focus of these questions is the absence of wonted action and volition; life lost is suggested by the loss of the power to will and speak. "That skull had a tongue in it, and could sing once"(5.1.71-72). The meditation is generalized at first, but takes on a horrible particularity when Hamlet is informed that one of the skulls belonged to Yorick, a person of his acquaintance. He now takes up the skull:

> Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him, Horatio, a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy. He hath borne me on his back a thousand times. And now how abhorred in my imagination it is! My gorge rises at it. Here hung those lips that I have kissed I know not how oft. Where be your gibes now? Your gambols, your songs, your flashes of merriment that were wont to set the table on a roar? Not one now to mock your own grinning? Quite chapfall'n? Now get you to my lady's chamber, and tell her, let her paint an inch thick, to this favor she must come. Make her laugh at that. (5.1.172-83)

Like Hippolito's speech, Hamlet's turns also on painting (there is a rather chilling echo here of his earlier upbraiding of Ophelia, whose death occasions the scene), and thus on the futility of human art, indeed all human endeavor, before death. Death, for Hamlet too, is the greatest and most ironic painter. Wit, songs, and makeup, jester, queen, or world conqueror, all end alike in the silent verity of the skull. "To what base uses," Hamlet continues, "may we return, Horatio! Why may not imagination trace the noble dust of Alexander till 'a find it stopping a bunghole" (5.1.190-93).

In *The Third Voice*, Denis Donoghue makes a useful distinction between "the unit of poetic composition," which "is necessarily verbal," and the situational unit of theatrical composition, which

[6]William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. Willard Farnham (Baltimore: Penguin Books, Inc., 1969).

> is not encompassed within the verbal realm. If one isolates a moment from the thousands of contiguous moments in a play, one should regard as the unit of theatrical composition everything that is happening at that moment, simultaneously apprehended. Words are being spoken, gestures are being made, the plot is pressing forward, a visual image is being conveyed on the stage itself.[7]

To consider the graveyard scene in *Hamlet* in this light is to be aware most powerfully of the visual image of a man gazing at a skull he holds in his hand. Our method of interpretation, therefore, is not simply verbal or linguistic, but emblematic. Like Hippolito, Hamlet gazes at the skull as into a mirror, showing him at once past and future, and signifying at once verity and vanity, that he too must come to this favor. The motif Hamlet enacts functions, of course, as part of the plot which is pressing forward, but at the same time it establishes emblematic connections with other works of art that make use of this motif as part of the human way of knowing.

The contemplation of a skull is a common motif in paintings of the period. Often a saint is depicted with a skull, suggesting his awareness of the vanity of human endeavor. Cavarozzi's painting of St. Jerome, for instance, portrays the scholarly and ascetic Jerome at his writing table watched over by a crucifix and two angels.[8] On his table are several old books, religious beads, a sand-glass, and in the foreground a skull facing outward. These images suggest at once the bearded saint's holiness and his humanity. The crucifix, the angels, and the beads guide and guard him, or rather his immortal part. The books represent his characteristic erudition, the toil of human wisdom. The sand-glass and the skull, however, are symbols of human vanity, the glass reminding us of the time-bound human condition and the skull reminding us of death. That Jerome keeps these articles on his desk suggests also his own awareness of time and death. The skull, placed on a book and facing outward, echoes by its position in the painting the bald head of the saint. Positioned between the head of Jerome and the skull, the glass serves to conjoin the two; this head, given the passage of time, will become that skull. Even the light, lingering on the two foreheads, implies their identity. A significant difference between the image in Cavarozzi's painting and the image in *Hamlet* is that, unlike Hamlet, Jerome does not contemplate the skull directly. As a tragic hero, "crawling between earth and heaven," Hamlet is very much the or-

[7]Denis Donoghue, *The Third Voice: Modern British and American Verse Drama* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1959) 7.

[8]Bartolomeo Cavarazzi, *St. Jerome* (before 1625), The Pitti Gallery, Florence.

dinary mortal with little "relish of salvation" in him. For Hamlet, as I have noted, the skull is in effect a mirror of his humanity, into which he gazes with all possible scrutiny. Jerome, on the other hand, pursues his characteristic work, which involves primarily the contemplation of divinity (one of his open books contains what might be a *pieta).* He is aware of the impending death of his body, as the skull suggests, but this affects a part of his consciousness only and by implication. The painting, though it involves memento mori, does not dwell on this, but celebrates Jerome's human activity.

Similarly, Ribera's portrait of St. Francis depicts the saint holding a skull in his hands but gazing upward at the vision approaching him from heaven.[9] Already marked with stigmata (a hole in his garment and a mark on one hand reveal this), Francis seems ready at this moment to leave behind the travail of his body and to become one with Christ in mind and heart. The position of the skull in Francis's hands suggests, however, that in the moments before the heavenly vision he was contemplating the skull directly, directly contemplating the vanity of earthly life very much in the manner of Hamlet. Interestingly, the fissures in the skull, which form a sort of rough cross, echo the stitchings of the saint's rag garment. The skull and the garment of rags, taken together, suggest the earthly trappings of the soul, from which it would escape. The cross on the skull reminds us that even Jesus' human body could not avoid the experience of death. If the skull is a mirror of Saint Francis's human life, however, it is a mirror from which he looks away toward salvation. Vanitas is merely one constituent of the religious experience being presented.

Georges de La Tour, in his painting, *Magdalen with the Lamp,* also makes use of the skull as an image of vanitas.[10] The Magdalen sits at a table holding a skull on her knee. On the table is another still-life setting: a glass oil lamp (the painting's only light source), two books, a scourge, and a wooden cross. Her right hand rests on the forehead of the skull, while her left hand supports her chin in a gesture of melancholy meditation. Once again, the saint's meditation is not directly on the skull; she gazes away from it, as it were, through the lamp's tall flame into the darkness of the background. Her thoughts are on the salvation possible only in another world. The light, however, flows from her hand to the skull, joining them in effect, while the position of her left forearm connects the skull with her own head. The end of earthly life, as the skull, the scourge, and indeed the cross remind us, is death. As T. Bertin-Mourot has pointed out, "the

[9] José Ribera, *St. Francis* (1663), The Pitti Gallery, Florence.

[10] Georges de La Tour, Magdalen with the Lamp (between 1625 and 1633), Louvre, Paris.

theme of the Magdalen in meditation is a synthesis of ... Melancholy and Vanity.... La Tour's is the mystic feeling of this poignant dialogue between the penitent and God, in the contemplation of Death."[11] La Tour's mysticism, therefore, asks us to go beyond Hamlet's human meditation. Hamlet, contemplating death as the certain end of all human life, throws down his skull and turns to act out the life remaining him. The Magdalen, like the other saints discussed in this context, looks through her death towards a salvation made possible only by the human oblivion of the skull. The mystic, reminded of death, is essentially uninterested (certainly the scourge suggests this) in the life she is to leave behind.

In secular works, however, the implications of the vanitas motif are more chilling. As I have suggested above, the skull is effectively a mirror, revealing to the subject his future at the same time that it reveals the past. A literal mirror is also commonly used in exercising the motif. Titian uses both a skull and a mirror as images of vanitas. There are two similar versions of the Magdalen subject that depict the saint gazing upward toward heaven, while an open book lies before her on a skull. In both versions a black ribbon drapes the skull, suggestive of the human vanity she is leaving behind. Other Titian vanitas paintings make use of mirrors. A painting attributed to Titian and entitled simply *Vanitas* shows a woman at her toilette gazing into a mirror held aloft by Cupid.[12] This painting is quite similar in theme and composition to the famous *Toilette of Venus.*[13] Here two cupidons assist the goddess, one holding the mirror and the other a garland for her hair. Venus wears pearls in her hair, earrings, costly bracelets and rings, and (partially) a rich robe of fur and gold embroidery. Gazing at the mirror, however, she sees not her own youthful face and body, but those of an old woman. In *Vanitas* too, the image in the mirror, though here the difference is not so striking, appears to be that of an older woman. The suggestion of both paintings is that old age and of course death are the favors to which all human beauty must come. Interestingly, though his subject is a Venus, Titian ignores the traditional ascription to the goddess of eternal youth. This suggests of course a devaluation of the Greek myth in a Christian century; the goddess is depicted in effect as a secular figure, and her vanity proposes itself therefore as something essentially human. Whether we wrap ourselves in costly furs and jewels, or "rear great names / On tops of swelling houses," or indeed "paint an inch thick," this is the end of human beauty, love, and life. Like the skulls in *Hamlet* and *The Honest Whore,* Titian's mirrors

[11]Quoted by Jacques Dupont and Francois Mathey, *The New Developments in Art from Caravaggio to Vermeer,* trans. S.J.C. Harrison (New York: Skira, c.1951) 36.

[12]Tiziano Vecelli (Titian), *Vanitas,* S. Luca Gallery, Rome.

[13]Tiziano Vecelli (Titian), *Toilette of Venus* (around 1550), The Hermitage, St. Petersburg.

suggest also the vanity of art and what E.R. Dodds once called "the offensive and incomprehensible bondage of time and space."[14] The images in the mirrors are *framed*, or delimited in space as if they were works of art. This implies, of course, the reasonable but limited confines of human activity. And the images in the mirrors, like the skulls, suggest an inescapable future time as well as the past (for do we not become in the future like those human Yoricks we once knew?). The vanitas motif, in its secular form, involves a human confrontation with the boundaries, in time and space, of human endeavor. The truth-telling skulls and mirrors, from which, mere mortals, we cannot take our gaze, remind us forcefully of these limits.

Before proceeding to some typical modern instances of the vanitas motif, I will consider one more version from the seventeenth century, Rembrandt's moving image of *Aristotle Contemplating a Bust of Homer*.[15] Dating from 1653, a time when Rembrandt's later style was beginning to be noticeable, the painting depicts a contemporary looking, bearded Aristotle gazing at a bearded sculpture of the fabled epic poet. Aristotle's left hand rests on his hip; his right hand is extended and rests on the head of the sculpture. The light passes from the sculpted head to Aristotle's face along the extended arm, which is clothed in a voluminous white sleeve. In effect this joins the two heads, as does the similarity of their beards. Rembrandt's image, while different from either the skull or the mirror images we have considered, combines in essence the elements of the vanitas motif present in both of them. Like the skull, the sculpted head suggests a lifeless image from the past. It is an essential skull, and in gazing at it, Aristotle confronts the vanity of even the most brilliant human endeavor. This head had a tongue in it once and could sing. It represents also Aristotle's future, for at some future time his physical being will be similarly silent; like his famous pupil, Alexander, Aristotle may find a new calling stopping a bung hole. And Rembrandt's painting suggests quite forcefully that the sculpted head is a kind of mirror. Both men are bearded and similarly featured. The sculpted head, however, speaks of death, and carries with it the burden of the past, which is, of course, the burden that the future must learn to bear. The anachronism of Aristotle's contemporary dress suggests that Rembrandt had in mind a more universal relation of living man to dead than simply the special subject of the two Greek thinkers. The future, the time of his own death, which Aristotle sees in an image of the past, is Rembrandt's time, and by extension

[14]E.R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957) 102.

[15]Rembrandt van Rijn, *Aristotle Contemplating a Bust of Homer* (1653), The Metropolitan Museum, New York.

our own. The anachronistic dress, along with the vanitas motif itself, scorns the artificial distinctions of time, which is actually a continuum imprisoning us all. That the sculpture is palpably a human work of art introduces more obviously than we have seen elsewhere the notion of art as a provisional confrontation with mortality which ultimately must confirm it. Like Hamlet, therefore, and unlike the saints, Aristotle confronts and—as his sober look suggests—accepts his own mortality.

The vanitas motif, as I have discussed it so far, might seem simply a phenomenon of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries. Indeed, all the works used here to round out the theme were produced between 1550 (the earliest ascribable date for Titian's *Toilette of Venus*) and 1653 (the date of Rembrandt's painting). Shakespeare's *Hamlet,* which was most probably written in 1600, appeared roughly in the middle of this period. The vanitas motif is an important and well-known ingredient of the *Zeitgeist* under which these artists worked. What I shall now try to demonstrate is that this motif is also important, though less formally worked out, in our own century. It is certainly visible among the fragments our artists have used to shore against their ruins, and if anything its grim message is grimmer still in a century when saints are mostly silent and religion is steadily on the wane.

One of Picasso's most fascinating paintings is the *Girl before a Mirror* of 1932, now at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.[16] Like many of Picasso's paintings of this period, it makes use of multiple images to suggest movement or the passing of time in a medium whose traditional convention was of temporal stillness. The girl stands before what might be a cheval-glass at once in profile and facing forward. The left profile of her face rests in an oval, full-face outline, in which the features of the right side are extended in a different color. A similar ambiguity attends the depiction of her legs and belly; there may be one or two legs, depending on how one views a line running down the middle of the figure, while a circular shape may suggest the frontal view of the belly or an interior image of the womb. From the stylized emphasis on her breasts and belly, it appears that she may be pregnant. Her arms are extended in the act of adjusting the glass, and one arm, therefore, interacts in terms of color and design, with the mirror image. As Alfred Barr notes, there is an "intricate metamorphosis of the girl's figure—'simultaneously clothed, nude and x-rayed'—and its image in the mirror."[17] This metamorphosis expresses itself in terms of oppositions of color

[16]Pablo Picasso, *Girl before a Mirror* (March 14, 1932), The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

[17]Alfred H. Barr, Jr., *Picasso: Fifty Years of his Art* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art,

and design which suggest the opposition of life and death. As in Titian's mirror paintings, the mirror image here both reflects the figure and comments on the figure through its variation. The most obvious variation is that of color. The stripes suggesting the girl's clothing are differently located in the mirror; what is nude is clothed in the mirror. The colors in the mirror are generally much darker than those of the girl herself. Her hair, as well as part of her face, is yellow and is set in what seems to be a white radiance, shaped almost like a bridal veil or halo. The face in the mirror, on the other hand, is composed of a silvery gray marked with reds, purples, green, and black, which flows into a heavy outline; the hair is green, outlined, and surrounded by what seems to be a bluish veil. Where the girl's face and hair suggest the sun and daylight, the mirror's face suggests the moon and night. Its color, grayish and blemished as it were with purple, creates a skull-like image. This is reinforced by the fact that while an eye is drawn in the girl's profile face, the face in the mirror has only a dark shape suggesting an empty eye-socket. Even the long oval of the cheval-glass has about it, in Nabokov's phrase, "the encroaching air of a coffin." This deathly air is enhanced by the stylized shape of the girl's neck, which is drawn as an Egyptian pyramid. Thus the striped clothing of the girl in the mirror may suggest the wrappings of a mummy.

The major opposition of the painting, very much in the vanitas tradition, is of life and death. Picasso combines the vanitas images of the mirror and the skull and involves the related theme of art (the cheval-glass could also seem a portrait on an easel, a painting within a painting). But Picasso's use of the vanitas motif is modern in sensibility as well as style. The fact that the girl is seen both in profile and in full face suggests that she is at once contemplating the image in the mirror and looking away from it. Unlike a saint, however, she does not look away toward her own salvation, but turns toward us. Modern human kind, as Eliot reminds us, cannot bear very much reality. Her memento mori is thus ours also in a direct and uneasy way. Her seeming pregnancy, suggestive of the human life cycle and the human urge to continue the chain of life, is still involved in the imprisoning continuum of time. For the modern artist, Hamlet's mortal gaze is more familiar than St. Francis's or the Magdalen's.

Eliot himself includes a "Girl before a Mirror" scene in the "Game of Chess" section of *The Wasteland*.[18] This is, of course, the famous parody of Shakespeare's description of Cleopatra's barge. The woman with bad nerves sits before her van-

1946) 176.

[18]T.S. Eliot, "The Wasteland," *The Complete Poems and Plays: 1909-1950* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1971).

ity combing her hair: "Under the firelight, under the brush, her hair / Spread out in fiery points / Glowed into words, then would be savagely still"(lines 108-10). As Eliot's many allusions suggest, this woman may be taken as a modern and ironic composite of a number of death-marked women from history and myth: Cleopatra, Dido, Eve, and Philomela. All of them are unlucky in love, and in this respect the woman with bad nerves certainly belongs in their company. The comparisons are ironic, however, because where Cleopatra and the others have *acted* greatly, as it were, have given all for love, the modern woman remains simply frustrated, another of the "uncommitted ones" who populate the "Limbo" of the modern world. Unwilling to risk "the awful daring of a moment's surrender," she glows into empty words that suggest merely the breakdown of communication with her lover:

> "What is that noise?"
> The wind under the door.
> "What is that noise now? What is the wind doing?"
> Nothing again nothing.
> "Do
> "You know nothing? Do you see nothing? Do you remember
> "Nothing?"
>
> I remember
> Those are pearls that were his eyes.
> "Are you alive, or not? Is there nothing in your head?"(117-26)

What the lover remembers, via Ariel's song, is the drowned Phoenician Sailor, who, as we later learn, "was once handsome and tall as you"(321). This thought is literally, therefore, a memento mori. But as the woman's response implies, they are themselves already among the living dead, neither truly alive nor dead, and as the repeated "nothings" of the passage suggest, essentially empty. Her identity, of course, is blurred with those of the dead queens; her future may be read in their past. Indeed, hers is in effect Hamlet's quandary on confronting Yorick's skull. The setting of the scene reinforces my sense of it as a modern reworking of the vanitas motif:

> The Chair she sat in, like a burnished throne,
> Glowed on the marble, where the glass
> Held up by standards wrought with fruited vines
> From which a golden cupidon peeped out

(Another hid his eyes behind his wing)
Doubled the flames of sevenbranched candelabra
Reflecting light upon the table as
The glitter of her jewels rose to meet it,
From satin cases poured in rich profusion...(77-85)

What we have here, cupidons, jewels, and all, is the pose of Titian's *Toilette of Venus.* This mirror, however, tells the woman not merely of time and death, but of her own emptiness and living death (the mirror is described as reflecting the objects of the room, but interestingly not her image). The vanitas motif, as Eliot invokes it, echoes the central condition of *The Wasteland.*

Something more akin to Rembrandt's use of the motif occurs in the *Mythistorema* sequence of George Seferis.[19] As the title suggests, these poems are concerned with myth, history, and story, and attempt to express, as Seferis himself puts it, "circumstances that are as independent from myself as the characters in a novel"(261). One of the major concerns is clearly the burden of the past as represented by myth, history, and story. The third poem of the sequence expresses this burden through the image of a man holding the head of a statue in his hands:

I woke with this marble head in my hands;
it exhausts my elbows and I don't know where to put it down.
It was falling into the dream as I was coming out of the dream
so our life became one and it will be very difficult for it
to separate again.

I look at the eyes: neither open nor closed
I speak to the mouth which keeps trying to speak
I hold the cheeks which have broken through the skin
I haven't got any more strength.

My hands disappear and come toward me
mutilated. (5)

The speaker here is very much in the pose of Hamlet: a living man confronting the image of the past and finding in it his own identity ("so our life became one"). The sculpted head, as in Rembrandt's painting, suggests an essential skull with eyes "neither open nor closed" and cheeks breaking through the skin. It "keeps trying

[19]George Seferis, *Collected Poems: 1925-1955,* trans. Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1967).

to speak," but it is locked in the silence of the past. The speaker senses and would maintain a connection with this past, but the effort for the living man is exhausting, indeed, mutilating. The world of the dead, of history, is a presence which must be confronted and remembered. In part because of this, it threatens to overwhelm the living person. He does not know where to put the statue down and resume his life; "it will be very difficult for it to separate again." Though it proposes itself as a waking experience, the poem is clearly nightmarish, an experience of life in the grip of time and death. It suggests no saintly escape from the condition of mortality, nor even Hamlet's return, after confronting death, to the work of living. The body's surreal dismemberment in the final lines argues rather that the self is bound to and lost in the past. Like the other moderns, Seferis's vanitas experience reverberates in a void of lost values.

I began with an example from comedy, and I return finally to a famous comedy of the twentieth century, Hugo von Hofmannsthal's *Der Rosenkavalier*.[20] Near the end of the first act of *Der Rosenkavalier,* Hofmannsthal interrupts the opera's merriment with a scene replicating Titian's image from *Toilette of Venus.* Having set in motion a comic plot that will end in the loss of her youthful lover, Octavian, the Marschallin is left alone for some minutes in her boudoir. The thought of the buffoon, Baron Ochs, taking a young bride disturbs her by reminding her of her own youth and marriage. Taking up a hand mirror, she gazes into it and meditates:

> Wo ist die jetzt? Ja,
> such' dir den Schnee vom vergangenen Jahr!
> Das sag' ich so:
> Aber wie kann das wirklich sein,
> daß ich die kleine Resi war
> und daß ich auch einmal die alte Frau sein werd.
> Die alte Frau, die alte Marschallin!
> "Siegst es, da geht die alte Fürstin Resi!"
> Wie kann des das geschehen?
> Wie macht denn das der liebe Gott?
> Wo ich doch immer die gleiche bin.
> Und wenn er's schon so machen muß,
> warum laßt er mich zuschauen dabei
> mit gar so klarem Sinn? Warum versteckt er's nicht vor mir?
> Das alles ist geheim, so viel geheim.

[20]Hugo von Hofmannsthal, *Der Rosenkavalier* (London: Fürstner Limited, 1911). English translations used here are my own.

> Und man ist dazu da, daß man's ertragt.
> Und in dem "Wie"
> da liegt der ganze Unterschied— (Page 42)

> (Where is she now? Yes, / seek out the snows of yesteryear! / That I can say: / But how can it really be / that I was little Resi / and that also one day I will become an old woman. / The old woman, the old wife of the Fieldmarshal! / "Look, there goes the old Princess Resi!" / How can that happen? / How can the dear Lord let it be? / Yet *I* am always the same. / And if He must do it like this, / why does He allow me to look on / with such clear senses? Why doesn't He hide it from me? / All this is mysterious, so very mysterious. / And one is here but to bear it all. / And in the "How" / there's the whole difference—)

Whereas in Titian's painting a young woman looks in a mirror and sees the image of an older woman, the Marschallin is actually an older woman and presumably sees a proper likeness of herself. On a psychological level, however, she does not feel like an older woman. Her sense of self is still that of the young Resi, and therefore the image in the mirror is strange and shocking to her. The "I", who is "immer die gleiche," sees a different, older self in the mirror, one clearly subject to the ravages of time. The mirror shows her a future that on a psychological level she did not know had already happened, and the passing of time, of course, threatens to continue. She feels herself slipping irrevocably into the past. Hofmannsthal's image—and it involves here words, gesture, the stage setting, and indeed the gorgeous music of Richard Strauß—presents the vanitas motif in the fullness of its lineaments. The reference to Villon's famous poem about the fading of earthly beauty merely deepens the aura of this tradition. What is more modern here, though it bears indeed a key relationship to the mood of Hamlet, is the questioning of the God who would subject human beings to such a painful consciousness of their fate. A secular character, the Marschallin does not look away in the manner of a saint toward mystical salvation, but concentrates like Hamlet on her own ageing and approaching death. But like Hamlet also, she turns stoically to the business of enduring life, the graceful "how" of things suffering the imprisonment of time, which, as she puts it, makes all the difference.

Comedy may remind us of death, and often forcefully, but its ultimate motive is the celebration of life as it is lived and passed on in the chain of time to the ever changing young. It recognizes the continuum of time as something neither to overcome nor to mourn, but to celebrate: a continuity in flux. This is the mystery

that the Marschallin, like Hamlet in his own way, recognizes and accepts. When Octavian returns at the end of the first act, he notices but does not understand her sober mood, and she attempts to interpret it herself:

> Die Zeit, die ist ein sonderbar Ding.
> Wenn man so hinlebt, ist sie rein gar nichts.
> Aber dann auf einmal, da spürt man nichts als sie.
> Sie ist um uns herum, sie ist auch in uns drinnen.
> In den Gesichtern rieselt sie,
> im Spiegel da rieselt sie,
> in meinen Schläfen fließt sie.
> * * * * *
> Manchmal steh' ich auf mitten in der Nacht
> und laß die Uhren alle, alle stehn.
> Allein man muß sich auch vor ihr nicht fürchten.
> Auch sie ist ein Geschöpf des Vaters, der uns alle
> erschaffen hat. (46)
>
> (Time is an odd, curious thing. / When one just lives, it seems like nothing. / Then suddenly one senses nothing else. / It is around us and inside us too. / It trickles in faces, / it trickles in mirrors, / it flows in my temples. / ... / Sometimes in the middle of the night I rise / and make the clocks, yes all of them, stand still. / But also one must not fear time. / It, too, is a creation of the Father who created us all.)

Secular man may be, in Matthew Arnold's phrase, a "chafing prisoner of time," or he may be an accepting prisoner of time. With a rather touching naivete, the Marschallin makes her case for acceptance. For her, as for the Hamlet who came to see a "special providence in the fall of a sparrow," the vanitas experience ends in a kind of humility before death and life. The confrontation with time as it flows in mirrors, in statues, or indeed the temples of skulls is a spiritual preparation for the act of living one's limited days.

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Figure 2.1: Rembrandt, *Aristotle Contemplating the Bust of Homer*



Figure 2.2: Ribera, *St. Francis*



Figure 2.3: Georges de La Tour, *Magdalen with the Lamp*



Figure 2.4: Titian, *Toilette of Venus*



Figure 2.5: Picasso, *Girl before a Mirror*

Chapter 3

Dantean Journeys: The Motif of Meeting the Dead in Modern Poetry

It seems almost odd that a poet as remote, historically, linguistically, and philosophically, as Dante should maintain so pervasive an influence on modern poetry in English, by which we may comprehend the work of romantic, modernist, and contemporary poets. And yet it is easily demonstrable that Dante, a poet with medieval religious beliefs, an elaborately allegorical method, and an Italian system of versification difficult to transpose into English, has been an intimate and profound influence on poets as diverse as Shelley, Dante Rossetti, T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Allen Tate, James Merrill, and Wendell Berry. Indeed, Eliot went so far as to recommend Dante as a "universal school of style" (228), a better model for English poets than such native luminaries as Shakespeare and Milton. The nature of Dante's actual influence varies from case to case, and ranges from attempts at "Englishing" *terza rima* to imitations of the grand structure of the *Commedia.* In the case of poets like Eliot and Tate, it may extend even to religious admiration, emulation, or attempted revival. The focus of this essay, however, will be on a narrower, and more strategic form of emulation: the recurrence in modern poetry of the motif of meeting and conversing with the dead.

There are a number of reasons that this motif should prove so congenial to the modern sensibility in spite of its allegorical associations.[1] For one thing, it

[1]Dante himself may be said to have picked up this motif from Homer and Virgil, and it could be argued that a poet like Pound seems more at home in a Homeric underworld than the underworld of

provides what one might call an "objective correlative" for the exploration of the unconscious mind, which since the time of the romantics, for good or ill, has been perhaps the central endeavor of poetry. Lancelot Whyte has argued in *The Unconscious Before Freud* for the centrality of the unconscious in the modern era:

> *faith, if it bears any relation to the natural world, implies faith in the unconscious.* If there is a God, he must speak there; if there is a healing power, it must operate there; if there is a principle of ordering in the organic realm, its most powerful manifestation must be found there. (7)

In poetry, as M.L. Abrams has shown, this habit of mind gave rise to "expressive form" (*The Mirror and the Lamp),* a revolutionary and pervading sense of poetry as the sincere expression of feeling. The interest of modern poets in the Dantean motif of meeting the dead is thus characteristically psychological, and represents a psychological reinterpretation of Dante's practice, analogous perhaps to the many "expressive" reinterpretations of Shakespeare in the nineteenth century. Whereas in Dante the meeting with the dead is at once literal and allegorical, in modern poets it is suggestive in terms of personal symbolism, a metaphor of the journey into the self.

Significantly, the modern poets generally offer some psychological explanation for their visions, suggestive of intercourse with the unconscious. Shelley's Dantean *tour de force,* "The Triumph of Life," is presented, for instance, as a "trance" or "waking dream," during the course of which he meets with his own counterpart to Dante's Virgil in the figure of Rousseau. Rossetti's "Willowwood" sonnets suggest a dream in which he sees his dead wife and muse, Elizabeth Siddal. Even Eliot's confrontation with the "familiar compound ghost" after an air raid in London is given the quality of a dream or hallucination. And more recently, in "The Buried Lake," Allen Tate presents a dream-like visit to the underworld. For the modern poets, the psychological aptness of these situations takes precedence over any allegorical function. Their significance, therefore, is not publically accessible, as in Dante, but must be construed in terms which are essentially interior and personal.

Shelley's "Triumph of Life," left unfinished at his death, recounts in over five hundred lines of *terza rima* his vision of a wild throng of people being driven be-

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the *Commedia.* The Homeric underworld is relatively free of moral judgments and punishments found in the underworlds of Virgil and Dante. This element seems important in the work of Shelley, Rossetti, Eliot, and Tate, however. The dominant feeling among the modern poets is a kind of guilt, and the Dantean treatment is more appropriate.

fore a chariot in which an allegorical figure, or "Shape" of Life sits in Roman-style triumph.[2] The throng Shelley witnesses, "Numerous as gnats upon the evening gleam" (line 46), is representative (one might say representative in their misery) of all the stages of life: "Old age & youth, manhood & infancy, / Mixed in one mighty torrent did appear" (52-53). Sexual love is suggested, in uncharacteristically dark and futile terms, by an orgiastic dance of "Maidens & youths" who "fling their wild arms in the air / As their feet twinkle; they recede, and now / Bending within each other's atmosphere / Kindle invisibly; and as they glow / Like moths by light attracted & repelled, / Oft to new bright destruction come and go" (149-54). One by one, they fall exhausted and "senseless" (160) in the path of the chariot, and their place is taken up, in a grotesque parody by "Old men, and women foully disarrayed" who "Shake their grey hair in the insulting wind, / Limp in the dance & strain with limbs decayed / To reach the car of light which leaves them still / Farther behind & deeper in the shade" (165-69). Shelley's final conception of sexual love, as the ending of the generally exultant "Epipsychidion" also suggests, is a pessimistic one, emphasizing futility and betrayal. Harold Bloom has argued that although "the tone of Shelley's last poem is derived from Dante's *Purgatorio*,... the events and atmosphere of *The Triumph of Life* have more in common with the *Inferno*" (xl). This might have been different had Shelley lived to complete the poem, but the fragment as it stands offers a vision of unrelieved darkness, a dying modern man's vision of last things.

This general tone of bleakness is even more conspicuous in the Dantean center of the poem, the meeting with Rousseau, which even T.S. Eliot admired.[3] Harold Bloom, a more sympathetic critic, calls it "the highest act of Shelley's imagination in the poem" (xli). Rousseau is quite obviously to Shelley what Virgil, the figure of Reason in the "Inferno" and Purgatorio," is to Dante, the dead "master" and guide, though we may infer that here Shelley will be guided not so much by Reason as by Feeling. Indeed, Rousseau, in a rather melodramatic fashion appropriate to his role as the archetypical romantic, shocks the poet with his sudden appearance:

> Struck to the heart by this sad pageantry,
> Half to myself I said, 'And what is this?

[2]As Marius Bewley, following A.C. Bradley, has pointed out, Shelley appears to have been influenced by Petrarch as well as Dante, particularly Petrarch's allegorical *Trionfi,* which describe similar dream visions of Roman triumphs involving the figures of Love, Chastity, Death, Fame, Time, and Divinity (870).

[3]Eliot wrote of this passage, that it was "better than I could do ... one of the supreme tributes to Dante in English, for it testifies what Dante has done, both for the style and the soul of a great English poet" (see Bewley 870).

> Whose shape is that within the car? & why'—
>
> I would have added—'is all here amiss?'
> But a voice answered .. 'Life' ... I turned & knew
> (O Heaven have mercy on such wretchedness!)
>
> That what I thought was an old root which grew
> To strange distortion out of the hill side
> Was indeed one of that deluded crew,
>
> And that the grass which methought hung so wide
> And white, was but his thin discoloured hair,
> And that the holes it vainly sought to hide
>
> Were or had been eyes. (176-88)

Rousseau is characteristically defiant, claiming that in spirit he "still disdains" to wear his earthly "disguise," but he is nonetheless condemned with the others "chained to the car" of Life, "The Wise, / The great, the unforgotten: they who wore / Mitres & helms & crowns, or wreathes of light" (205, 208-10). Upon questioning, he reveals some of these, including Napoleon, who "sought to win / The world, and lost all it did contain / Of greatness" (217-19), and "those spoilers spoiled, Voltaire, / Frederic, & Kant, Catherine, & Leopold, / Chained hoary anarchs, demagogue & sage" (235-37). Indeed, almost all men, the great only more conspicuously than the mean, stand condemned, "For in the battle Life & they did wage / She remained conqueror" (239-40). Rousseau himself claims to have been undone "By my own heart alone" (241). As Marius Bewley has noted, "in this poem self-betrayal appears to be almost universal" (870). Jesus and Socrates (and interestingly not his disciple Plato) are virtually alone in escaping conquest by Life because of the peculiar honesty and intensity of their visions.[4]

What it is exactly that vitiates the others, and by implication Shelley himself, is less certain, but seems to be a matter of impurity of imagination, the one power, according to Bloom's reading, "capable of redeeming life" (xlii). Rousseau's first sentence suggests the importance of withholding one's inner *self* from the seductive attractions of earthly life: " 'If thou canst forbear / To join the dance,

[4]Harold Bloom argues interestingly that, "on the basis of *Adonais*," Keats can be placed with them also, "as he too had touched the world with his living flame, and then fled back up to his native noon" (xl-xli).

which I had well forborne.' / Said the grim Feature, of my thought aware, / 'I will now tell that which to this deep scorn / Led me & my companions' " (188-92). But Shelley seems aware that, like Rousseau, he is not among those who can forbear the dance; like the dead master, he is "one of those who have created, even / If it be but a world of agony" (294-95). Rousseau's experience, in his "April prime" (308), of seduction by nature away from a primal, imaginative vision, echoes Shelley's own experience, and interestingly what Shelley perceives as the experience of Wordsworth's "Immortality Ode." (Indeed, it is not uncommon to read Rousseau's speech as a parody of Wordsworth's poem.) The malevolent seductress of Rousseau is described as a mysterious "shape all light" (352), a Wordsworthian conception of nature that according to Donald H. Reiman, "is composed of all that is 'wonderful, or wise, or beautiful' in the young Rousseau's experience, but as the product of a limited human imagination, she is still of earth, earthy" (quoted by Bewley 872). Bloom notes that Rousseau, drinking from the shape's "crystal glass / Mantling with bright Nepenthe" (358-59), forgets "everything in the mind's desire that had transcended nature, and so he falls victim to Life's destruction" (xlii). The lesson comes too late, however, to Shelley, for whom "life had become the destructive element in which perfect integrity and purity of heart and imagination were all but impossible" (Bewley 871).

In spite of its fragmentary nature, "The Triumph of Life" is a most impressive achievement. The influence of Dante was obviously beneficial in tightening Shelley's style and clarifying his images. But the points where Dante's influence ceases its penetration are most interesting in highlighting Shelley's distinctively modern concerns. The first thing one notices about Shelley's use of Dante is his secularization of his model's religious and allegorical approach. Like Dante, Shelley wants to write on the level of ideas, but these ideas are personal and secular, expressive not of a shared body of religious belief but of personal conviction and feeling. Thus, Shelley's vision is explained in psychological terms that are quite alien to Dante's belief and practice, though as one might point out, even modern religious poets like Eliot offer some "realistic" explanation for their visions. Perhaps by analogy with Virgil's inadequacy of faith in the *Commedia,* Rousseau is presented as a corrupted figure. But though his message is ambiguous, it suggests certainly a dark and infernal view of human life alien to Dante's larger view, but rather typically modern. Whether Shelley might have won through to a more positive view if he had lived to finish the poem is, of course, unanswerable, but doubtful, and perhaps beside the point. Dante provided him chiefly with an overarching metaphor, a poetic structure for investigating the hellish interiors of the modern soul, and it is perhaps in the nature of it that the investigation should be

fragmentary.

Dante Rossetti's use of his namesake is similarly psychological and infernal. In the "Willowwood" sequence of *The House of Life*, the Dantean motif functions to expose the failure of love as a means of overcoming Narcissism. The dream imagery in these sonnets, while it provides the adequate psychological explanation necessary for a modern use of the Dantean motif, functions at the same time to undermine its validity as an objective vision. Thus, the "Willowwood" sonnets become a dark, Narcissistic fantasy, a nightmarish journey into a troubled self.

The "Willowwood" sonnets (#'s 49-52) appear near the end of the "Youth and Change" section, the first part of *The House of Life*, and signal a significant darkening of the seemingly more hopeful attitude about love that finds expression in such sonnets as "Silent Noon" (#19). In the earlier poem, as the lovers lie together in a pasture "'neath billowing skies that scatter and amass," their moment is epiphanized, the landscape of "kingcup-fields" and "cow-parsley" is made "visible silence, still as the hour-glass." Love transforms even the meanest constituents of nature into things of significant beauty and indeed plays the trick of bestowing timelessness on the lovers, offering them, "for deathless dower, / This close-companioned inarticulate hour / When twofold silence was the song of love." Rossetti is not so innocent, however, as to mistake his epiphany for something more than a provisional assuagement of the condition of timefulness. On closer inspection, the insight of the poem appears deeply paradoxical. The "inarticulate hour" is also described as "winged," for time, as perceived by human consciousness is never really still; an "hour-glass" is never still unless its sands have run out. Indeed, our only possible timelessness on earth is death. As Stephen Spector has argued, this notion is involved in and underlined by Rossetti's use of the sonnet form itself, with its inherent structural imbalance suggesting the ineluctable movement of time (54-58). Thus the "deathless dower" is really an epiphanic "moment's monument" of art with precedents in the sonnets of Shakespeare and Michelangelo. This is the only possible transformation into timelessness that the poem offers, and it represents something less selfless than a romantic ideal of love.

The "Willowwood" sonnets make use of the Dantean motif to explore the Narcissistic consequences of such love. As in all modern Dantean poems, a psychological explanation of the vision is intimated, in this case through impressionistic, dreamlike imagery and the dreamlike compression of the title ("Willowwood," of course, is the wood of weeping, the forest of tears). Another suggestion of dreaming is the deliberate confusion of the speaker, Love, and the beloved, with the implication that the consciousness of the speaker embraces all the rest. The

first sonnet begins with the speaker sitting "with Love upon a woodside well, / Leaning across the water, I and he." Though the speaker and Love appear to be at least grammatically distinct at this point, we should keep in mind that the speaker "leaning across the water" is in the classic pose of Narcissus, implying rather his identity with Love. The image is not so simple, however, for Love makes "audible / That certain secret thing he had to tell" (though we might indeed say such things to ourselves), and this in turn comes "to be / The passionate voice I knew." At this point, the image of Love changes to that of a female beloved: "his eyes beneath grew hers; / ... And as I stooped, her own lips rising there / Bubbled with brimming kisses at my mouth." This seems on the surface at least a fairly straightforward rehearsal of the dream motif of a speaker meeting his beloved (the fact that she is a "lost" beloved suggests, perhaps, the influence of Milton's "Methought I saw my late espoused saint"). But the notion of Narcissus continues to govern in some sense throughout the poem, implying that the love of the speaker is somehow self-love. Like the young officer in Rilke's "Letzter Abend," the speaker here sees a mirror image in his beloved, not her own. The myth of Narcissus is very clear about the dangers of such love, and they are suggested by the sonnet.

The next two sonnets of the "Willowwood" sequence are taken up with Love's song, though interestingly it is "meshed with half-remembrance hard to free," arguing again for the omnipotence of the speaker's Narcissistic consciousness. Love sings not so much a song as a Dantean anecdote while the speaker and his beloved relive their days together, "the shades of those our days that had no tongue." In Willowwood is "a dumb throng [the language here is interestingly close to Shelley's] / ... one form by every tree / All mournful forms, for each was I or she." They engage in a "soul-wrung implacable close kiss," but all the while make "broken moan" in their hopelessness. The kiss, which holds until Love has finished his song, is a sort of enabling talisman of the vision. In the third sonnet, Love addresses "all ye that walk in Willowwood / ... with hollow faces burning white." These manifestations of vain love ("who so in vain have wooed / Your last hope lost, who so in vain invite / Your lips to that their unforgotten food") are promised nothing but "one lifelong night" before they "again shall see the light." Indeed, the speaker prays for a Lethean forgetfulness: "Better all life forget her than this thing, / That Willowwood should hold her wandering!" Willowwood, of course, suggests the speaker's mind in its dream state. The implication of these lines, therefore, is that he would drive her from his unconscious, where she lives on as an occasion for unbearable guilt.

The notion of guilt is reinforced in the final sonnet of the series as Love ends his song: "when the song died did the kiss unclose; / And her face fell back

drowned, and was as gray / As its gray eyes." If the speaker of the poem may be identified to any degree with Rossetti himself, then the lost beloved of the poem is very likely Rossetti's wife, Elizabeth Siddal, who had died of tuberculosis six years before the probable date of composition. The image of her falling "back drowned" may be seen as something more than a colorful arabesque. It suggests rather a surcharge of guilt in the form of negligence on the part of the speaker who cannot help letting her fall back.[5] In the context of the poem, this guilt manifests itself in the Narcissism that calls into doubt any unclouded sense of youthful, idealistic love. The Narcissistic confusion of identities, set up in the first sonnet, rises to a chilling climax in this final poem of the sequence:

> Only I know that I leaned low and drank
> A long draft from the water where she sank,
> Her breath and all her tears and all her soul:
> And as I leaned, I know I felt Love's face
> Pressed on my neck with moan of pity and grace,
> Till both our heads were in his aureole.

The speaker, as it were, drinks the very being of his beloved, subsuming her completely to his own identity. Indeed, this may have been a part of his love all along, as the transformation into art, the "moment's monument" of "Silent Noon" suggests. Whether such transformations are redeeming, for the artist or the object of his attentions, is a matter for question. The final lines of the poem claim that the speaker has also grown one with Love, so much so as to share his aureole. There may indeed be some redemption for him here, but taken in the dark context of the poems, these lines seem rather like the speaker's attempt to cheer himself up in the end. The woman is still dead. The Narcissism is unabated. And the darker vision of the "Change and Fate" section lies ahead.

Dante was a profound influence on T.S. Eliot throughout his career. He was, first of all, the paradigm of the Christian poet for Eliot, as well as a model of concrete and precise language. In terms of Eliot's own poetry, the *Inferno* (as transposed to modern London) certainly plays its part in *The Wasteland* and other

[5]There is ample evidence that Rossetti's relations with his wife, both before and after her death, were ambiguous and compulsive. Rossetti lived with Elizabeth Siddal, his favorite model, for ten years before they were finally married in 1860. Within two years, she was dead, and Rossetti was so despondent that he impulsively buried a manuscript of his poems in the coffin with her. In 1869, however, he allowed his wife's body to be exhumed so that the manuscript, which formed the basis of his 1870 collection, could be retrieved. In later years, he lived under the illusion that his wife's spirit returned to him in the form of birds.

early works. Similarly, the *Purgatorio* furnishes much of the imagery and intellectual underpinning of *Ash Wednesday*. Eliot's most sustained imitation of Dante, however, occurs in "Little Gidding," in the passage where the speaker meets "a familiar compound ghost" while patrolling the streets of London during an air raid.[6]

It is instructive to consider this passage in the light of Eliot's earlier use of Dante in the famous passage occurring near the end of "The Burial of the Dead." In the earlier poem, the Dantean experience is presented as the hallucinatory overtone of an ordinary commuter morning in London. The place is London Bridge "Under the brown fog of a winter dawn." In keeping with the "method" of *The Wasteland,* Eliot suggests the Dantean hallucination by means of actual quotes from the *Inferno* dropped into his piece without explanation:

> A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,
> I had not thought death had undone so many.
> Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled,
> And each man fixed his eyes before his feet.

With the exception of the second line quoted above, this passage might be taken as simple description. The quote from Dante, however, enters the passage with a surreal force that produces disequilibrium in the lines that follow. The ordinary commuters are suddenly suggested to be shades in "Limbo," a throng of the living dead deprived of the certainties of their existence. Indeed, the passage would seem silly to the point of being meaningless if it were not for the psychological aptness of the speaker's perceptions. The literate mind of the speaker, which includes among other things familiarity with these lines from Dante, brings them to bear upon the scene he witnesses. It might even be argued that the passage suggests unconscious association of Dante and the commuters. Once the association has been made, however, Eliot reinforces and develops it with a line typical of Dante as he is about to meet one of the dead: "There I saw one I knew, and stopped him." This turns out to be "Stetson," who, in spite of his unlikely name, is proposed as a former comrade of the speaker's in the First Punic War. The appropriateness of this bizarre detail, with its implied comparison of the First Punic and First World Wars (both senseless and futile), has been much commented upon. I would add that the detail of the ancient war superimposed upon the memory of a recent one,

[6]How closely we should identify this "speaker" with Eliot himself is a difficult question. Eliot was notoriously slippery about allowing the voices in his poetry to be identified with his own. He was, however, an air raid warden in London during the Second World War, and the passage does closely reflect his personal concerns.

along with the conversation that follows, a pastiche of Webster and Baudelaire, conveys again a sense of the unconscious mind of the speaker, a detritus of information it has picked up here and there, the fragments of self he will later use to shore against his ruins. The manner of association here suggests, as much as anything, a dream. The Dantean experience is thus another journey, infernal to be sure, into the self, where, in the context of *Wasteland,* misery and emptiness await. As with Shelley and Rossetti, Dante provides Eliot with a means of interior journeying and Eliot's occasion, in 1922 at least, is similarly bleak.

By the time of the *Four Quartets,* a number of events had intervened in Eliot's life that might conceivably have altered this situation. He had converted most visibly to Christianity, for one thing, and his difficulties with his wife had at least been put on hold. But even in "Little Gidding," the darkness of his modern Dantean vision persists. This is attributable, most obviously, to the approach and onset of World War Two, a time, as he later put it, when "the conditions of one's life changed and one was thrown in on oneself" (quoted by Ackroyd 253). This interesting confession suggests, however, a sense of personal urgency and unease, as well as public concern for the precarious state of civilization. Peter Ackroyd has noted that during the composition of *Four Quartets* Eliot was plagued by doubts about his creative vitality, going so far on one occasion as to suggest that he might not be able to write anything again (254). These doubts find expression in the theme of language that runs persistently through the *Quartets:* the difficult struggle "To purify the dialect of the tribe" ("Little Gidding"), and the equally difficult realization that one learns "to get the better of words / For the thing one no longer has to say, or the way in which / One is no longer disposed to say it" ("East Coker"). Eliot is quite capable of collapsing his own lyrical flights, such as the opening of the second part of "East Coker":

> That was a way of saying it—not very satisfactory:
> A Periphrastic study in a worn-out poetical fashion,
> Leaving one still with the intolerable wrestle
> With words and meanings. The poetry does not matter.

Richard Poirier, commenting on these lines, argues that Eliot is devaluing "literature in the interests of the preeminent values of language," something "too important to be left in the care only of poetry" (48). According to Poirier, Eliot displays a profoundly "de-creative impulse, with respect to the more reassuring values of the past," which is "evidence of an especially austere heroism" (59). Eliot suffers "in a degenerative era, for the necessarily de-creative movements within the processes of creation" (Poirier 60). I think Poirier may be overstating his case here,

but his arguments are useful in focusing our attention on the broodingly ambiguous and personal nature of Eliot's concern with language in the *Quartets*.

Significantly, the Dantean motif of the meeting with the "dead master" in "Little Gidding" is concerned largely with the problem of language. The speaker is patrolling the streets of London after an air raid "In the uncertain hour before the morning." He meets "one walking, loitering and hurried / As if blown," and soon recognizes him as

> some dead master
> Whom I had known, forgotten, half recalled
> Both one and many; in the brown baked features
> The eyes of a familiar compound ghost
> Both intimate and unidentifiable.

The identity of the ghost has been much debated, most critics settling for a composite of Yeats and Swift and Eliot himself.[7] The dream-like "compound" of the interlocutor, as well as the speaker's presumed involvement in the compound himself ("I assumed a double part ... I was still the same, / Knowing myself yet being someone other"), suggests another use of the Dantean motif as a metaphor of the journey into the self. Speaking to the apparition, whose words, interestingly, "sufficed / To compel the recognition they preceded," the speaker is on one level holding a colloquy with himself. The passage is full of paradoxes with which language must wrestle. The conversation is held at an "intersection time / Of meeting nowhere, no before or after." The wonder that the speaker feels "is easy, / Yet ease is cause of wonder." Indeed, the poem itself strains from the beginning against the boundaries of human experience. The title refers to a seventeenth century Anglican community to which Eliot has turned as one of the "places / Which ... are the world's end." The scene in London, "before the morning / Near the ending of interminable night / At the recurrent end of the unending," is another of these places.

Here language, with its full freight of history (a notion enforced by the Dantean motif), strains to its end. The ghost will not rehearse his thoughts,

> For these things have served their purpose: let them be.
> So with your own, and pray they be forgiven
> By others, as I pray you to forgive

[7]Hugh Kenner goes so far as to include Yeats, Mallarmé, Hamlet's father, Ezra Pound, Dante, Swift, and Milton in the composite, a simultaneous embodiment of "the *literary* past which has been Eliot's theme since 1917" (321).

> Both good and bad. Last season's fruit is eaten
> And the fullfed beast shall kick the empty pail.
> For last year's words belong to last year's language
> And next year's words await another voice.

In Shelley's poem, the gloom arises from the speaker's consciousness of the impurity of the human imagination; in Rossetti's sonnets a similar gloom issues from his awareness of the impurity of romantic love; for Eliot, the impurity of language is cause for despair. The ghost notes, paraphrasing Mallarmé, that "our concern was speech, and speech impelled us / To purify the dialect of the tribe / And urge the mind to aftersight and foresight." But Eliot seems aware that this goal is doomed to failure. Interestingly, Mallarmé had spoken merely of giving a more pure sense ("un sens plus pur") to the words of the tribe. "To purify the dialect of the tribe" suggests something much more, an enterprise, as Poirier would argue, beyond the powers of poetry, even without the additional injunction to "urge the mind to aftersight and foresight." Like Rousseau in "the Triumph of Life," the ghost in "Little Gidding" offers his interviewer only the fruits of defeated purpose, "gifts reserved for age / To set a crown upon your lifetime's effort." These include such things as "the cold friction of expiring sense / Without enchantment," the "bitter tastelessness of shadow fruit," "the conscious impotence of rage," and "the rending pain of re-enactment / Of all that you have done, and been." The best hope the ghost can offer of escape from the inferno of desire is a sort of purgatory of art, where the "exasperated spirit," moving tentatively "From wrong to wrong," may be "restored by that refining fire / Where you must move in measure, like a dancer." It is at once a state of effort and of grace, and far from the bravado of purifying language itself. Indeed, "Little Gidding" tests the "no man's land" at the boundary of poetic language as a condition of faith in the modern era, an era obviously less conducive to such faith than Dante's own. Eliot's use of the Dantean motif, like Shelley's and Rossetti's, highlights not so much a moment of affirmation as one of doubt, of darker musings on the frailties of modern man.

In his later poems in *terza rima,* Allen Tate also finds in the example of Dante a vehicle for the exploration of dark, modern subjects. "The Swimmers" is a straightforward and effective narrative that describes a childhood memory of a lynching. "The Buried Lake" is a more difficult poem that makes use of the Dantean motif of meeting with the dead to explore the relationship of poetic inspiration and religious faith in the modern world. Typically, it presents itself as a dream, a nocturnal visit to the unconscious where the speaker "had kept opaque / Down deeper than the canyons undersea / The sullen spectrum of a buried lake /

Nobody saw; not seen even by me."

The frame of the poem is a prayer to Saint Lucy, the lady of light from Dante's *Purgatorio,* to whom the speaker "would admit a dream." Throughout the poem, Tate contrasts the lady's "imponderable stuff / Of light," the mystical lucidity achievable through prayer, with his "edge of darkness," the opacity of the human unconscious. "An ageing child," the speaker stumbles "all night long on sand and shell / By a lakeside where time, unfaced, was dark." He is admitted to the underworld, "a pinched hotel," by "a sick dog," whom we may identify as Cerberus, the three-headed dog who according to tradition guards the entrance to Hades. Once there, the speaker himself reveals a touch of Orpheus, unsnapping a "lyric case" and preparing to play on his violin. If this is meant to suggest Tate's vocation as a modern poet, his attitude seems at this point darkly ambiguous. The "cadenza" he plays is "for the Devil's Trill." A "Small dancing girl" appears and then disappears as suddenly, having "locked the fiddle up." The poet's response is to mourn "the death of youth without a word." Like Shelley's early idealization of sexual love, the youthful poet's first bloom of inspiration proves to be a dead end.

The speaker next meets his "friend Jack Locke, scholar and gentleman," who glares and flicks "his nose as if about to scan / My verse." He has moved from his youthful, lyrical "Devil's Trill," it seems, to the maturer musings of empirical philosophy, but Locke too disappears "as mist upon the browning air [pun presumably intended] ... Leaving me guilted on a moving stair / Upwards, down which I regularly fell / Tail backwards." A Browningesque delight in materialism will no more do than youthful, lyrical exuberance. The poet/speaker is left to topple "tail backwards" (there is still a bit of the devil in him, it would seem) down his Dantean escalator. Having worn through the other possibilities, he would now "resume / The grey sonata," an art of old age perhaps. At this point he has a vision of his "love," "A stately woman who in sorrow shone," wearing the aspect of a Piero Francesca "Madonna." She would appear to be his muse, possibly associated with the beauties of nature ("Under the dogwood tree / In bloom, where I had held her first beneath / The coiled black hair, she turned and smiled at me.") But as he tries to look at her, she turns suddenly into "Another's searching skull whose drying teeth / Crumbled me all night long and I was dead." This passage, with its realistic, nightmare images, is one of the most effective in the poem. The speaker's efforts as a secular poet hurl him into a psychological abyss.

Indeed, any resolution of this dark night of the speaker's soul, conceived purely in mortal terms, seems doomed to failure. "All grace being lost," the only hope of salvation is in religious conversion and prayer: "come to midmost May I bent my knees, / Santa Lucia! at noon ... And knew I had not read your eye

before." Tate does not pretend that such conversion can come easily, however. "How vexed, bitter, and hard the trance / Of light—how I resented Lucy's play!" He goes so far as to wonder if it were not better to "stay dead." Yet as Lucy "lost the day" only to "refound it Lucy-guise," the speaker refinds the light "where two shadows meet" and greets his "speaking Dove," his Lady "in the double of our eyes." The speaker's paradoxical salvation is to be found in the self, or at least that part of the self akin to Lucy's light, suggested by "the double of our eyes." The dream, which may after all have been the darkness of unenlightened human life, "is over and the dark expired. / I knew that I had known enduring love." With this, the speaker is released from his nightmare, if not into a paradisal state, at least into the purgatorial state of hope suggested in the poem's epigram.

In addition to his recreation of *terza rima,* Tate goes farther than any of the other poets we have considered in trying to recreate the religious allegory of Dante. But it seems curiously unsatisfactory in the modern, psychological setting where it must perform. If "The Swimmers" suggests, in its relatively simple, narrative fashion, a human *Inferno,* "The Buried Lake" is clearly meant to suggest, in terms of a struggle carried out in the self, the climb from an *Inferno* of the soul to a *Purgatorio* of at least possible salvation. But while the dream images seem psychologically apt, the allegorical apparatus, which must do the work of performing the conversion and salvation, seems forced to the point of accidental comedy. The "sick dog" who must act the part of the modern Cerberus, for instance, is appropriately plain in the best modern way, but hardly terrifying as he was meant to be. The playing of the "fiddle," acceptable as a dream image, cannot really bear the weight of association with Orpheus' lyre which is forced on it. Whereas in Shelley the Dantean motif functions beneficially to concretize an imagination habitually too free, in Tate it acts as an encouragement to the sort of crabbed ratiocination which is his greatest vice as a poet. The hopeful conclusion of "The Buried Lake" seems not so much the inevitable outcome of the poem as an act of intellectual will, for the theology of the poem is ultimately at war with the poem's modern, psychological constituents. The result is an ambiguity more awkward than enduringly provocative.

It is not without significance that the more formidable Dantean moments in Eliot are not specifically imitative of Dante's manner or theology. The Dante at work upon Eliot's poetry was by historical necessity different from the Dante Eliot contemplated as a critic. In his moments of what F.R. Leavis has called "difficult sincerity" (118), Eliot's poetry represented "a striving after a spiritual state based upon a reality elusive and yet ultimate" (Leavis 118). The paradox of this state being at once elusive and ultimate is important. The state of grace may hint at

transcendence, but its expression in human language can only be provisional. On his salient occasions, as in “East Coker” and “Little Gidding,” Eliot was enough a man of his time to recognize this.

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Chapter 4

Humbert Rising: The Nature and Function of the Two Parts in *Lolita*

Vladimir Nabokov was never one to miss an opportunity of balance, and *Lolita*[1] is full of balances, repetitions, and oppositions. This is as true of the novel's larger structure as it is of minutiae. The balance in a name like Humbert Humbert is reflected in the balance of the two parts of the book. In fact, the two parts of the book are vigorous opposites in structure and in tone, and this opposition sustains much of the plot's considerable energy. Part one is dominated by Humbert's solipsistic view of those around him, while part two suggests his gradual release from this condition. Thus, in the first part of the novel, Humbert has virtually complete control of the narrative perspective and the reader is expected on the whole to accept his version of the events being related, while in the second part the reader is invited to make a counter-reading, to see Humbert's perspective as limited and provisional, and to view the other characters as having distinct motivations apart from the enchantment of his imagination. Paradoxically, this allows us to see Humbert himself in a truer relation to the other characters and to take some measure of him in his tragic freedom.

Any autobiography or confession, as Humbert's narrative purports to be, is by nature problematical. We are given abundantly what we can never have in a conventional biography, the author's inner experience of events. At the same time,

[1] My text is the Berkeley Medallion Edition of *Lolita* by Vladimir Nabokov. New York: Berkeley Publishing Corporation, 1966.

however, we lose the critical objectivity we expect in biography. Where the biographer's struggle is to move from outward public facts to some inkling of his subject's inner experience, the autobiographer's struggle is to establish some plausible connection between his inner experience of events and the events themselves as publicly witnessed. In practice, both these efforts achieve at best a provisional success. The biographer's imagination must furnish the empty building of publicly available facts. The autobiographer must contend with the solipsistic world of his memory and its protective artifices. Objectivity, as any therapist or rapist will tell us, is not a virtue for which our protective memories have any need or use. A novel that makes artistic use of the form of another genre, such as biography or autobiography, inherits some of the problems of the form along with its potentialities. In *Lolita*, Nabokov turns the inherent problem of the confession to artistic advantage. The native solipsism of the confessor becomes a most important illuminating strain of Humbert's complex character.

Like many novels concerned with the "history" of a major character, *Lolita* makes use of a "rise and fall" structure. The first part relates Humbert's rise to the height of his peculiar bliss, the possession of a nymphet, while the second part relates his fall from this state of grace. (As we shall see, however, *Lolita* is at once and paradoxically a "fall and rise" novel.) In part one, almost as an analogue of his rise to power, Humbert's solipsistic point of view is given complete control of the narrative. Even Annabel, with whom Humbert discussed as an equal his favorite topics, "the plurality of inhabited worlds, competitive tennis, infinity, *solipsism*, and so on"(14, italics mine), can be said to have been made in the image of Humbert's imagination, if not actually "solipsized." Like Quilty in his dark, unmanageable way, Annabel is depicted as Humbert's alter ego, with the same thoughts, dreams, and other "strange affinities"(16). In so far as she is distinct, however, with "seaside limbs and ardent tongue"(17), she is vulnerable to death, which Humbert's imagination cannot control. This example of his own victimization by fate (McFate in a later incarnation) haunts him throughout the novel. While the caretakers of the cemeteries in Ramsdale "report that no ghosts walk"(6), a number of ghosts, beginning with Annabel's, flit about in Humbert's consciousness, and against these Humbert struggles to establish control over the world of his mind. Humbert's obsession with nymphets is an effort to reincarnate Annabel, to manipulate a fate that has eluded his control.

Humbert exercises control over the circumstances of his life by controlling its narration. Even the most humiliating events, such as his first wife Valeria's desertion, are mitigated by Humbert's narration of them. When Valeria and her muscular lover Maximovich leave, Humbert is as frustrated in his desire for re-

venge as Anton Petrovich in Nabokov's early story "An Affair of Honor": all he can do is slam the door behind them. But unlike Anton Petrovich, he is the ironic teller of his own story, and as such he can reduce Valechka and her taxi driver to absurdity:

> I do not remember his ridiculous name but after all those years I still see him quite clearly—a stocky White Russian ex-colonel with a bushy mustache and a crew cut; there were thousands of them plying that fool's trade in Paris....With an atrocious accent to his careful French, he delineated the world of love and work into which he proposed to enter hand in hand with his child-wife Valeria....I can swear that he actually consulted me on such things as her diet, her periods, her wardrobe and the books she had read or should read. "I think," he said, "she will like *Jean Christophe?"* Oh, he was quite a scholar, Mr. Taxovich.(28-29)

It should be noted that this absurd taxi driver "made of pig iron"(30) is cuckolding Humbert just as another "pig-like" character, Quilty, will later do, but Humbert's helplessness in the situation is not nearly as apparent. He is still the ironic master of his own story, controlling the narrative in such a way that we accept pretty much at face value his version of characters and events. Valeria's departure is made to seem almost convenient. The same point can be made about Humbert's handling of other minor characters, such as the various prostitutes and psychiatrists he encounters before arriving in Ramsdale. Though the events are humiliating in themselves, their ironic narration by Humbert renders them innocuous. It is only with the arrival of his double, Quilty, that Humbert's control of our perceptions begins to slip and a counter-reading is invited.

We see this also in Humbert's relationship with Charlotte Haze. From the moment of his first seeing Lolita, his narration and our perceptions are focused on the nymphet. Charlotte is satirized as an annoying intruder on Humbert's bliss, an animated part of the *poshlust* of the background of 342 Lawn Street. It is not until after her love letter, when the course of events has rendered her useful in keeping Lolita within reach, that we begin to suspect Humbert has been subtly leading Charlotte on:

> There may have been times—there must have been times, if I know my Humbert—when I had brought up for detached inspection the idea of marrying a mature widow (say, Charlotte Haze) with not one relative left in the wide gray world, merely in order to have my way with

> her child (Lo, Lola, Lolita). I am even prepared to tell my tormentors that perhaps once or twice I had cast an appraiser's cold eye at Charlotte's coral lips and bronze hair and dangerously low neckline, and had vaguely tried to fit her into a plausible daydream.(66)

In order to deal with his "poor doting Big Dove"(67), his "brand-new large-as-life wife"(72), Humbert must "solipsize" Charlotte (as indeed he has done with Valeria), hunting for signs of the child about her, "a resemblance to the lovely, inane, lost look that Lo had when gloating over a new kind of concoction at the soda fountain"(71-72), evoking "the child while caressing the mother"(72). In effect, Humbert represents "Lotte" to his imagination as Lolita's older sister. He forces himself to make love, not to the mature woman, but the simulacrum of the child. And when the real Charlotte wriggles out of Humbert's control, he contemplates her murder. Throughout, Humbert Rising controls our perception of events. Even in the awkward moments when Charlotte discovers his diary and declares her independence of his control, Humbert's narrative fudges his discomfort: "Whatever Humbert Humbert said—or attempted to say—is inessential.... whatever H.H. murmured may be omitted"(89). McFate's subsequent elimination of Charlotte, certainly a wish-fulfilling event, seems an orchestration of Humbert's mind, the narrator's combining of the intricate threads of his story.

With regard to Lolita herself, we tend to accept without question Humbert's version of the events in part one. When he first sees her, she is wearing a pair of dark sunglasses not unlike the pair left on the beach when Humbert and Annabel made their last, desperate attempt at a tryst. For Humbert, Lolita appears as Annabel magically reincarnated, "the same child—the same frail, honey-hued shoulders, the same silky supple bare back, the same chestnut head of hair....I recognized the tiny dark-brown mole on her side"(38). Humbert's narrative insists on their identity, and aside from a few hints of her own banal ideolect which Humbert evidently does not care to consider—"I must go now, kiddo"(41)—Lolita exists in these early pages not so much as an independent character, but as a catalyst and prisoner of Humbert's imagination, fitted in his mind to the Platonic ideal suggested by Annabel. To seclude Lolita further from an independent existence, the narrative shifts immediately following their meeting to the form of Humbert's diary where we are given his perceptions without even the objectivity of an autobiographer's retrospective view. Our first sense of Lolita, therefore, is very much Humbert's own sense of her, and we accept without question his daemonic characterization:

> What drives me insane is the twofold nature of this nymphet—of ev-

> ery nymphet, perhaps; this mixture in my Lolita of tender dreamy childishness and a kind of eerie vulgarity, stemming from the snub-nosed cuteness of ads and magazine pictures, from the blurry pinkness of adolescent maidservants in the Old Country (smelling of crushed daisies and sweat); and from very young harlots disguised as children in provincial brothels; and then again, all this gets mixed up with the exquisite stainless tenderness seeping through the musk and the mud, through the dirt and the death. (43)

Humbert claims that his Lolita "has individualized the writer's ancient lust"(43), but the point might just as easily be made the Humbert's ancient lust has individualized and indeed created *his* Lolita, as well as the other characters who pass in the web of his narrative. Thus, while Charlotte is neatly sketched as an intrusive, chain smoking, "phocine mamma"(41), Lolita is just as neatly shown as a daemonic, flirtatious "seventh grader" displaying "the seaside of her schoolgirl thighs"(41). No perspective but Humbert's is even suggested at this point in the narrative, and our reading must concur with his.

Indeed, Humbert's control of the narrative is such that the usual language of eroticism is ironically reversed; to have the body of a woman is to be repulsive, to have the hips of a schoolboy is to be preternaturally attractive. At one point, Humbert laughs about a psychiatrist's file calling him "potentially homosexual"(34), and we laugh also. Psychiatrists, of course, are among the chief satirical targets of the novel, as in so many of Nabokov's writings. Although Humbert has associated "with uranists in the Deux Magots"(17), and will later befriend the homosexual Gaston, he is obviously not one of them; homosexuals parallel rather than duplicate Humbert's chronically uncertain relation with the society around him.

In the "diary" chapter, Humbert imagines himself as a spider "sitting in the middle of a luminous web and giving little jerks to this or that strand. My web is spread all over the house as I listen from my chair where I sit like a wily wizard"(47). In this way, he attends imaginatively to Lolita's movements about the house. The image of the spider with his "luminous web" is an apt metaphor for Humbert's narrative, the imaginative act of reaching out for, touching, and controlling the other characters. In the first part of the novel, they are all drawn into Humbert's web, subjected to his imagination. Humbert in his chair spreading out his web, Humbert in his chair writing his diary, Humbert on the sofa "solipsizing" Lolita, Humbert narrating: in all these acts, the primary agent is Humbert's controlling imagination.

The masturbation scene is important in this respect. While Charlotte is away

at church, praying as it turns out for guidance in her own relations with Humbert, Lolita in her role as daemonic nymphet plays teasingly around Humbert in the living room with a "beautiful, banal, Eden-red apple"(55). As she sits beside with her legs accross his lap, he contrives secretly to masturbate: "Sitting there, on the sofa, I managed to attune, by a series of stealthy movements, my masked lust to her guileless limbs"(56). Meanwhile, they bandy about a popular song concerning "little Carmen," which Humbert, associating with Merimee's *Carmen,* will add as an overtone to Lolita's identity. As he enters "a plane of being where nothing else mattered," it occurs to Humbert that "Lolita had been safely solipsized....In my self-made seraglio, I was a radiant and robust Turk, deliberately, in full consciousness of his freedom, postponing the moment of actually enjoying the youngest and frailest of his slaves....Blessed be the Lord, she had noticed nothing"(57-58)!

The importance of the scene lies in its suggestion that solipsistic Humbert has no desire or need for a Lolita not of his own creation. When he does feel such a need near the end of the novel, it will entail the establishment of fatal connections with the outside world, the death of one self in hope of the rebirth of another. The Lolita from whom he has "stolen the honey of a spasm"(59), is not yet a deliverer but a Platonic composite of Annabel, Poe's "Vee," Dante's "Bea," Petrarch's "Laureen," and Merimee's Carmen. In other words, she is an artistic creation of his imagination, subject to his narrative will: "What I had madly possessed was not she, but my own creation, another fanciful Lolita—perhaps, more real than Lolita; overlapping, encasing her; floating between me and her, and having no will, no consciousness—indeed, no life of her own"(59). For most of the novel, it is this ideal, solipsized Lolita for whom Humbert longs. It is interesting that until she surprises him by seducing *him* at the Enchanted Hunters, his ambition remains to fondle her while she is in a sleep induced by "Papa's purple pills." Indeed, until it is pathetically too late, Humbert's vanity requires no response. Throughout part one, we are presented with Humbert's solipsized Lolita, a Lolita he kidnaps literally and figuratively. Humbert's control of the narrative perspective insures that we see her this way.

The scene at the Enchanted Hunters, of course, is the climax of this narrative movement, and introduces, in the character of Quilty, an uncontrollable element that will invite us to make a counter-reading of Humbert's recitation of the events of part two. At the Enchanted Hunters, Humbert—the room key in his fist, and his fist in his pocket—rises to a height of solipsistic control never again to be attained. Inside the room he has locked a "hermetic version"(114) of Lolita. Appropriately, Room 342 is described as a veritable hall of mirrors:

> There was a double bed, a mirror, a double bed in the mirror, a closet door with a mirror, a bathroom door ditto, a blue-dark window, a reflected bed there, the same in the closet mirror, two chairs, a glass-topped table, two bed tables, a double bed. (110)

The mirrors, of course, suggest at once Lolita's own bewildering loss of identity and Humbert's solipsism. Like Humbert's name, everything in the room is doubled, implying his complete dominance. Just as Humbert's and Quilty's identities will blur in their death struggle ("We rolled over us"(272)), Humbert's and Lolita's identities blur among the mirrors that reflect the scene of the seduction.

Paradoxically, the seduction, the climactic height of Humbert's rise to bliss, represents also a fall:

> I should have known (by the signs made to me by something in Lolita—the real child Lolita or some haggard angel behind her back) that nothing but pain and horror would result from the expected rapture. (115)

In another passage, he regrets that he did not "leave the town, the country, the continent, the hemisphere,—indeed, the globe—that very same night"(114). The height of Humbert's solipsistic paradise is at once the depth of his personal hell. But it is only through his fall from grace in the second part of the novel that he rises above solipsism and attains some saving knowledge of his true relation and responsibility to others. This may seem an awfully "moral" point to make about a novel by someone as given to parody as Nabokov, but if we neglect it, we miss the real poignancy of Humbert's fate. Parody and the detection of one's characters do not preclude the establishment of a moral dimension for them; indeed, they may provide our surest footing in the moral ambiguity of the twentieth century.

Interestingly, it is when he accidentally meets Quilty at the Enchanted Hunters and engages in a strange riddling conversation (the nature of which, for the first time, he does not comprehend or direct) that Humbert's control of the narrative begins to slip. Quilty, who represents significantly Humbert's shadow or *Doppelgänger,* is an uncontrollable character who cannot be subjected to Humbert's imagination, and who begins to invite our ironic counter-reading of events.

The second part of the novel begins with an extended overview of Humbert's and Lolita's first year of traveling around the United States. Much of it is devoted to a marvelous satire of American ways, such as the diner with its "impaled guest checks, life savers, sunglasses [a subtle reminder of the Annabel/Lolita theme?], adman visions of celestial sundaes, one half of a chocolate cake under glass, and several horribly experienced flies ziggzagging over the sticky sugar-pour"(142).

Amid such general satirical descriptions, and very tentatively at first, a different vision of Lolita begins to emerge. Humbert repeatedly claims that he's doing everything he can to make Lolita happy, and indeed he indulges her with all sorts of treats, but it becomes apparent that she is actually a most unwilling prisoner and a very different girl from the one he imagines. Humbert is even disappointed in her mind, for unlike the Annabel he would reincarnate in her, she belongs among the objects of his satire:

> Lolita, when she chose, could be a most exasperating brat.... Mentally, I found her to be a disgustingly conventional little girl. Sweet hot jazz, square dancing, gooey fudge sundaes, musicals, movie magazines and so forth—these were the obvious items in her list of beloved things. (135-36)

All this is at variance with the Platonic ideal Humbert had formed of her. On her own—and we begin to see more and more such signs of her independent existence—Lolita aspires to a different ideal. She is "the ideal consumer, the subject and object of every foul poster," who patronizes "only those restaurants where the holy spirit of Huncan Dines had descended upon the cute paper napkins and the cottage-cheese-crested salads"(136). In other words, she is as typically American as the other objects of Humbert's satire, and this separates her from the European ideal of Annabel. At the same time, these leanings toward American *poshlust,* as well as her attraction to the vulgarities of Hollywood, all point, though Humbert does not yet know this, to her attraction for Quilty.

We begin to see also that Humbert controls his love not with passion but with threats. At first he threatens her with being sent to Miss Phalen's Appalachian farmhouse, and then with life as a "ward of the Department of Public Welfare"(138). But the best he can do is keep her quiet. He succeeds in "terrorizing Lo," but with all the ice cream bribes he buys her, he is "much less successful in keeping her in a good humor"(139). Humbert's control of the narrative is no longer absolute: a very different version of the story emerges between his lines. Their "indolent *partie de plaisir"* (141), as he puts it, is really a difficult struggle "to keep my companion in passable humor from kiss to kiss"(142). Humbert's narrative cannot quite gloss over the various rows he has with her, or his jealousy of various "grease monkeys" and roller skating companions she happens to meet. Even when his imagination etherializes her, as when he sees her on a ski-lift "floating away from me, celestial and solitary," outsiders intrude uncontrollably on the scene: she rides "up and up, to a glittering summit where laughing athletes

stripped to the waist were waiting for her, for her"(147). Humbert and his solipsized Lolita can only exist in a void created by his imagination, emblematized by the "hermetic seclusion" of the room at the Enchanted Hunters. Here, as in Beardsley, society intrudes on Humbert's solipsistic version of events.

The lack of understanding between Humbert and Lolita is suggested gradually and in a number of ways. For instance, Humbert cannot teach her to play tennis, something he hopes will give them "more amusements in common"(148), and even after she takes expensive lessons from a professional (incidentally, a pederast), the brow-beaten little girl cannot push herself to win. Humbert does not yet see, as we begin to see, how her normal desires have been stunted. He passes quickly over such suggestions of these desires as her fascination with pictures of brides. And though he doesn't seem to mind, we note her indifference to his ecstasies. Solipsistic Humbert wishes to devour her, to "turn my Lolita inside out and apply voracious lips to her young matrix, her unknown heart, her nacreous liver, the sea-grapes of her lungs, her comely twin kidneys," while she remains "a typical kid picking her nose while engrossed in the lighter sections of a newspaper"(151). When she reads a newspaper column on ways children might guard against sex crimes (by obeying "a few don'ts"), Humbert duly notes the absurdity of the article in light of their situation, but not the suggestion in Lolita's eagerly reading such an article that she might consider herself similarly victimized. That Humbert's relationship with Lolita is in fact very different from his relationship with Annabel becomes clear in the comical passages relating his repeated and failing attempts to find a love beach, "a sublimated Riviera, or whatnot"(152) in America on which to consummate his interrupted affair with Annabel. Later, when he recounts the "definite drop in Lolita's morals"(167), the difference becomes even more apparent. Humbert must begin bribing, in effect paying Lolita for her favors. To the reader, though not to Humbert, she seems more a reincarnation of the young prostitute Monique than Annabel. Humbert himself comes to realize this only at the end of the novel when he describes his gift of money to Dolly Shiller as a *"petit cadeau"* (254). In the course of part two, the image of the real Lolita gradually separates itself from the reincarnated nymphet of Humbert's imagination. At first we see it only around the edges, like a blurred color separation, but eventually it becomes more and more apparent, culminating in the image of pregnant Dolly Shiller. And we see it against and in spite of Humbert's narrative protestations to the contrary: "Annabel Haze, alias Dolores Lee, alias Loleeta"(153). Ultimately, the solipsist has "only words to play with"(32).

The scenes at Beardsley, where the girls learn, in Gaston Godin's phrase, "not to spell very well, but to smell very well"(161), are important in suggest-

ing Lolita's estrangement from Humbert's ideal. Beardsley provides a new social entanglement. For the first time since Camp Q, Humbert must deal with various people—teachers, neighbors, schoolmates—who make rival claims to influence the Lolita he has carefully solipsized. The first of these is Headmistress Pratt who advocates "the four D's: Dramatics, Dance, Debating and Dating"(161), all social activities of the kind Humbert, if he is to keep Lolita in the seclusion of his imaginary ideal, must prohibit. As Miss Pratt puts it, "with due respect to Shakespeare and others, we want our girls to communicate freely with the live world around them rather than plunge into musty old books. We are still groping perhaps, but we grope intelligently, like a gynecologist feeling a tumor"(162). Although this program, for obvious reasons, appalls Humbert, he feels he has no choice but to go along with it. He cannot simply satirize Pratt away; though she is as ridiculous as Valeria and Maximovich, she still claims a degree of authority over a Lolita equally abstract but very different from Humbert's. Pratt's Lolita is the absurd composite of psychological characteristics drawn from various "special research reports"(177), and measured against a pre-formulated ideal. " 'She is still shuttling,' said Miss Pratt, showing how with her liver-spotted hands, 'between the anal and genital zones of development' "(177). Indeed, Pratt herself does not hesitate to force Lolita into her own mold: "Sighs a good deal in class. Chews gum vehemently. Does not bite her nails though if she did, this would conform better to the general pattern—scientifically speaking, of course"(177). In effect, Pratt offers a rival solipsism to Humbert's, and thus threatens his control of the narrative and our assent to his version of events. She also forces Humbert to give up a measure of physical control over Lolita, insisting that he allow her to participate in the performance of Quilty's play, where Lolita will be enabled to form an alliance with Humbert's more formidable rival.

Neighbors and schoolmates also create problems for Humbert. The neighbors, such as the "odious spinster"(164) Miss East, keep Humbert in check by pestering him and Lolita with busybody questions: "And where is your mother, my dear? And what is your father's occupation? And where did you live before"(164)? While these attempts to discover something about Humbert prove fruitless, they keep him in a state of anxiety about his secret. Interestingly, Gaston, who is admired by everyone in spite of his own parallel secret, a homosexual taste for young boys, remains blithely indifferent to Humbert's domestic situation. Indeed, he is not even certain how many "daughters" Humbert has.

Lolita's friends are more dangerous. Though he forbids her for the most part to see boys, Humbert allows Lolita to befriend a number of girls from the Beardsley School: "Opal Something, and Linda Hall, and Avis Chapman, and Eva Rosen,

and Mona Dahl"(173). His hope is that Lolita will bring other nymphets into his circle, but in this he is disappointed. Either the girls do not possess nymphet qualities, or Lolita, out of some sense of rivalry perhaps, drops them. We see, of course, that Humbert cannot control them. They are autonomous characters his imagination cannot manipulate, and by establishing her own relations with them, Lolita claims another degree of freedom. This is especially the case with Mona Dahl, the girl Lolita likes best and Humbert least. "Mona, though handsome in a coarse sensual way and only a year older than my aging mistress, had obviously long ceased to be a nymphet, if she ever had been one"(173). She is already something of an actress with a streak of vulgarity, and it is she who first involves Lolita in "dramatics." Humbert is unsettled by Mona, who becomes Lolita's rival confidant and likes to drop puzzling hints about their secrets. Humbert must narrate here things he does not yet know or understand, but which the reader is expected to pick up on. In other words, Humbert, whose control of the narrative and its situations was so tight in part one, is now subject to dramatic irony. The reader sees the events of the story diverging from his awareness of them.

In the chapters concerning Lolita's preparation for Quilty's theatrical, this divergence becomes particularly apparent. In the manner of Emma Bovary, Lolita pretends to take piano lessons with her own Miss Emperor while in fact going for "extra rehearsals" with Quilty. Humbert, who does not understand what is going on, takes the play lightly, contenting himself with comments about detesting "the theatre as being a primitive and putrid form"(182). True to form, he shows a romantic's distaste for acting. For him, Lolita is simply "stage-struck"(182). In fact, as Humbert will later note, acting is teaching her the refinements of duplicity, and of course, allowing her further freedom from his orbit. Humbert's innocence is partially exploded a week before the performance when Miss Emperor calls to ask why Lolita has been missing her piano lessons. Humbert, who is playing chess with Gaston at the time, becomes so distracted that he almost loses his queen to his docile opponent. Indeed, his unaccustomed loss of control of the board suggests his loss of control of the narrative and Lolita's fate.

When Lolita returns home, they have the most explosive and detailed row of the book. Earlier fights were glossed over by Humbert's narration, but in this one we get a sense of what Lolita says in such situations:

> She said she loathed me. She made monstrous faces at me, inflating cheeks and producing a diabolical plopping sound. She said I had attempted to violate her several times when I was her mother's roomer. She said she was sure I had murdered her mother. She said she would

> sleep with the very first fellow who asked her and I could do nothing about it. (187)

We don't know what was said in earlier fights, but in this one Lolita suggests a very interesting counter-interpretation of the events in Ramsdale (was she not so thoroughly solipsized that morning after all?) and ends with a declaration of independence from Humbert's will. When a snooping neighbor calls to complain of the noise, she even escapes the house. Humbert finds her in a telephone booth where she has just made a call ("Tried to reach you at home"(189)) and undergone what seems a complete change of heart. The Lolita who has been accustomed to charge money for unwilling sessions of love-making suddenly comments: "Carry me upstairs, please. I feel sort of romantic to-night"(189). Humbert swallows all this, "shedding torrents of tears"(189), but the reader does not. Quilty and Lolita are now directing the action, and Humbert relates events over which he has no control.

From this point on, Quilty makes his presence felt in Humbert's narrative. All through the book, there have been hints of his presence—the Who's Who page, the Drome ad, references to Ivor Quilty and his nephew—but until the accidental meeting at the Enchanted Hunters, Humbert is able to ignore these. The meeting at the Enchanted Hunters is disturbing to Humbert because he cannot control it, but even then it is not perceived as threatening. Though Quilty occupies the toilet next door, Humbert is able to leave the next morning with his prize. In the later scenes of the novel, however, Quilty, in the form of the mysterious Detective Trapp, is able to torment Humbert, and largely because he is so completely and obviously out of Humbert's control. Indeed, the *Doppelgänger* itself is a solipsist's nightmare fantasy. Instead of an independent character being drawn *into* the self, controlled, and made part of it, a version of the self splits off and runs amok. This is the case, for instance, in Dostoyevsky's *Double* and Gogol's *The Nose*, both works that Nabokov in varying degrees admired, as well as such English works as *Frankenstein* and *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde.*

Quilty cannot be drawn into the web of Humbert's consciousness because he represents a rival version of that consciousness. Only Quilty, seeing Humbert and Lolita at the Enchanted Hunters, would guess what they were up to. As a playwright and "author of fifty-two successful scenarios"(272), Quilty is as adept at creating fictive narratives as Humbert, and indeed his machinations begin to control Humbert's own narrative. Humbert is no longer the controller of our perspective, but the sufferer of plot reversals we see coming. He is reduced to reading Quilty's text by means of the latter's many clues. Many critics have noted how the

conventions of detective fiction take over the novel at this point, but it is important to remember that the detective story within *Lolita* is essentially Quilty's creation. Humbert, who cannot imagine who his tormentor is, becomes helplessly unable to control the ordering of events (Lolita and Quilty have worked out an itinerary he knows nothing about), and is subjected eventually to the undeniable humiliation in the hospital at Elphinstone. Having lost solipsistic control of the narrative, Humbert loses literally and figuratively *his* Lolita, who was always a creation of his imagination.

Curiously, it is at this point that Humbert begins to develop in human terms. Having lost Lolita, he learns through his relationship with Rita that he can have a relatively normal affair with a mature woman. There is no question of free-spirited Rita, "the most soothing, the most comprehending companion that I ever had"(236), being solipsized. She is no ideal, but an independent "other" who responds, unlike Lolita, to his kisses, and moves in and out of his life with ease. To some extent because of Rita, Humbert comes to a clearer understanding of his relations with the other characters and to two important insights: that he loves the real Lolita to whom he has behaved monstrously in fashioning her in his own imagination, and that he must kill the rival devil Quilty, which on one level is tantamount to killing himself. In a number of moving passages, Humbert reviews his relationship with Lolita and sees for the first time not the nymphet, but the sad little girl whose childhood he killed:

> I recall that...it was always my habit and method to ignore Lolita's states of mind while comforting my own base self.... It had become gradually clear to my conventional Lolita during our singular and bestial cohabitation that even the most miserable of family lives was better than the parody of incest, which, in the long run, was the best I could offer the waif. (261-62)

Toward the end of the novel, he recalls hearing "the melody of children at play," and realizes "that the hopelessly poignant thing was not Lolita's absence from my side, but the absence of her voice from that concord"(280). Breaking out of the vicious circle of his solipsism (in the language of *Speak Memory*, one might almost say, changing the vicious circle to a spiral), Humbert is able, tragically too late, to experience a non-selfish love for a Lolita independent of his imagination.

Interestingly, as he prepares to murder Quilty, Humbert takes control of the narrative again. The revelations of the true nature of his love for Lolita and the identity of Quilty confer on him a new freedom and power. He is able to manipulate Ivor Quilty, for instance, at will. Whereas Quilty had been Humbert's

haunting shadow, Humbert (physically close to death himself) now becomes a shadow following Quilty, a "raincoated phantasm"(268) seeking revenge.

The murder scene has the kind of grotesque, tragicomical quality often associated with Elizabethan revenge plays. Humbert's nemeses have always been linked with bathroom imagery—Maximovich relieved himself in Humbert's bathroom and neglected to flush the toilet, while Quilty himself disturbed Humbert in the Enchanted Hunters by flushing the toilet in the next room. Now Humbert meets Quilty coming out of a bathroom "leaving a brief waterfall behind him"(268). The scene of their struggle is appropriately messy and melodramatic, both in terms of physical struggle and dialogue. In a reverse echo of their conversation at the Enchanted Hunters, Quilty does not seem to comprehend who is confronting him. Humbert, however, is perfectly aware now of their relation and essential identity:

> We rolled over the floor in each other's arms, like two huge helpless children. He was naked and goatish under his robe, and I felt suffocated as he rolled over me. I rolled over him. We rolled over me. They rolled over him. We rolled over us.... It was a silent, soft, formless tussle on the part of two literati, one of whom was utterly disorganized by a drug while the other was handicapped by a heart condition and too much gin. (272)

The identity of Humbert and Quilty has already been suggested in the scene where Humbert practices shooting an old sweater that he is later forced to wear himself. The murder of Quilty is thus palpably a form of suicide, as the killing of a *Doppelgänger* so often is. (One might consider, for instance, Victor Frankenstein's fatal pursuit of his monster.)

But the murder here is also an exorcism of what Humbert has come to see as the evil in himself. Indeed, Humbert cannot escape or even exculpate himself—he is too deeply involved in the evil Quilty represents more purely, and too deeply aware of this involvement—but he is free "to exist a couple of months longer" and to make Lolita "live in the minds of later generations"(281). It is a tragic freedom. His crimes lead irremediably to Lolita's and his own death, and the best he can offer her is "the refuge of art.... the only immortality you and I may share, my Lolita"(281). In terms of moral knowledge, however, Humbert, like Lear, has risen out of solipsism to a tragic awareness of himself in his true relation to others.

In actual autobiography, we do not expect this degree of self-awareness, nor are we generally invited to read between the lines and against the intention of the author, no matter how sorely we are tempted to do so. Witness the relative lack of irony in even a work like *Speak Memory*. *Lolita*, however, is a novel purporting

to be an autobiography. As such, it is under the imperative to round off its fictive world, and this involves allowing some adequate, objective assessment of its characters. *Lolita* accomplishes this by means of the carefully plotted, ironic reversal of Humbert's assumptions and claims in part two of the narrative. Humbert may rise in tragic stature only by his fall, and in this way, the reader is able to judge the confessor in his breadth and fullness and offer him the only forgiveness he can share.

Chapter 5

The Errors of a Comedy: Shakespeare's Farce

It is becoming something of a critical commonplace that comedy should not properly be termed a genre at all. We must contend, as Morton Gurewitch puts it, with "a plurality of impulses" (13). His mention of four such impulses—farce, humor, satire, and irony—is not exhaustive, but is sufficient to suggest the hazard of reducing comedy to a single, or even a dualistic motive (13). When we deal with Shakespeare, this danger is exaggerated for we all too easily cull from his plenitude a seeming unity of impulse, which, though in fact a mark of his limitations as a comic author, is often made to define the genre itself. Shakespeare's comic forte is the romance, replete with airy dangers, sprites, and fertile reconciliations. The study of Shakespeare's plays as paradigms of anthropological structures has proven extremely fruitful, as the work of Northrup Frye abundantly testifies. But this leaves untouched or slighted a vast range of what one might call "hard core" comedies, works such as the farces of Plautus that seem to be without redeeming metaphysical value.

Farce is perhaps the most anarchic form of comedy, subversive of all claims to a "higher seriousness" that critics in the Aristotelian tradition have sought in comic art. Its frenzied, wish-fulfilling plots blithely disregard the motivations and dynamics of the rational world. Maurice Charney has gone so far as to argue that "farce may be the purest, quintessential comedy, since it so rigorously excludes any sentiment at all, especially feelings of sympathy, compassion, or empathy for the characters. It is also unintellectual, unpsychological, and uncomplex" (97). It is not surprising that farce has proved an uncongenial form for those writers and critics who seek in comedy (perhaps by analogy with cathartic tragedy) a

domesticable support for the mores and assumptions of society.

Consideration of Shakespeare's *Comedy of Errors* is quite interesting in this regard, as it is a play based on a pure farce and written by a man who was uncomfortable with the conditions of farce. This is not especially apparent to those Shakespearean critics who believe strongly in their master's Midas touch. In her introduction to *Comedy of Errors* in *The Riverside Shakespeare,* Anne Barton acts as the apologist for every Shakespearean deviation from the chief source, Plautus' *Menaechmi.* Plautus' play is rather patronizingly described as having no "object or concern other than to evoke the normal world upside down and to evoke laughter of a simple and unreflecting kind" (80). What Barton will not recognize is something that should be quite familiar in an age that has produced Ionesco and Stoppard. The object of evoking the "normal world upside down" has its own very serious meaning, even though it refuses the notions of seriousness common in a stable society. A farce like Plautus' licenses anarchic and subversive ideas about society and man's place in the universe, ideas much more common in our own day than Elizabethan times.

Shakespeare, of course, was not content to let Plautus' plot remain as he found it. One of the superficialities of *Menaechmi,* according to Barton, is that "death is never a serious possibility" (80). Thus Shakespeare, in his wisdom, has imported the figure of Egeon from a source more congenial than classical comedy, the story of Apollonius of Tyre in *Confessio Amantis,* a late fourteenth century poem by the man Chaucer called "the moral Gower". The Goweresque Egeon, however, cannot be easily fitted into the amoral Roman scheme that considered parents and wives "usually nothing but a nuisance, repressing and causing trouble for the young" (Barton 80). In contrast to the others, Egeon expresses real anguish, though as his speeches "delicately" suggest, he needn't really worry. Most of all

> Egeon allowed Shakespeare to open the play under the shadow of death and to keep this threat alive in the background, like a sword that has been drawn and not sheathed, until it flashes into prominence again in Act V only to dissolve before the discoveries and accords of the final scene. (Barton 80)

That all this is gratuitous, that a comedy of errors such as *Menaechmi* does not need to be under the shadow of death, does not seem to have occurred to Barton. In the next paragraph, she goes on cheerfully to assert that Shakespeare's *Comedy of Errors* "revitalizes and gives new meaning to a seemingly outworn dramatic convention" (81).

There is more than a suggestion of a rather romantic belief that Shakespeare is somehow recapturing the complex spirit of a Greek original (in this case Menander) that was unavailable to the more prosaic, as it were, more bourgeois Roman author. "Menander's characters were psychologically more complex than their Roman descendants" (Barton 81). This is, of course, rather difficult to maintain, as we have only the most rudimentary fragments of all but two of Menander's works (compared with twenty of Plautus'). One must have extraordinary confidence or imagination to make calm assertions about the relative merits of Menander and Plautus.

But the fact is that Shakespeare, far from revitalizing an outworn convention, is vitiating the conventions of farce with foreign elements drawn chiefly from romance, a kind of comedy which may be said to reduce farce in inverse proportion to its own increase. Egeon, for instance, is clearly a romance figure. There are many other imported romance elements in *Comedy of Errors.* In *Menaechmi* the role of the courtesan, Erotium, is of great importance to the plot. Many of the Roman play's "errors" are hinged upon her confusion of the two brothers, which causes her among other things to sleep accidentally with Menaechmus of Syracuse. The wife in *Menaechmi*, typically, is a shrew; we do not pity her on account of her husband's frank infidelity, or even his apparent intention at the close of the play to auction her off. Shakespeare, with a shyness and sense of rectitude proper to a different world—a world where romantic love and marriage are to be exalted—leaves his courtesan a minor, shadowy figure, and gives her strategic importance in the plot rather to the wife Adriana and a new, more socially presentable character, her sister Luciana. Shakespeare is concerned here also to prepare a good match for such an eligible bachelor as Antipholus of Syracuse. Romance is particularly comfortable with such pairs, suggesting as they do the formation of a new society with the potential for fertility. Indeed, Shakespeare invents the character of Aemilia to provide yet another couple, yet another reunion and reconciliation at the end of the play.

Luciana represents another element alien to the world of farce in that she is the bringer of "light," or reason, into what Antipholus perceives as a land of nightmare, a place where "none but witches do inhabit" (III.iii.56). But certainly the irrational, though perhaps stripped of the romantic and Freudian notions of the nightmare, is the suitable and proper realm of farce. As Charney points out, "the prevailing mood [in a farce] is one of a world gone mad" (97). There is in Shakespeare's play an inordinate need to rationalize and round off the occasion. Dispensing with Plautus' simple prologue, Shakespeare has Egeon in the first scene spin out a long explanatory tale ostensibly to make plausible the events that fol-

low. In a true farce, where absurd conditions are understood to be the order of the day, no such explanation should be necessary. In fact, Egeon's wild tale serves only to make the story more remote, and perhaps less plausible for it. We are clearly being made to understand that all this is happening only because it is the world of fairy tale, of romance. We needn't worry. We need only suspend our disbelief a few hours and then return to our unbaffled lives.

All this suggests that Shakespeare was uncomfortable with the farcical nature of his source material in *Comedy of Errors.* Farce, as we perceive it in the plays of Plautus, has little to do with such humanistic values as Shakespeare was concerned to celebrate. It is rather a means of dealing with human aggression through absurd or surreal denial of the cause and effect of aggressive actions. In farce, our aggressive impulses are symbolically released and punished. Shakespeare's positive values, his celebrations of love, marriage, and fertility are not at home here. Faced with such conditions of farce as are discernible in Plautus, he was compelled to mitigate them with romance: a threatening condition to be overcome, rational if ingenuous explanations of the plot, love interest, a final reconciliation, the renewed vitalities of spring, a new society. Later, he would see in what direction to move: into the forest of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* or onto the enchanted island of *The Tempest. The Comedy of Errors,* however, remains a hybrid work, a grafting of romance upon farce, and is completely successful perhaps as neither.

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Chapter 6

Fevers Deeply Burning: Sexuality in the Brothers Grimm's "Nixie of the Millpond"

One of the rare Grimm's stories that deserves greater attention is "The Nixie of the Millpond."[1] Rich in symbolic detail and psychological depth, embodying in Joseph Campbell's phrase "a world of magic...symptomatic of fevers deeply burning in the psyche," it well repays close critical study.[2] Like "East of the Sun and West of the Moon" and other tales from the so called "animal groom" sequence, "The Nixie of the Millpond" is steeped in the mysteries of human sexuality, with which it deals simply but not simple-mindedly. In the tradition of romantic comedy, to which most fairy stories adhere, it offers hope in the ultimate benignancy of the human condition without understating the dangers and the difficulties we all know to be a part of that condition. "The Nixie of the Millpond" celebrates in festive terms a full, rounded view of sexual love towards which so many in the latter twentieth century grope with increasing anxiety and frustration.

The plot is fairly complicated for a fairy tale. It begins with a miller who has lost his fortune through one of those quirks of fate common in fairy tales as in life. One day, as he wanders near his mill he sees a beautiful woman rising from

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[2]Joseph Campbell, "The Question of Meaning," *The Complete Grimm's Fairy Tales*, trans. Margaret Hunt and James Stern (New York: Random House, Inc., 1972) 863.

the water. Although he rightly takes her to be a water spirit and reacts at first with fear, she cunningly wins his confidence and offers to restore his fortune in return for "the young thing which has just been born" in his house. Unwittingly, he consents to this bargain, and only later discovers that his wife has just given birth to a baby boy. The miller is remorseful, and brings his son up to fear the water and the Nixie, but over the years, as his fortune returns and the Nixie does not appear to claim her part of the bargain, the miller begins to feel at ease about the Nixie. The boy grows up to be a fine huntsman and is married to a "true-hearted maiden" from the village. Everything is fine until he accidentally ventures near the pond to wash his hands after hunting. The Nixie ascends, "smilingly" wraps her arms around him, and drags him under. The huntsman's wife goes to the millpond when her husband does not return, and finding his hunting pouch by the shore, guesses what has happened. Vainly, she curses the Nixie and paces around the pond. After many hours, she falls asleep and dreams that she climbs a mountain and visits an old woman who lives in a little cottage. Upon waking, she resolves to act in accordance with her dream and indeed discovers the old woman in her cottage. On three occasions, the woman offers the wife gifts to take to the millpond. Whenever the wife leaves one of the gifts at the water's edge, she sees part of her husband's body appear above the water. Each time, however, a wave rises from the pond and drags him down again. The third time, the husband manages to escape with his wife, but the couple are threatened by a tidal wave. In desperation, the wife calls on the old woman for help, and she responds by turning the wife into a toad and her husband into a frog. Thus they escape the flood, though the water separates them, and when they regain their human form they cannot find each other. In their need, they both turn to tending sheep, and drive their flocks for years "full of sorrow and longing." One spring they meet by chance, but do not recognize each other. They do feel comforted in each others company, however, and so continue their friendship. One day the man pulls out a flute and begins to play. The woman weeps on hearing this, and when questioned, replies that the air was one she played on a golden flute (one of the wife's gifts to the Nixie) on one of the occasions she saw her husband rise from the water of the millpond. The two then recognize each other and live happily thereafter.

The plot is composed of three loosely connected sections: the story of the miller inadvertently offering up his child, the story of the boy's capture and his wife's valiant efforts to free him, and the story of the couple's separation and eventual reunion. The miller's story, a common motif in fairy tales, is curiously incomplete. He does not undergo any development and indeed disappears from the story completely after the first part. As the husband plays a relatively passive

role throughout, the main focus of interest is on two characters: the Nixie and the wife. Interestingly, their parts overlap, the Nixie appearing in the first two thirds of the story, the wife in the last two thirds. The miller and the old woman balance each other in the first two sections, and are completely absent from the last section, which is left to the husband and wife alone. The progress of the plot is to isolate and make autonomous the married pair. The story's symmetry derives from its balancing of characters, the miller against the old woman, the Nixie against the wife, and ultimately the wife with the husband.

The miller and the old woman function at strategic moments to propel the plot. In effect, they represent the harmful and helpful influence of an older generation on the young couple. The miller's foolish greed in trading his son for gold, an act he regrets but does not disclaim (he accepts the Nixie's gold in spite of the probable consequences of this action), predestines his son's bad fortune. The old woman balances the miller's greed with her own generosity. Her golden gifts, a comb, a flute, and a spinning wheel, enable the wife to pay back the Nixie for the gold she gave the miller. The old woman, whose white magic counters the black magic of the Nixie, acts also as a mother figure to the young wife, duplicating in her relation to the wife the miller's relation to his son. Together they suggest the ambiguous relation of the older generation to the younger often found in comedy. The miller is a blocking character, or *senex iratus,* while the helpful old woman is a type of *eiron,* facilitating the young lovers' escape to a festive conclusion.

The Nixie and the wife are the characters most interesting in themselves. They are described in such opposite terms that one is almost tempted to think of the old Victorian dichotomy of the whore and the angel of the house. In a certain sense, such a symbolic opposition suggests a splitting of character and thus essential identity. The Nixie and the wife are negative images of each other. The wife has long black hair. The Nixie has long hair also, and although its color is not specified, we may imagine from her obvious association with figures like the Lorelei, that her hair is blonde. The Nixie is always described in what are essentially sexual terms. When the miller meets her, she is presumably naked and holds her long hair "off her shoulders with her soft hands." She is described as having a "sweet voice," which she uses to manipulate the miller. Her taking of the huntsman is described as an erotic act: "Scarcely, however, had [the huntsman] dipped [his hands] in than the nixie ascended, smilingly wound her dripping arms around him, and drew him quickly down under the waves." The wife, on the other hand, seems completely a-sexual. She is "a beautiful and true-hearted maiden" when she is married to the hunter, and we are given no reason to suppose that she changes until her husband is taken from her. Though the two "loved each other with all

their hearts," they have no children, and one may infer that their domestic paradise is innocent of its sexual component. At this point, the "love" of the huntsman and the "true-hearted maiden" is more akin to *agape* than *eros.*

Indeed, this is the heart of the story. Bruno Bettelheim has argued interestingly that all good fairy tales suggest some moral or emotional development on the parts of their heroes and heroines.[3] The development of the huntsman and his wife is a matter of accepting sexual maturity. The huntsman must learn to become a husbandman (suggested by his career change from hunter to shepherd, from predatory male, as it were, to nurturing protector), while the wife must learn to acquire some of the Nixie's arts, in other words to found and embrace the sexual side of her nature. Until they do this, they are embroiled in what is essentially a love triangle. Lacking a sexual component in his marriage, the huntsman, like many others (Whoso list to hunt?), has gone hunting for it and wound up in the clutches of the Nixie. The fact that he is captured while washing his hands after having disemboweled a deer reinforces this notion. The location of such drives in the unconscious is suggested by his visiting the pond, the natural habitat of the Nixie. The wife too has to come to terms with her unconscious sexual drives; she must visit the pond three times to dicker with the Nixie and ultimately learn to survive in some form in the watery element.

The wife's development is the most interesting part of the tale. It begins with her dream of the old woman, suggesting that the route she must take is through the unconscious. From the old woman she learns how to be a woman, and the implication of the dream is that this is achieved only by a fuller understanding of herself. The three gifts she receives from the old woman are fairly commonplace in fairy tales (one thinks, for instance, of the similar gifts in "East of the Sun and West of the Moon), but they are of interesting symbolic significance in this context. The comb, flute, and spinning wheel suggest three important aspects of a woman's love if not woman herself: sexual attractiveness, a spiritual component, and domestic industry (the spinning wheel, I dare say, was more commonly used in its day by women of a certain class than the microwave oven in our own time). The flute is also of special significance, implying that in order to rise above empty sex love must have a spiritual element, a "primal sympathy" to borrow a phrase from Wordsworth. Indeed, it is this primal sympathy, suggested by the remembered melody of the flute, which brings about the festive *anagnorisis* and *peripeteia* of the conclusion.

[3]Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (New York: Vintage Books, 1977).

The primal sympathy was always there as we know ("they loved each other with all their hearts"), but to achieve a mature and lasting love, the couple must first learn to deal with and domesticate the sexual sides of their natures. They must deal with and escape the Nixie. It is interesting that their escape is made possible by their being changed into amphibian creatures. Bettelheim contends persuasively that amphibians in fairy tales are almost always sexual symbols, primitive creatures associated with the primitive drives of the id as well as "our ability to move from a lower to a higher stage of living."[4] The transformation to amphibians suggests that the couple are at last able to deal with their sexuality and indeed transcend it. The process is not easy, however, and the husband and wife must spend years as shepherds (a symbolic wandering in the desert) before they recognize each other in terms of mature love. The act of shepherding represents the effort to domesticate their drives, the symbolic husbanding of sexual energy necessary for the social ideal of a family. This is not a limiting of sexual possibility, nor the imposition of unrealistic expectations, but the hope of a healthy society, the hope of renewal and regeneration which the greatest comic art dramatizes and predicts.

[4]Bettelheim 101.

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Chapter 7

A Controlling Sympathy: The Style of Irony in Joyce's "The Dead"

The plot of James Joyce's "The Dead," on the surface at least, is rather uneventful. Kate and Julia Morkan, two elderly sisters who live with their spinster niece, are holding their annual Christmas dance. Their married nephew, Gabriel Conroy, attends with his wife, and as is his wont on such occasions, delivers a rather unexceptional after-dinner speech. Among the guests is a tenor, Bartell D'Arcy, who sings after much good natured prodding a ballad that affects Gabriel's wife Gretta strangely. After the party, as they walk back in the snow to their hotel room, Gabriel experiences feelings of great passion for his wife. When he approaches her in the hotel room, however, she breaks into tears, and informs him about a former lover she had known when she lived in the country, a young boy who had died, as she believes, for her; the tenor's song had reminded her of the lad. All of Gabriel's complacent assumptions about his own life are in a moment torn down, and yet he responds eventually with "generous tears" of understanding and creature feeling. As the snow continues to fall alike on the living and the dead, Gabriel undergoes an epiphany, a moment of sublime understanding.

A number of critics have maintained that Joyce was depicting symbolically a society of the "living dead." Bernard Benstock, for instance, writes that Joyce's story is chiefly concerned with "those who remain alive, but fail to live: the disillusioned, the self-destructive, the blighted and wasted lives" (149). Hugh Kenner goes so far as to describe "The Dead" as a "definition of living death" (*Dublin's*

Joyce 62).[1] All the characters, according to such a view, are left exposed to the merciless blasts of their author's irony. The Misses Morkan and their niece affect a sham gentility, the grandchildren of a "glue-boiler." The various guests, too, are pretentious and phoney. Gabriel himself, with his pompous sense of dignity and superiority, is shown up; his words ring hollow, and even the emotional certainties upon which he has maintained the comfortable stability of his life are undermined. He is now middle-aged and his wife is no longer beautiful. On top of it all, he learns that for all these years she has not shared his own feelings, but has kept locked in her heart the image of another, younger, untouchably more romantic lover, a young man who has taken the Sophoclean precaution of dying young. Beside this romantic sacrifice, Gabriel's emotional outpourings must surely seem to be "only all palaver" (178).

Against such a view, I would argue that Joyce had a more generous conception of his characters. This is not to say that he does not "detect" them in the limitations of their humanity, that there is not irony at play here, but simply that the irony is gentle and embracing. I have borrowed the word "detect" from Denis Donoghue, who maintains in a splendid book, *The Ordinary Universe,* that Joyce failed to "detect" his character Stephen Dedalus in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man,* and that at least in this respect, Joyce's novel is inferior to a book like the *The Great Gatsby* where the characters are "detected" by their author (66-67). While this failure of detection can be convincingly maintained of *Portrait of the Artist* (perhaps because of the autobiographical origin of that book), it is precisely the accurate detection of character that renders not only "The Dead" but all the stories in *Dubliners* successful.[2]

[1]One might add to these names those of James R. Baker and Lionel Trilling. Baker, comparing Joyce and Ibsen, sees the stories in *Dubliners* including "The Dead" as sharing a "common pattern ... Dublin is the realm of the living-dead, paralysis exists on every level of experience and at every stage of life" (67). Trilling, perhaps echoing his own concerns, writes that "Gabriel Conroy's plight, his sense that he has been overtaken by death-in-life, is shared by many in our time" (156). Both these writers, however, Trilling genially and Baker somewhat less so, impose on Joyce the coloring of outside concerns, fitting him to the mold of Ibsen or an "adversary" literature.

[2]Of course "The Dead" is also "autobiographical" in the sense that Joyce based his characters on people he knew, his family, friends, and himself, but no character has the special personal relevance of Stephen Dedalus, originally conceived as "Stephen Hero," and only later subjected to distancing irony in *Portrait of the Artist* and *Ulysses.* Ellman believes that while Gretta is fairly obviously based on Nora Barnacle, and the Misses Morkan on Joyce's own great-aunts, the character of Gabriel is actually a composite of Joyce himself, his father John Joyce, and a friend named Constantine Curran, whose brother was a priest like Gabriel's brother Constantine (*James Joyce* 1959). Harry Levin describes Gabriel as "a Stephen Dedalus who stayed on to teach school and write occasional reviews" (42). That fact that Gabriel is only partially autobiographical can

Detection, however, does not necessarily entail the sort of withering irony that a critic like Hugh Kenner imputes both to *Portrait of the Artist* and *Dubliners (Dublin's Joyce).* It is not within my province to consider the later novel in detail, but I think it is demonstrable that we are meant to sympathize with Gabriel to a considerable degree. Most of the narrative, as we shall see, is given to his perspective. Furthermore, it can be argued that though his consciousness at the end of the story must be expected to undergo extensive revision, this need not be for the worse. Joyce has been at pains to show us that Gabriel's complacent self which was destroyed was not really worth his keeping. And we should not suppose that his life with Gretta is at an end; she will, indeed, at some time in the future wake up, and they will have the opportunity, for the first time, to reestablish their relationship on the firmer ground of full understanding. If we insist too much on seeing "the Dead" of the story as "the living dead" characters in it, we make the mistake of replacing a metaphysical vision of great subtlety with what is essentially a cliched moral vision of bourgeois vacuity. A detailed consideration of the text should convince us of the complexity of its vision.

What Vladimir Nabokov said of *Madame Bovary* furnishes us with a good approach to all fiction written in the tradition of that book: "Stylistically it is prose doing what poetry is supposed to do" (125). Any reader of "The Dead" should begin by taking account of the textual density of the work. Though conventional and modest enough in comparison with such a production as *Finnegan's Wake,* "The Dead" is nonetheless richly rewarding. From the first line of the story, the language of "The Dead" begins manipulating our assumptions about its characters, their society, and their fates in such a way as to contribute to the wonderfully subtle climax.

We learn first of all that "Lily, the caretaker's daughter, was *literally* run off her feet." (italics mine) As Hugh Kenner points out in his recent book, *Joyce's Voices,* whatever else one might say about Lily, she was not *literally* run off her feet (15). This is an instance, typical of Joyce according to Kenner, where the language of the narrative takes on some of the coloring of the character's own idiolect. This is most likely the sort of thing Lily would have said about herself, had someone taken the trouble to ask her. It is also a subtle indication of social position in a story where concern for social distinction provides a great deal of the imaginative life.

In the same paragraph we are introduced in the breathlessly busy way typical of Lily to "Miss Kate" and "Miss Julia," who, having converted the upstairs bath-

explain both Joyce's sympathy for and detection of his character in "The Dead."

room into a "ladies' dressing-room," were to be seen there "gossiping and laughing and fussing, walking after each other to the head of the stairs, peering down over the bannisters and calling down to Lily to ask her who had come." The grammar of the sentence, with its string of participles, suggests already something of the exciting holiday activity. The detail of the makeshift "ladies' dressing-room" indicates the extraordinary nature of the day's events, and also places the "Misses Morkan" socially: they are of the genteel, middle class, able to employ a servant but not prepared on a regular basis for entertaining. Lily, of course, thinks of them politely as "Miss Kate" and "Miss Julia," and is convinced that the women guests are "ladies." We should not necessarily take Lily's control of the narrative, however, as constituting a scathing attack on the pretensions of the bourgeoisie.

In the next paragraph, control of the narrative slips to Kate and Julia; it is their idiolect, and not the young servant girl's, which gives us: "For years and years [the annual dance] had gone off in splendid style, as long as anyone could remember; ever since Kate and Julia, after the death of their brother Pat, had left the house in Stoney Batter and taken Mary Jane, their only niece, to live with them....That was a good thirty years ago if it was a day" (175-76). This helps to develop our overall sense of them, and gives us also some sense of their ages. Thirty years ago, at least, their niece was "a little girl in short clothes." Now she is "the main prop of the household," and of course of an age to make her a prime candidate for spinsterhood. There has also been an evident decline in their standard of living since the time of the house in Stoney Batter when Pat, apparently, was the main prop of the household. The reader should note that Mary Jane and her aunts often act the part of servants to their wealthy students from Kingstown and Dalkey. As the point of perception shifts to Mary Jane, we learn also to distinguish between her elderly aunts, for though Julia, while "quite grey, was still the leading soprano in Adam and Eve's," Kate was "too feeble to go about much" and was now reduced to giving music lessons to beginners. Ironically, it is Aunt Julia whose ill health and impending death will first be hinted at and later insisted on. All this introduces a feeling of impending doom which comes gradually to dominate the story. The shift of perception to "the three mistresses" enables Joyce to introduce the main character, Gabriel Conroy, familiarly as "Gabriel" before Lily introduces him formally as "Mr. Conroy," a formality he likes to keep up. Our knowing him first as "Gabriel," the dutiful married nephew who could be counted upon in an emergency (for instance, to control a drunken guest like Freddie Malins), assures us that there is a more human, less austere, and less exceptional side to him than he likes to put out. Not everything shall be as it appears.

At this point Gabriel and his wife make their entrance, greeted politely by Lily

as Mr. and Mrs. Conroy. They seem the typical bourgeois couple to whom nothing especially eventful ever happens. Gabriel is witty and colloquial, explaining that they are late because "my wife here take three mortal hours to dress herself" (177). (As some critics have noted, this may be taken as an early suggestion of the theme of death. See Kenneth Burke 410) To Aunt Kate, he says: "Here I am right as the mail" (177). There is nothing extraordinary about all this, but it indicates Gabriel's security and self-satisfaction. Perhaps the only odd thing is that Gretta, his wife, will hardly strike us as the type who habitually spends "three mortal hours to dress herself"; she is too open and natural for us to imagine her being that vain.

A significant detail is the mention of Gabriel's goloshes. In Ireland where there is very little snow, goloshes are even now somewhat rare; in Joyce's day Gutta-percha goloshes were rarer still, "the latest things" from the continent. Though Gabriel makes no big deal about them, they would have struck people as rather fussy or extravagant. Indeed a little later on, Gretta chides Gabriel about them.

> —Goloshes! said Mrs. Conroy. That's the latest. Whenever it's wet underfoot I must put on my goloshes. Tonight even, he wanted me to put them on, but I wouldn't. The next thing he'll buy me will be a diving suit. Gabriel laughed nervously and patted his tie reassuringly, while Aunt Kate nearly doubled herself, so heartily did she enjoy the joke. The smile soon faded from Aunt Julia's face and her mirthless eyes were directed towards her nephew's face. After a pause she asked:
>
> —And what are goloshes, Gabriel?
>
> —Goloshes, Julia! exclaimed her sister. Goodness me, don't you know what goloshes are? You wear them over your ... over your boots, Gretta, isn't it?
>
> —Yes, said Mrs. Conroy. Guttapercha things. We both have a pair now. Gabriel says everyone wears them on the Continent.
>
> —O, on the Continent, murmured Aunt Julia, nodding her head slowly. Gabriel knitted his brows and said, as if he were slightly angered:
>
> —It's nothing very wonderful, but Gretta thinks it very funny because she says the word reminds her of Christy Minstrels. (180-81)

In this scene, Joyce begins to employ a gentle irony against the pretensions of his characters. Gabriel is shown to be of a higher level of culture and awareness

than his aunts, but also to be rather stuffy and even a bit of a prig. The natural Gretta makes fun of his cosmopolitan pretensions, which upsets him, as we feel, more than it ought. The reader should notice that whenever Gabriel feels uncomfortable he escapes into an outward gesture of some sort, such as patting his necktie, or flicking his boots. These gestures act rather like emotional circuit-breakers when a situation becomes too hot. And many situations do, for we see that in contrast to Gretta, Gabriel is extremely self-conscious, so much so that his awareness of other people is obscured and his interaction with them hindered. He cannot easily laugh at even a friendly joke made at his own expense. In contrast to Aunt Kate, who doubles over with laughter, or Gretta herself who laughs naturally, Gabriel laughs "nervously." With all his self-conscious posturing, he has trouble acting naturally and frequently fails, as here, to produce the desired effect.

We have already noticed this in his scene with Lily. He tries to be condescending (in the old sense) and falls flat. Perhaps this is because again he is more full of himself than observant. He can notice that she speaks with a less cultured accent than he, but he has no real empathy for her, or understanding of her reaction to him. Indeed, it is thoughtless of him to ask a girl of her low station if she still attends school. He can only compound his offense in a rather smug, bourgeois way by assuming that if she is no longer in school, she must be about to hear wedding bells. Lily answers him sharply: "The men that is now is only all palaver and what they can get out of you." The remark is significant in that it subtly introduces a main theme of the story: the real or imagined superiority of the past to the present, of the dead to the feeble living, who are all words. Though not a rake, Gabriel will soon find himself in a similar position in relation to his wife's former lover, a man of mere words to a man of action. Gabriel's extreme self-consciousness leads him now, as later with Miss Ivors and finally with Gretta, to failure. Typically, he escapes from Lily through the outward action of flicking his boots,[3] and further distances himself from her by forcing her to accept his charity. This action affirms his social superiority and the sense of security this confers on him. As Allen Tate notes, "from [this] moment, we know Gabriel Conroy ... we have had him rendered" (405).

It is interesting that Joyce chooses this rather awkward moment to give us our first, uncomfortable physical description of Gabriel. It is too intimate an exposure for the dignified figure Gabriel would like to cut:

[3]The flicking of snow from Gabriel's boots has also been seen by critics like Allen Tate (408) and Kenneth Burke (410) as an early suggestion of death, the first appearance of the snow symbolism that comes gradually to dominate the story.

> He was a stout, tallish young man. The high colour of his cheeks pushed upwards even to his forehead, where it scattered itself in a few formless patches of pale red; and on his hairless face there scintillated restlessly the polished lenses and the bright gilt rims of the glasses which screened his delicate and restless eyes. His glossy black hair was parted in the middle and brushed in a long curve behind his ears where it curled slightly beneath the groove left by his hat. (178)

One can imagine what Gabriel's discomfort would be if he found himself so closely scrutinized. In fact, Gabriel does not and cannot see himself with anything like this honesty until the final scene when he is alone in the hotel room with Gretta and glimpses himself in the mirror. What he then sees, and with an almost metaphysical insight that conveys both physical and spiritual implications at once, is the somewhat unpleasant figure we have been given so early on. It may be, indeed, that any such close scrutiny of a human being tends by the nature of it to reduce him comically, to render him grotesque. From the beginning, Joyce commits such sensuous detail to a strategy of controlling our view of Gabriel; we are meant to recognize, before he does, his unheroic proportions. This is not, however, a completely merciless exposure. We are encouraged, within these limits, to sympathize with Gabriel. For most of the story Gabriel is in charge of the narrative, and it is through his perceptions that most of the other characters are exposed. It is only that we are not to take him at his own evaluation of himself, and Joyce's subtle control of narrative perspective assures this.

To see this, one has only to compare the description of Gabriel with one a few pages later of Freddie Malins, who on this occasion is enjoying what is perhaps his final drinking bout before undergoing the drinking cure at the Trappist monastery at Mount Melleray. Freddie is engagingly more jovial than Gabriel, but he is subjected to even harsher scrutiny.

> Gabriel could be seen piloting Freddie Malins across the landing. The latter, a young man of about forty, was of Gabriel's size and build, with very round shoulders. His face was fleshy and pallid, touched with colour only at the thick hanging lobes of his ears and at the wide wings of his nose. He had coarse features, a blunt nose, a convex and receding brow, tumid and protruded lips. His heavy-lidded eyes and the disorder of his scanty hair made him look sleepy. (184)

Certainly here is a description to make Gabriel seem quite attractive by comparison, but this is not necessarily the effect. We do not mind the evident grotesqueness of Freddie Malins quite so much, perhaps because he affects the low role

of the clown, while Gabriel asserts his own dignity and will aspire to the role of the romantic lead. Unlike Gabriel, Freddie Malins is unself-conscious, "laughing heartily in high key." Through this he exercises claims to participation in a comic spirit which renders him somewhat immune to our censure. A number of the minor characters (Mr. Browne, for instance, whose face wrinkles with mirth as he pours himself glasses of whiskey) are similarly redeemed through acceptance of festivity. They are more comic than ridiculous.

The character of Gretta Conroy is more complex, in fact the most mysterious in the story. Unlike her husband, she does not control the narrative perspective at all in the early part of the story, and therefore, we get very little of her interior life, either directly or by implication. Of course, this is because Joyce wants to heighten his climax by locking the reader into Gabriel's ignorance. But it makes what little information we do get subtle, interesting, and significant.

We see her first as nothing out of the ordinary, but good natured and pleasantly unaffected in comparison with Gabriel. Soon, however, while Mary Jane is playing the piano, we learn in a sort of interior monologue of Gabriel's that his mother, who had high aspirations for her son, had once disparaged Gretta as being "country cute."

> A shadow passed over his face as he remembered her sullen opposition to his marriage. Some slighting phrases she had used still rankled in his memory; she had once spoken of Gretta as being country cute and that was not true of Gretta at all. It was Gretta who had nursed her during all her last long illness in their house at Monkstown. (187)

It is interesting that although the narrative, through Gabriel's idiolect, specifically denies his mother's assertion, we are inclined rather to believe it. It is our first inkling of something in her past, at least of some aspect of her which Gabriel refuses to recognize. "Country cute," perhaps, has connotations not unlike those of Hamlet's "country matters." The hint of an unbridled sexuality will also turn up later when Gretta speaks of walking with Michael Furey "the way they do in the country" (221).

However strenuously Gabriel would like to deny it, Gretta's "countryness" is insisted upon. It is prominent in the scene of his confrontation with the Irish nationalist, Miss Ivors. Both she and Gabriel are academics and colleagues, but we learn that Gabriel is what she calls a "West Briton," or sympathizer with England, while she is a strong nationalist, rather like a fictionalized Maud Gonne. Miss Ivors, however, can hardly be said to "dwell in lover's eyes." Joyce describes her in a-sexual terms: "She was a frank-mannered, talkative young lady, with a freckled

face and prominent brown eyes. She did not wear a low-cut bodice and the large brooch which was fixed in the front of her collar bore on it an Irish device" (187). She is hardly an attractive character in comparison with Gretta, but she is the perfect foil for Gabriel's affected cosmopolitanism. After duly upbraiding Gabriel for publishing literary reviews in the pro-British *Daily Express,* she invites him to make an excursion to the west of Ireland.

> —It would be splendid for Gretta too if she'd come. She's from Connacht, isn't she?
>
> —Her people are, said Gabriel shortly.
>
> * * * * * * * *
>
> —Well, we usually go to France or Belgium or perhaps Germany, said Gabriel awkwardly.
>
> —And why do you go to France and Belgium, said Miss Ivors, instead of visiting your own land?(189)

Miss Ivors continues to press Gabriel until he comes out with "I'm sick of my own country, sick of it!" Once again, he has failed socially because of his lack of insight into other people. Of particular interest is his attempt, in harmony with his own deracination, to separate Gretta from "her people," and her roots in the country and the past. In his imagination he would remake his wife in the mold of himself. That Gabriel is deluded we learn not long after this when Gretta, contrary to his expectation, expresses enthusiasm about the idea of visiting Galway, her provincial hometown in Connacht.

It is, of course, no coincidence that the country in the west of Ireland is associated with Gretta's past and comes to be associated with the past itself, and thus death. An easy step connects the journey to the west of Ireland with the journey to death, which is traditionally associated with the west. The connection is made explicit in the final paragraph of the story:

> The time had come for him to set out on his journey westward. Yes, the newspapers were right: snow was general all over Ireland. It was falling on every part of the dark central plain, on the treeless hills, falling softly on the Bog of Allen and, further westward, softly falling into the dark mutinous Shannon waves. It was falling too on every part of the lonely churchyard on the hill where Michael Furey lay buried. It lay thickly drifted on the crooked crosses and headstones,

> on the spears of the little gate, on the barren thorns. His soul swooned slowly as he heard the snow falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead. (223-24)

The passage is remarkable, among other things, in that it is full of archetypal images of death: the journey westward, "the dark mutinous Shannon waves," the graveyard, the crosses, "the barren thorns" (these last, like the crosses, suggesting central Christian images), and finally the snow itself, suggesting the unifying consciousness of the essential inseparableness of the living and the dead. And, of course, central among the dead is Michael Furey, the representative of the past who defeats Gabriel's very conception of himself.

The notion that the living suffer in comparison with the dead, the present with the past, has been well prepared for us. The reader will remember Lily's angry retort: "The men that is now is only all palaver and what they can get out of you." On a comic level, this sums up a central theme of the story. Another important variation on the theme is the dinner conversation about opera singers.

> Mary Jane led the table back to the legitimate opera. One of her students had given her a pass for *Mignon.* Of course it was very fine, she said but it made her think of poor Georgina Burns. Mr. Browne could go back farther still, to the old Italian companies that used to come to Dublin—Tietjens, Ilma de Murzka, Campaini, the great Trebelli, Giuglini, Ravelli, Aramburo. Those were the days, he said, when there was something like singing to be heard in Dublin. He told too of how the top galley of the old Royal used to be packed night after night, of how one night an Italian tenor had sung five encores to *Let Me Like a Soldier Fall,* introducing a high C every time, and of how the galley boys would sometimes in their enthusiasm unyoke the horses from the carriage of some great *prima donna* and pull her themselves through the streets to her hotel. Why did they never play the grand old operas now, he asked, *Dinorah, Lucrezia Borgia?* Because they could not get the voices to sing them: that was why.
>
> —Oh, well, said Mr. Bartell D'Arcy, I presume there are as good singers today as there were then.
>
> —Where are they? asked Mr. Browne defiantly.

> —In London, Paris, Milan, said Mr. Bartell D'Arcy warmly. I suppose Caruso, for example is quite as good, if not better than any of the men you have mentioned.
>
> —Maybe so, said Mr. Browne. But I may tell you I doubt it strongly.
>
> —Oh, I'd give anything to hear Caruso sing, said Mary Jane.
>
> —For me, said Aunt Kate, who had been picking a bone, there was only one tenor. To please me, I mean. But I suppose none of you ever heard of him.
>
> —Who was he, Miss Morkan? asked Mr. Bartell D'Arcy politely.
>
> —His name, said Aunt Kate, was Parkinson. I heard him when he was in his prime and I think he had then the purest tenor voice that ever was put into a man's throat.
>
> —Strange, said Mr. Bartell D'Arcy. I never even heard of him.
>
> —Yes, yes, Miss Morkan is right, said Mr. Browne. I remember hearing of old Parkinson but he's too far back for me.
>
> —A beautiful, pure, sweet, mellow English tenor, said Aunt Kate with enthusiasm. (198-200)

In an age when Caruso has assumed the inviolable mantel of legend (who in our time would go so far as to compare, say, Pavarotti quite favorably with him?), it is amusing to hear the resistance of Mr. Browne and some others to any recognition of Caruso as the equal of the likes of Trebelli or Giuglini, now quite forgotten. In fact, only Mary Jane and the "modern" singer Bartell D'Arcy will go so far as to praise Caruso. Aunt Kate suggests her own preference for a man completely unknown and perhaps even fictional. The point, of course, is that to the characters in this story (as we shall see, including Gretta), the memory of the dead completely overshadows any effort of the living. The reader should keep in mind the fact that Michael Furey was himself a singer of the old time.

The idea of the past overwhelming the present also makes an appearance on the level of abstract banality in Gabriel's speech.

> —Ladies and Gentlemen.
>
> —A new generation is growing up in our midst, a generation actuated by new ideas and new principles. It is serious and enthusiastic for these new ideas and its enthusiasm, even when it is misdirected, is,

> I believe, in the main sincere. But we are living in a sceptical and, if I may use the phrase, a thought-tormented age: and sometimes I fear that this new generation, educated or hyper-educated as it is, will lack those qualities of humanity, of hospitality, of kindly humour which belonged to an older day. Listening tonight to the names of all those great singers of the past it seemed to me, I must confess, that we were living in a less spacious age. Those days might, without exaggeration, be called spacious days: and if they are gone beyond recall let us hope, at least, that in gatherings such as this we shall still speak of them with pride and affection, still cherish in our hearts the memory of those dead and gone great ones whose fame the world will not willingly let die. (203)

The irony of this speech, is that Gabriel has no idea of the effect his own conventional pleasantries about the past have on Gretta. Although we too, locked in Gabriel's perception, do not suspect it, a speech about "those dead and gone great ones whose fame the world will not willingly let die" can only remind Gretta of the great romantic love of her life, Michael Furey. The scene, in fact, typifies Gabriel's lack of intuitive sympathy with other people, including his wife.

Gabriel is socially mistaken or inept on many levels: his failure with Lily, the controversy with Miss Ivors, the inappropriate speech, where, among other absurdities, he calls his aunts and cousin "the Three Graces of the Dublin musical world" (204). One night also instance the famous "Distant Music" passage.

> Gabriel had not gone to the door with the others. He was in a dark part of the hall gazing up the staircase. A woman was standing near the top of the first flight, in the shadow also. He could not see her face but he could see the terra-cotta and salmon-pink panels of her skirt which the shadow made appear black and white. It was his wife. She was leaning on the banisters, listening to something. Gabriel was surprised at her stillness and strained his ear to listen also. But he could hear little save the noise of laughter and dispute on the front steps, a few chords struck on the piano and a few notes of a man's voice singing.
>
> He stood still in the gloom of the hall, trying to catch the air that the voice was singing and gazing up at his wife. There was grace and mystery in her attitude as if she were a symbol of something. He asked himself what is a woman standing on the stairs in the shadow,

> listening to distant music, a symbol of. If he were a painter he would paint her in that attitude. Her blue felt hat would show off the bronze of her hair against the darkness and the dark panels of her skirt would show off the light ones. *Distant Music* he would call the picture if he were a painter. (209-10)

Even in a private moment contemplating his wife, Gabriel cannot give up the pose. He insists on viewing her "as if she were a symbol of something." He affects, at precisely the wrong moment, an artificial, "aesthetic" relation to Gretta. In fact, she is at this moment engrossed in the folk song being sung by Bartell D'Arcy, which as it turns out, was one sung also by Michael Furey.

> O the rain falls on my heavy locks
> And the dew wets my skin,
> My babe likes cold. . . (210)

Gabriel, of course, misinterprets his wife's passionate response to this as a longing to respond to him. Actually, the lyrics suggest Michael Furey standing under a tree in the rain on the last night before Gretta was to leave, the night when he told her he no longer wished to live.

Indeed, the song may suggest even more than that. Later on, when she confesses her affair with Michael Furey, Gretta remarks: "I was great with him at that time" (220). It may be possible to infer from this an unwanted pregnancy, which would supply a sufficient motive for Gretta's family's separating her from Michael Furey and shipping her off to a convent, a traditional dumping ground for such cases. Gretta's having been pregnant would also go some distance towards explaining the strange depth of her passion for the young boy, and indeed it would increase the depth of Gabriel's humiliation.

We should not be too hard on Gabriel, however. Certainly a great deal of irony has by now been pointed at him; he has been indeed "a ludicrous figure, acting as a penny-boy for his aunts, a nervous, well-meaning sentimentalist, orating at vulgarians and idealizing his own clownish lusts, the pitiable fatuous fellow he had caught a glimpse of in the mirror" (220). Yet since the time of the speech, at least, we have begun to see him as a more genial, human character than we were allowed to see previously. The anecdote he tells about Patrick Morkan and his horse is unpretentious and amusing, and the passion he feels for Gretta on the way home, though perhaps banal and even a bit fatuous, is genuine, attractive, and moving. The wine, perhaps, has broken his pretension and inhibition. Whatever the cause, the effect is to endear Gabriel to the reader in a way we had not expected. It is

only at this point that he is humiliated with the bizarre *anagnorisis* and *peripeteia* of the final scene in the hotel room.

This seems to be Joyce's deliberate strategy. As C.C. Loomis points out, "if the reader identifies himself unreservedly with Gabriel in the first ninety percent of the story, he will lose that critical insight into him which is necessary for full apprehension of his vision ... [and] he is liable to miss those very shortcomings which make the vision meaningful" (149). The shortcomings, as we have seen, are fairly obvious. The exact nature of the "vision" has been much debated. David Daiches, for instance, who views the story positively, treats Gabriel's epiphany in aesthetic terms. Daiches notes that "the indifferent acceptance of life as something revolving not round the artist's ego but on its independent axis is for Joyce the ideal aesthetic attitude" (82), and goes on to say that "The Dead" is a "fable" illustrating this view (82). Florence Walzl, in an interesting essay summarizing the major criticism, argues that the way one reads the ending of "The Dead" seems to depend on whether one views it as the culminating story in *Dubliners* or an independent work (424-25). Thus, critics like Hugh Kenner and Brewster Ghiselin, who treat "The Dead" as part of the whole book of stories and emphasize certain "unifying" themes, tend to see it as a summation of negativism; Gabriel's vision is one of "identification with the dead" (Walzl 424). In Kenner's phrase, Gabriel finds at the end of the story that his "proper medium" (*Dublin's Joyce* 64) is death. On the other hand, critics like Daiches, Kenneth Burke, and Allen Tate, who view the story as an entity in itself, see the final vision as "a rebirth experience" (Walzl 443). Walzl herself believes that Joyce deliberately imposed on his work "a pattern of ambivalent symbols and a great final ambiguity" (443).

Indeed, the circumstances of publication seem to have dictated to Joyce the logic of this solution. He began writing some of the stories in *Dubliners* before leaving Ireland in 1904, and he completed an early version of the volume in 1906. Walzl notes that the letter so many of the negative critics cite, in which Joyce claims that he chose the Dublin setting because that city seemed to him the "centre of paralysis," was written in May 1906, well before the composition of "The Dead" (425). Thus "The Dead" seems to have been an afterthought reflecting not merely Joyce's growing experience and maturity, but his changing attitude as well. Despite the natural attraction of seeking unifying themes, we should be careful not to bind "The Dead" by the strictures the other stories impose upon themselves. As S.L. Goldberg argues, "The Dead's" "deeply felt conviction, its originality, its complex yet assured ironies, its humility before life, place it apart from the rest of *Dubliners.* Fine as they are, the other stories stand judged by this" (46). Because of this, we should feel free to follow the story through its epiphany toward

its greater depths of understanding. Gabriel's longing at one point to extricate himself from the situation of the party and walk alone in the snow need not be, as Kenner suggests (as much as anything by analogy with earlier stories) "a longing for ... death" (*Dublin's Joyce* 68). Just as easily, the longing could be for a higher form of selflessness, the moral parallel of Daiches "aesthetic ideal," which has very strong roots in Christian tradition, and indeed should not involve the death wish. Kenneth Burke, we should remember, sees the snow as "the *mythic image*, in the world of conditions, standing for the transcendence above the conditioned" (415-16).

Finally, if we do not conclude, with Hugh Kenner, that Joyce took a malicious delight in the ironic exposure of his character, we should seek in the humbling of Gabriel's pride some spiritual preparation for the "epiphany" which in the final pages he achieves. This insight is a profound one: the essential unity and equality of all mankind in death. It is an insight which gathers up and defeats all the social or political pretensions with which we have become familiar in the story.

> Generous tears filled Gabriel's eyes. He had never felt like that himself towards any woman, but he knew that such a feeling must be love. The tears gathered more thickly in his eyes and in the partial darkness he imagined he saw the form of a young man standing under a dripping tree. Other forms were near. His soul had approached that region where dwell the vast hosts of the dead. He was conscious of, but could not apprehend, their wayward and flickering existence. His own identity was fading out into a grey impalpable world: the solid world itself, which these dead had one time reared and lived in, was dissolving and dwindling. (223)

Homer Obed Brown, following Ellman, speaks of Gabriel's insight at the end of the story in terms of "the death of egoism" (99). And what seems to be the emotive image of Calvary supports and strengthens this: Gabriel's old and bankrupt sense of self dies so that a new and finer one may be born. If we are disposed to translate a secular tale into the familiar terminology of Christianity, "the form of a young man standing under a dripping tree" does seem very like a figure of Christ, and Gabriel's fading identity very like those rare things, Christian selflessness and humility. And the approach to these is mediated by Gabriel's hard earned, very human love, "the word known to all men" which according to Richard Ellman informs Joyce's masterpiece, *Ulysses* , and proves, in Ellman's phrase, "the closest we can come to paradise" (*New York Times Book Review* 37). Far from culmi-

nating “the centre of paralysis” depicted in Joyce’s earliest stories, “The Dead” points the way toward the great comedy of life in his mature fiction.

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Chapter 8

Standing by Words: Wendell Berry's Interesting "Prose Side"

The consideration of contemporary American poetry brings immediately to mind such terms as diversity and plenitude, if not indeed, overabundance. Reviewing the many anthologies of the fifties and sixties, one notices not so much an emerging canon of recent poetry as the many new camps of modern poets, often armed, rival, and conflicting. One is tempted to say, paraphrasing Yeats, that the only thing certain of these poets is that they are too many. What is surprising is that so many of these poets were trained at a time when the teaching of poetry, guided by the New Critics, had as much homogeneity as at any time in recent history. It is not an overstatement to say that *Understanding Poetry*, the famous Brooks and Warren textbook, charmed an entire generation of aspiring poets with the theories and predilections (and indeed the prejudices) of the New Criticism. There seemed at last to be something approaching a consensus about how the poetry of the past was to be read, and how the poetry of the future should be written.

What Brooks and Warren called for were individual, "well-made" lyrics, emphasizing paradox and irony, and drawing for inspiration on the Elizabethans by way of Yeats and T.S. Eliot. Such poems were to be "impersonal" and coherent in themselves—that is, apart from any recourse to literary history or some other discipline not properly within the scope of literary study. What one might call the poet's "public" responsibilities were to be determined solely within the context of such literary study. Brooks and Warren made little secret of their preference for

poems whose first ambition was to "work" as poetry, and only then to be of significance to the larger concerns of life. *Understanding Poetry* speaks of the "poem" in terms of a modern, organic trope emphasizing its coherence:

> Certainly it is not to be thought of as a group of *mechanically* combined elements—meter, rhyme, figurative language, idea, and so on—put together to make a poem as bricks are put together to make a wall. The relationship among the elements in a poem is what is all important; it is not a mechanical relationship but one which is far more intimate and fundamental. If we must compare a poem to the make-up of some physical object it ought not to be to a wall but to something organic like a plant. (16)

Obviously, it is unfair of Robert Bly to describe the New Critics' approach as "the Tate-Ransom nostalgia for jails," an attempt "to construct poetry machines, so that even people with no imagination can write it" (163). But at the same time such comments, here in Bly's typically extreme fashion, are representative of the frustration many of the poets working in the sixties began to feel.

Indeed, much of the poetry of the sixties is to be understood in terms of the various escape routes different poets found from the enchantment of *Understanding Poetry*. Thus, we find the "Beat" poets, such as Ferlinghetti, Ginsberg, and Corso using blatantly "open" forms and reveling in the lifestyle of an "adversary" culture. There is also the "deep imagery" school, poets like Bly, Merwin, Wright, and the later Roethke, flirting with the unconscious via surrealism (especially a variety from Spain and Latin America). One might also instance the so-called "confessional" poets, such as Robert Lowell, Plath, and Berryman, who take the romantic autobiographical impulse to an extreme degree. Even poets such as Merrill, Rich, and Wilbur, who seemed more comfortable than most with the closed, ironic forms of the New Critics, have sought through sequences, long poems, and *outre* subject matter to break free of the isolation of the well-made poem.

The subject of this essay, Wendell Berry, grows out of the New Criticism also, but he has developed in his own ways. Increasingly, he has come to emphasize in his poetry a sense of history and place, the seeking of roots, a refusal to consider literature apart from the larger concerns of life. Among other things, this humanistic element has given him an interesting "prose side" rare among contemporary poets. At a time when "literary intellectuals" have often retreated from a serious role in the affairs of the world, Berry has remained a moralist with the high aspirations of a Victorian sage: the ambition, with literature as his vehicle, to discover

and chart out a decent, sane, meaningful life in a world seemingly indecent, insane, absurd. Indeed, Berry is the kind of poet who finds the creation of good literature concomitant with and inseparable from the creation of a good life.

The invention of such a poetic self is by no means easy. For Berry it has been a matter of strenuous honesty about the self and searching development as a poet and thinker in areas where the fashionable poetics of his youth offered neither guidance nor sway. Berry's prose, the medium where much of his development has been hammered out, offers us a rare and valuable running commentary on the work of a contemporary poet.

Berry was born on August 5, 1934 in Henry County, Kentucky, and as a boy was taught to farm near the place he has since fixed as his home, Port Royal. He attended the University of Kentucky, where he received an A.B. degree in 1956 and an M.A. one year later. In 1957 he married Tanya Amyx, and in 1958, having received the Wallace Stegner Fellowship, he and his wife moved to Stanford. This marks the beginning of what one might call Berry's "worldly" period: an extended time during which he led the typically rootless life of a promising urban academic. From 1958 to 1960 Berry remained in California as a fellowship recipient and then a lecturer before a Guggenheim Fellowship allowed him to visit Italy and France in 1961 and 1962. From 1962 to 1964 he taught at New York University, directing the freshman writing program. In 1964, however, he accepted a position on the faculty of the University of Kentucky at Lexington, and a year later he moved with his wife and two children to Lanes Landing Farm, a small piece of land he had bought at Port Royal. This place, with which his family had been associated since the early nineteenth century, has been Berry's home ever since. For a number of years he lived and wrote there while pursuing a successful academic career in Lexington, rising to distinguished professor of English in 1971 and Professor of English in 1973. In 1977 he quit teaching to devote himself to writing and farming. He has come to emphasize more and more his life as a farmer, however, as the dust jacket of his recent volume of essays, *Standing by Words*, will attest: "Wendell Berry lives and farms with his family in Kentucky." Indeed, much of his philosophy is summed up in these words.

II

Berry's typical themes grow out of his acute sense of the corruption of our culture. It is audible in his prose pieces as early as *The Long-Legged House* (1969) and has

been persistently sounded ever since. *The Unsettling of America* (1977), a hard hitting critique of the policies of former Secretary of Agriculture Earl L. Butz, contains some of Berry's clearest articulations of this theme. The dominant spirit of American history, from the conquistadors through the whole series of "gold rushes" to the recent conquest of the moon, he finds a "mixture of fantasy and avarice" (3). The people who embodied this spirit, whether they styled themselves "seekers for El Dorado" or "missionaries" or "reachers for the stars," were actually the victims of a permanent state of dissatisfaction. They were never satisfied with a place on earth, but were always seeking "somewhere farther on" (3)—that is, after having exploited and impoverished the place where they had been.

In a sort of counterpoint to this tendency, however, there has always been another, weaker one according to Berry: "the tendency to stay put, to say, 'No farther. This is the place."' This tendency, the older one which characterized the native Indian cultures of America, had the flaw, however, of being "less glamorous, certainly less successful" (4). But even though "the first and greatest American revolution ... was the coming of people who did NOT look upon the land as a homeland" (4), the expanding frontier always left behind a few who did want to stay put.

Exploitation by the dominant group was not limited to the Indians, however. Berry argues that a "consistently operative" law of American history "is that the members of any *established* people or group or community sooner or later become 'redskins'—that is, they become the designated victims of an utterly ruthless, officially sanctioned and subsidized exploitation" (4). Thus the colonists who exploited the Indians were themselves exploited by imperial governments; the independent farmers who in a sense succeeded them were "exploited by, and recruited into, the the industrial society" (5) to the point of virtual extinction. Indeed, the only alternative to "this destiny of exploitation" was making it "into the class of exploiters" where one remained "so specialized and so 'mobile' as to be unconscious of the effects of one's life or livelihood" (5).

Against these exploiters, whose characteristic type is the modern "strip-miner," Berry sets what he calls "the nurturer," whose model is "the old-fashioned idea or ideal of the farmer" (7). Whereas the exploiter seeks only money and profit, "the nurturer's goal is health—his land's health, his own, his family's, his community's, his country's" (7). The nurturer, unlike the exploiter, does not pose as an "expert"; rather, his "competence" is in "a human order ... that accommodates itself both to other order and to mystery" (8). As we shall see, this notion of the antagonism of exploiter and nurturer informs Berry's ideas of work, poetry, life, and religion. And it animates his development as a creative writer.

A chapter in *The Unsettling of America* entitled "The Body and the Earth" considers the consequences of exploitation for modern society and modern work, "the life of the body in this world" (97). Exploitative contempt for the earth leads naturally to contempt for and exploitation of our bodies, which are "joined inextricably both to the soil and to the bodies of other living creatures" (97). The damaging result of this attitude and the belief in "the specialist system" that accompanies it has been an isolation of the body from the activities and life of the world:

> at some point we began to assume that the life of the body would be the business of grocers and medical doctors, who need no interest in the spirit, whereas the life of the spirit would be the business of churches, which have at best only a negative interest in the body. In the same way we began to see nothing wrong with putting the body...to a task that insulated the mind and demeaned the spirit. (104)

This divisive attitude brings with it abuse, exploitation, and contempt for "other bodies for the greater good or comfort of our own" (104). In Berry's conservative though somewhat unorthodox religious view (see Pevear), it is a sin thus to set the soul "against the body, to thrive at the body's expense" (105). For under these conditions what Berry conceives as "spiritual value" can no longer have a practical or worldly force (105). In opposition to the orthodoxies of both religion and capitalism, Berry maintains that "you cannot devalue the body and value the soul—or value anything else....The world is seen and dealt with [under this view], not as an ecological community, but as a stock exchange, the ethics of which are based on the tragically misnamed 'law of the jungle'...a basic fallacy of modern culture" (105). The law of competition thus reigns and results in "sexual division" (making nurture "the exclusive concern of women" (113)), "the dismemberment of the household" ("the isolation of sexuality" through "the lore of sexual romance and capitalist economics" (117)), and the abstraction of work from any meaningful relation to the earth.

Indeed, Berry has written often on the joyless activity of modern work. Through increasing specialization and a loss of contact with the soil that feeds us, our work has become increasingly sterile, technological, and lacking in significant human contact. In *The Gift of Good Land* (1981), contemplating the appeal of two modern advertisements, Berry writes of

> the widespread, and still spreading, assumption that we somehow have the right to be set free from anything whatsoever that we "hate"

> or don't want to do. According to this view, what we want to be set free from are the natural conditions of the world and the necessary work of human life.... Implicit in all this is the desire to be free from the "hassles" of mortality, to be "safe" from the life cycle. (184)

But life and work outside the life cycle are neither pleasurable, nor interesting, nor, in an essential sense, practical. As Berry puts it, "when people begin to 'hate' the life cycle and to try to live outside it and to escape its responsibilities, then the corpses begin to pile up and get into the wrong places" (186). As a society we pay the high price of sterility and pollution, for "the only real way...to escape the hassles of earthly life—is to die" (185).

Berry is hopeful, however, that a life-giving sense of work is at least marginally recoverable through the actions of individuals, those who have "turned off the road that leads to 'Midland City, U.S.A.' [a futuristic projection of life in 2001]. They are the home gardeners, the homesteaders, the city people who have returned to farming, the people of all kinds who have learned to do pleasing and necessary work with their hands" (180). They are the people who have learned, as Berry puts it in *The Unsettling of America,* that "the 'drudgery' of growing one's own food...is not drudgery at all. (If we make the growing of food a drudgery, which is what 'agribusiness' does make of it, then we also make a drudgery of eating and of living.) It is...a sacrament, as eating is also, by which we enact and understand our oneness with the Creation, the conviviality of one body with all bodies" (138). By realizing this, we can restore "the connections [that] have been broken by the fragmentation and isolation of work," and recover a "good work" which "IS living, and a way of living" and "is one of the forms and acts of love" (138,139).

Berry's practical and many-sided notion of "fidelity" plays an important role in maintaining the cultural continuity of the body and the soil. According to Berry, "a purposeless virtue is a contradiction in terms" (*Unsettling of America* 121), and thus fidelity, like any other virtue, must have a practical basis. In the context of marriage, for instance, fidelity should not be seen as "a grim, literal duty enforced only by willpower" (120), but the provider of a responsible use of sexual energy, "the necessary discipline of sexuality" (122), without which "irresponsible sexuality would undermine any possibility of culture" (122). Fidelity unites a man and woman not only with themselves but with the community around them. The responsibility it entails is thus a "sexual responsibility toward all others" (*Unsettling of America* 122), and indeed a responsibility toward the natural order which encloses the community of men. This suggests the analogous forms of fidelity to the household and one's place in the world:

> Fidelity to human order...if it is fully responsible, implies fidelity also to natural order. Fidelity to human order makes devotion possible. Fidelity to natural order preserves the possibility of choice, the possibility of the renewal of devotion.... One who returns home—to one's marriage and household and place in the world—desiring anew what was previously chosen, is neither the world's stranger nor its prisoner, but is at once in place and free. (130,131)

This notion of marital fidelity and its analogues, centered in the paradox of the last phrase, is of great importance in Berry's life and poetry. In retrospect, the central act of his life seems to have been his decision to leave his teaching post in New York and return to Kentucky. This has allowed him, as he puts it in "A Native Hill" (1969), to grow "more alive and more conscious than [he] had ever been" (*Recollected Essays* 79) and to experience the parado fidelity brings: "the possibility of moments when what we have chosen (and what we desire are the same" (*Unsettling of America* 122).

Berry's philosophy has an unusual coherence: his ideas about a variety of topics generally considered the domain of specialists (e.g. agriculture, religion, sexuality and marriage, poetry) all have their basis in a harmonious principle of man's place in the world. In *Standing by Words* (1983), he describes this philosophy as "a system of nested systems: the individual human within the family within the community within agriculture within nature" (46). This "updated, ecological version of the Great Chain of Being" (46,47) is kept in a very delicate balance, however, dependent on the disciplined submission of each system to the next larger one. The discipline, or rather disciplines involved here are the fibers of human culture and "must be deliberately made, remembered, taught, learned, and practiced" (47). In our society, the system of systems is in a virtual state of disintegration because of a reversal of the hierarchy, which Berry compares to the Greek notion of *hubris.* Modern man, like Milton's Satan, is guilty "of attempting to rise and take power above [his] proper place" (47). In doing so he falls victim to specializations of various sorts as the connecting disciplines of the system of systems "degenerate into professions, professions into careers" (47). Thus our specialized "external" accountings (such as the report of two agricultural writers applauding the transformation of the dairy cow from a "family companion animal" to an "appropriate manufacturing unit of the twentieth century" (44)), by upsetting the hierarchies, fail "to consider all the necessary considerations" (47)—that is, other than those of greed. The accounting of the two farm "experts," for instance, ignores "the claims of family, community, and nature" and leaves "the

outer circle [nature]... "under the control of simple greed" (48).

Berry outlines three kinds of interests involved in the system of systems: "ontogenetic," "phylogenetic," and "ecogenetic," which represent respectively self-interest at the center, humanistic interest reaching through family and community into agriculture, and "the interest of the whole 'household' in which life is lived" (48). The special vulnerability of the system of systems is "that the higher interests can be controlled or exploited by the lower interests" (48) through a willful reversal of the necessary hierarchies. It is here that religion has its place in the scheme of things. Left to his own ignorance or devices, man has the brute power to distort and thus disrupt the "earthly" elements of the system of systems. Like the aether of the medieval imagination, religion encloses the system of systems "within mystery, in which some truth can be known, but never all truth" (49). Standing protectively above and outside the ecocentric part of the hierarchy, it provides an "interest of some kind above the ecocentric" (49), beyond the willful and ignorant reach of man. According to Berry, "the practical use of religion...is to keep the accounting in as large a context as possible....Religion forces the accountant to reckon with mystery" (49). This insures that any "answers" will be subject to the human limits of humility and restraint, which are essential conditions of man's place in the world. Thus "a reliable account is personal at the beginning and religious at the end" (50,51); it associates man in a properly respectful way with the larger structures and the ultimate mystery surrounding him.

Berry maintains that "this kind of accounting gives us the great structures of poetry—as in Homer, Dante, and Milton" (51). And in what is perhaps a *raison d'etre* for his own work, Berry writes that in our day "ecological insight proposes again a poetry with the power to imagine the lives of animals and plants and streams and stones. And this imagining is eminently proprietous, fitting to the claims and privileges of the great household" (51). Thus it is possible to find life interesting even without "nuclear powerplants or 'agri-industries' or space adventures," the "big technological solutions" (51). As he does so often in his writing about farming, Berry opposes what he calls "the elaborations of elegance" to the less practical and more glamorous "elaborations of power" (51). He applies the antidote of a "nurturer" to the poison of exploitation. Against the technological fantasies of R. Buckminster Fuller, which cannot stand by their words because they lack any firm sense of man's special place in the universe (Berry compares them to the boasts of Milton's Satan (57)), Berry sets his own religious sense of man's place and security in the world around him.

One of the most important ingredients of Berry's sense of man's place in the world, indeed of his religion, is his acceptance of death. As Speer Morgan has

demonstrated, Berry's writing about death has moved increasingly away from abstract confrontation with an "enemy" toward acceptance of death as a part of the whole of life ("Wendell Berry: A Fatal Singing"). According to Morgan, "Berry is learning to 'conquer' the opponent by cooperating with it fully;...he learns to "'oppose' death with such grace that he dances with it" (873). Certainly his recent elegies, such as the "Requiem" and "Elegy" for Owen Flood in *The Wheel* (1982), exhibit impressive "grace" and mature depth of feeling we do not find so readily in his earlier attempts in this genre. But putting detailed considerations of the poetry aside for the moment, we should note that coming to terms with death has long been an important part of Berry's philosophy of life. "It is time's discipline," Berry has written, "to think / of the death of all living, and yet live" (*Poems* 99). In this particular poem, "A Discipline" (1968), Berry (very much involved at the time in Vietnam protest poetry) is contemplating a modern industrial or nuclear holocaust, but the insight of its last lines is more generally applicable. For Berry, living is done not only in the shadow of the world's death, but his own, and the deaths of those he loves, and indeed the seasonal deaths of the crops. The sense of death permeates, as it must, everything he does, even what is most hopeful of life. In the poem "For the Rebuilding of a House" (1970), for instance, he notes that "I build / the place of my leaving" (*Poems* 106). Another poem of the same year called "The Silence" offers an imaginative experience of death:

> What must a man do to be at home in the world?
> There must be times when he is here
> as though absent, gone beyond words into the woven shadows
> of the grass and the flighty darknesses
> of leaves shaking in the wind...
> * * * *
> It must be with him
> as though his bones fade beyond thought
> into the shadows that grow out of the ground
> so that the furrow he opens in the earth opens
> in his bones, and he hears the silence
> of the tongues of the dead tribesmen buried here
> a thousand years ago. (*Poems* 111-112)

Indeed, this is a spiritual discipline of the life of a farmer, of life maintained in contact with the land. The ground is broken, we remember, for burial as for planting. For Berry, this fact has more than the force of simple metaphor. Marriage

to the land, fidelity to a place in the world, involves necessarily the acceptance of death. It is an ineluctable part of accepting one's place in the "system of systems." And it is, for Berry, the condition of our salvation. In *The Unsettling of America* he quotes a farmer as saying that "without death and rot there can be no new life" (193). This echoes, he notes, a principle "as old and exalted as the Bible: 'Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit"' (193). Always heterodox, Berry often harmonizes biblical quotations like this with passages from other very different cultures. In an earlier essay "Discipline and Hope" (1972), for instance, he quotes from a medicine rite of the Winnebago Indians: "Our father has ordained that my body shall fall to pieces. I am earth. Our father has ordained that there should be death, lest otherwise there be too many people and not enough food for them" (*Recollected Essays* 198). This passage, which recognizes that "if there is to be having there must also be giving up" (198), is typical of Berry's cyclical sense of time as opposed to the linear vision of time favored by traditional Christianity. And here too Berry matches it with a passage from the Bible:

> Because death is inescapable, a biological and ecological necessity, its acceptance becomes a spiritual obligation, the only means of making life whole: "Whosoever shall seek to save his life shall lose it; and whosoever shall lose his life shall preserve it." (*Recollected Essays* 199)

Indeed, it is in Berry's favoring of the cyclical vision of time that much of the lack of orthodoxy that so incenses Richard Pevear lies. Pevear objects to these lines on the grounds that Berry does not feel constrained by their specifically Christian reference, and accuses Berry of making "a 'religion' of his cause" (346). This judgment is rather narrow-minded, however, based seemingly on the notion that official Christianity can have a "fee simple" ownership of its texts and has a right to censor unorthodox interpretations of those texts. Berry is conservative, but he is not a backward-looking dreamer like Miniver Cheevy. Very much a man of our troubled century, he has never pretended to the orthodoxy of official religion. (One should add that he has never pretended to any sort of radical *chic* either.) Indeed, he has argued against official religion's disdain for the body as something ultimately corruptive of man's respect for nature. And we have seen that he prefers the cyclical notion of time held typically by "primitive" religions to the linear vision of time enshrined in Christian dogma. In this latter preference, one might add, Berry has much in common with many poets, mythological scholars, and religious thinkers of our century (including T.S. Eliot—the poet, if not

the religious thinker) who grew up in the shade of *The Golden Bough.* But the core of Berry's thought is nonetheless profoundly religious, profoundly respectful of the ultimate mystery of the universe. Like E.F. Schumacher, Berry draws for inspiration on the texts and practices of many religions that have helped sustain man in a permanent and symbiotic relation with the world around him, and fights against all those tendencies in our culture, even some rooted in religious theory, which undermine this relation.

III

In effect, Berry's first principle is respect for nature, the systems of systems enclosed in the mystery of creation, and this underlies even his theory of poetry. *Standing by Words* contains the most complete exposition of Berry's ideas on language and poetry and their relation to the rest of his philosophy. Modern poetry, like virtually everything else in modern life, is a victim of the tendency toward specialization. Like any other "specialist," the modern poet "withdraws from responsibility for everything not comprehended by his specialty" (*Standing by Words* 4). Berry notes that certain poets of our century, such as Yeats, MacDairmid, and Pound, have sought "larger responsibilities" of one sort or another, but he argues that "it remains true that the poet is isolated and specialized and that the old union of beauty, goodness, and truth is broken" (5). The very familiarity of this statement suggests how deeply it has penetrated our romantic, modern, and post-modern conceptions of the poetic craft. For Berry, the problem stems from the old doctrine "of the primacy of language and the primacy of poetry" (7). The specialized poets have made their art into a kind of "religion based not on what they have in common with other people, but on what they *do* that sets them apart" (7). A poem conceived in this way does not seek to make connections with the outside world or with readers. Similarly, it is not "an adventure into any [outside] reality or mystery" (7). What it does seek is merely the "self in words, the making of a word-world in which the word-self may be at home" (7). In place of the Aristotelian notion of the poet as a "mirror of nature," we now have poets for whom the world is simply "the poet's mirror" (8). According to Berry, this explains much of the "personal terror and suffering and fear of death" in modern poetry, for a world of mere words "gives to one's own suffering and death the force of cataclysm" (8). Berry firmly believes, however, that the real "subject of poetry is

not words, it is the world, which poets have in common with other people" (8). This enjoins even the most spiritual of poets (among whom Berry classes Yeats) "to turn outward" (8). Berry compares "putting exclusive emphasis upon a world of words" to organized religion's "putting exclusive emphasis upon heaven" (9). Both abet the degradation of the world and their respective disciplines, for "renunciation of the world may sustain religious or poetic fervor for a while, but sooner or later it becomes suicidal" (9). Indeed, the exclusive emphasis on language has a very negative effect on what Berry calls literacy in general, for the writer, freed from the requirement to experience something of life and the world, becomes a mere tinkerer with words. Berry mentions with some scorn, for instance, the presumption of John Dean III that he could be a writer simply because he enjoyed playing Scrabble (9). A more responsible view "would see words as fulcrums across which intelligence must endlessly be weighed against experience" (9). Berry has little patience with such writers as Mark Strand, Adrienne Rich, and William Matthews, who seem either to eschew all traditional forms, or to court a form of chaos (10-12). According to Berry, such fashionable "formlessness is... neither civilized nor natural. It is a peculiarly human evil, without analogue in nature, caused by the failures of civilization: inattention, irresponsibility, carelessness, ignorance of consequence. It is the result of the misuse of power" (12). Although not a Marxist, Berry seems close at times to such critics as Raymond Williams (see Steven Weiland) and Terry Eagleton in insisting on a public role for literature, and if not its submission to a politicized "solidarity," at least its acceptance of fidelity to the world and the community of men which are its proper subject and audience. Berry's insistence on a public role for literature is not a new idea. Indeed, it has an almost Victorian flavor. What is new is the way Berry wields such an idea in the mid twentieth century. It is part of a reaction against the "well-made" poetry of the fifties, which tended, among other things to be politely, decorously apolitical. Such reactions were fairly common among poets of the sixties (one thinks, for instance, of the "protest poetry" of Bly), but Berry is unique in the extent to which he develops his idea theoretically and raises it above the level of mere protest.[1]

[1]Roberts French once described Berry's poems as "pastorals of withdrawal" ("From Maine to Kentucky" 473), commenting that Berry "preaches incessantly at us" and that "one soon has enough of it" (473). These remarks are far from just. Berry's return to country life can hardly be called a withdrawal from reality, for in fact it brings him regularly into intimate contact with the hardest realities nature has to offer. Edwin Fussell writing in a pressurized airplane somewhere over California is much more withdrawn from the reality of life on earth, as indeed so many of us are who live the climate-controlled lives of the modern industrial world. And one might add

According to Berry, two important elements of recent poetry's withdrawal from a public role are its lack of song, "a force opposed to specialty and to isolation" (17), and its "estrangement from storytelling" (17). The modern poet who sings only to himself (i.e., does not really sing at all in an important sense) lapses "diffidently into a 'not overly excited discourse' on the subject of isolation, guilt, suffering, death, and oblivion—the self-exploiting autobiography of disconnected sensibility" (16). Similarly, when poets like Galway Kinnell speak "of the suppression of narrative as a goal... it is indicative of a serious lack of interest, first, in action, and second, in *responsible* action" (18-19). This is very important to Berry, for losing "sight of the possibility of right or responsible action" (19) is the cause, he feels, of the present malaise "in our art and in our lives" (19). According to Berry, much of recent poetry, like "the other specialized disciplines of our era," has been nurtured on and in turn has "fostered... a grievous division between life and work" (21) which we must do our best to balance and repair, even while respecting the necessary "tension between them" (22). As Berry puts it, "the *use* of life to perfect work is an evil of the specialized intellect. It makes of the most humane of disciplines an exploitive industry" (22).

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that the hysterical avoidance of anything which even approximates "preaching" is itself a form of withdrawal from any role in the real affairs of the world. The poet-specialist, under such a view, must confine himself to the masturbatory manipulation of words without regard for audience or even the public meanings of his words. And yet, as Berry might argue, this narrow view of the poetic function invalidates much of the greatest poetry ever written. Indeed, Berry has never invited the rest of us home to his farm. As he puts it in one of the poems of *A Part* (1980): "In the labor of the fields / longer than a man's life / I am at home. Don't come with me. / You stay home too" (*Poems* 199.)

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Part II

Essays on Poetry

Chapter 9

Dream Songs and Nightmare Songs: The Balance of Style in the Later Poems of John Berryman

There can be no doubt that John Berryman was one of the most original poets in recent decades.[1] Of course, it is almost too common for contemporary writers to represent the "adversary culture," and certainly there has been no shortage of writers seeking surreal energy in the unconscious. In these respects, the Berryman of *77 Dream Songs* (1964) was no more than a man of his age, just as the Berryman of *The Dispossessed* (1948) was a man of what we now see was a different poetic age. What is unique in Berryman is neither his pose nor his failure, but the style of his later poems, the curious amalgam of disgruntled or disillusioned voices, the clash of erudition and vulgarity, the angry dislocutions of language ("Crumpling a syntax at a sudden need," Sonnet 47), the dialogue form of a divided self pushed to schizophrenic limits. In *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet,* (1956) and more especially in *77 Dream Songs,* Berryman's style enacts the madness enforced by what he came to see as the cursed fate of life in a world gone mad. Very much a poet on the cutting edge of life, Berryman managed with this style a precarious balance which could not last long. The later "Dream Songs" collected in *His Toy, His Dream, His Rest* (1968), are spiritually and sylistically a different work, flatter, more mechanical, less rigorously selected, and more openly autobiographical.

It is as a modern *poete maudit* that Berryman clearly perceives and presents

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himself in the earlier sequence. In the sixteenth "Dream Song," for instance, Berryman writes of his alter ego, Henry, that his "pelt was put on sundry walls / where it did much resemble Henry." Henry's tortured sensibility always expresses itself in such curious twistings of archaic diction, at once bookish and mad. What is even more interesting here is the subtle allusion to Michelangelo's famous self-portrait as a skin in "The Last Judgment," suggesting that Henry too, though in the less grand company of his "sundry walls," is damned. Significantly, this spectacle of the self (we should keep in mind the autobiographical impulse that underlies so much romantic and post-romantic art) is admired by a leering public, "Especially his long & glowing tail." The modern poet exposes himself as a sort of petty devil, and having accomplished this "mission," is ignored again by the public which returns to its usual forms of oblivion:

> Two daiqueries
> withdraw into a corner of the gorgeous room
> and one told the other a lie. (#16)

In the poem that immediately follows this, Berryman treats his damnation from a different, allegorical perspective; Henry prays that his "madnesses have cease," and Lucifer answers him: "I smell you for my own"(#17). If Henry is a "Faust" here, he is a Faust without hope of redemption, denied, as we will see, the comfort of the *ewig Weibliche.*

In the fourteenth "Dream Song," Berryman proposes his own version of Baudelairean ennui:

> Life, friends, is boring. We must not say so.
> After all, the sky flashes, the great sea yearns,
> we ourselves flash and yearn,
> and moreover my mother told me as a boy
> (repeatedly) 'Ever to confess you're bored
> means you have no
>
> Inner Resources.' I conclude now I have no
> inner resources, because I am heavy bored.
> Peoples bore me,
> literature bores me, especially great literature,
> Henry bores me, with his plights & gripes
> as bad as achilles,

who loves people and valiant art, which bores me.
And the tranquil hills, & gin, look like a drag
and somehow a dog
has taken itself & its tail considerably away
into the mountains or sea or sky, leaving
behind: me, wag. (#14)

This is a subtly organized poem, whose theme is well realized in its language. The incessant "ands," the persistent refusal of the syntax to come to rest, the literate colloquial tone all contribute to the poem's feeling of restless dissatisfaction. Berryman satirizes in particular middle class ecstasy over the common functioning of nature ("the sky flashes, the great sea yearns"), which borders on pathetic fallacy ("we ourselves flash and yearn"). The speaker who does not respond to all this flashing and yearning must alienate himself from the mainstream of society, represented by his mother, and conclude that he has "no inner resources." But even the Baudelairean stance of the alienated or adversary poet is boring, as are the artificial paradises of "tranquil hills" and "gin." The speaker himself is a wraith, an empty gesture, the "wag" of a vanished dog. All that is left standing is the elegant structure of the unrhymed stanza Berryman so often uses with its alternating long and short lines in the pattern: A,A,B,A,A,B. Composing his poem with three such stanzas, Berryman aims at the local intensity of a sonnet within a sequence. (Indeed, reviving the idea of the poetic sequence as opposed to the isolated well-made lyrics of the new critics is one of Berryman's real contributions to contemporary American poetry.)

As we have seen, emptiness and boredom extend even to Berryman's elegant persona, Henry, the professor gone astray, "unappeasable Henry" who "hid the day"(#1). As if to counter his zombied intellectual self, Berryman repeatedly conjures a second, incongruous persona, the dialect-speaking Negro, who addresses him as Mr. Bones, and who echoes something of the stoic vitality found in the blues:

Wishin was dyin but I gotta make
it all this way to that bed on these feet
where peoples said to meet.
Maybe but even if I see my son
forever never, get back on the take,
free, black & forty-one.(#40)

The "Bones" voice fades in and out in dialogue with Henry's, a sort of earthy conscience commenting on and exposing Henry's world-weariness. The black

interlocutor follows naturally his animal instincts ("Le's do a hoedown, gal, / one blue, one shuffle, / if them is all you seem to require. Strip, / ol banger, skip us we, sugar"), where Henry lusts, equally vulgar in his way, after poeticized and often unattainable women:

> Filling her compact & delicious body
> with chicken paprika, she glanced at me
> twice.
> Fainting with interest, I hungered back
> and only the fact that her husband & four other people
> kept me from springing on her
>
> or falling at her little feet and crying
> 'You are the hottest one for years of night
> Henry's dazed eyes
> have enjoyed, Brilliance.' I advanced upon
> (despairing) my spumoni. —Sir Bones: is stuffed,
> de world, wif feeding girls.
>
> —Black hair, complexion Latin, jewelled eyes
> downcast... The slob beside her feasts... What wonders is
> she sitting on, over there?
> The restaurant buzzes. She might as well be on Mars.
> Where did it all go wrong? There ought to be a law against Henry.
> —Mr. Bones: there is.(#4)

This is one of Berryman's finest erotic poems with its mixture of grotesque and elegant, literary and colloquial tones. There is an elegant wit here ("I advanced upon / (despairing) my spumoni.") worthy of James Merrill at his best. Henry's literate though clownish lust is punctuated and exposed by the black man's earthy remarks. He knows better than Henry that in the contemporary world the search for Love and Beauty has been reduced to bar hopping in the hope of casual sex, the "good lay" that so often eludes Henry:

> Let us suppose, valleys & such ago,
> one pal unwinding from his labours in
> one bar of Chicago,
> and this did actual happen. This was so.
> And many graces are slipped, & many a sin
> even that laid man low

> but this will be remembered & told over,
> that she was heard at last, haughtful & greasy,
> to bawl in that low bar:
> 'You can biff me, you can bang me, get it you'll never.
> I may be only a Polack broad but I don't lay easy.
> Kiss my ass, that's what you are.'(#15)

In the twentieth century, so the suggestion goes, all human life is similarly devalued. In one of the many guilt poems (#43), Henry imagines himself "charged" as "The Man Who Did Not Deliver," and comments wryly to the effect that being has been reduced to limp consisting: "Be. / I warned him, of a summer night; consist, / Consist"(#43). Interestingly, chief among the ridiculers and accusers are "Ex-wives."

The central experience of *77 Dream Songs* is certainly that of loss. Berryman himself, looking back from the perspective of the later dream songs of *His Toy, His Dream, His Rest,* described Henry as "a white American in early middle age sometimes in blackface, who has suffered an irreversible loss"(Prefatory Note). Just what the "loss" is, however, is not a simple question. Like Hamlet's notoriously mysterious motivation, for which there is no clear "objective correlative," the loss that motivates Henry's *Weltschmerz* is never definitively located, though there are a number of possibilities hinted at in different "series" of poems: the loss of sex or love, the loss of religion, the loss of friends and fellow poets.

I mentioned above that one of Henry's roles was that of a Faust without the salvation of the eternal feminine. A number of the songs treat the theme of the loss of love. Song #44 suggests this theme with an ironic parody of a number of traditional love lyrics:

> Tell it to the forest fire, tell it to the moon,
> mention it in general to the moon
> on the way down,
> he's about to have his lady, permanent;
> and this is the worst of all came ever sent
> writhing Henry's way.

The seeming satisfaction of desire, for which many poets who "lie down alone" have longed, is for Berryman "the worst of all came ever sent [the fractured syntax here considers out loud various possibilities of expression] / writhing Henry's way." Henry as alienated, betraying outsider ("fifth column, quisling, genocide"),

writhes at the "loverly time" other men might look for as their salvation. A socially acceptable form of love, as in marriage, is for Henry unacceptable ("Bars will be closed. / No girl will again / conceive above your throes.") and bound for a short duration ("A fine thunder peals / will with its friends and soon, from agony / put the fire out."). Indeed, for Henry love cannot be disentangled from his boastful (and doubtless insecure) sexuality:

> The glories of the world struck me, made me aria, once.
> —What happen then, Mr. Bones?
> if be you cares to say.
> —Henry. Henry became interested in women's bodies,
> his loins were & were the scene of stupendous achievement.
> Stupor. Knees, dear. Pray. (#26)

Stupor is what Henry is left with, in lieu of love, and it is more easily accommodated by the *poete maudit* in him. But the question of loss is not satisfied. Henry cannot be said to have lost what he claims never to have wanted.

The injunction, addressed ironically to his knees, to pray (for salvation from the "achievement" of his loins?) touches on another possible loss, that of religion. A number of poems, such as "April Fool's Day, or, St Mary of Egypt" (#47), deal ironically with religious themes. The real St. Mary of Egypt was for many years an actress and prostitute, interestingly for motives of lust rather than money. Even when she joined a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, she continued corrupting her fellow pilgrims. When she tried to enter the church at Jerusalem with the others, however, a mysterious force prevented her from entering, and recognizing her sin, she repented. Praying to the Virgin Mary for guidance, she was told to go into the desert beyond the River Jordon, where she lived naked and in great privation for forty-seven years before making herself known to a holy man, Father Zosimus, and dying in holiness. The cloak he lent her was treasured as a holy relic. Berryman retells her story with the interesting variation that Mary is not prevented from entering the church, but recognizes her own unworthiness before God:

> —When down she saw her feet, sweet fish, on the threshold,
> she considered her fair shoulders
> and all the hundreds who have held them, all
> the more who to her mime thickened & maled
> from the supple stage,
>
> and seeing her feet, in a visit, side by side

paused on the sill of The Tomb, she shrank: 'No.
They are not worthy,
fondled by many' and rushed from the Crucified...

Berryman's Mary is curiously modern in her sins and self-awareness, a female counterpart of Henry, who rushes "out of the city ho / across the suburbs, plucky / to dare my desert in her late daylight / of animals and sands." Mary rushes, as it were, through time, not to the desert outside Jordon, but to Henry's desert. Like him, she refuses the possibility of salvation. Her nakedness and barrenness, as Berryman's updated imagery suggests, are the nakedness and barrenness of Henry, and by extension, of modern man. "She fall prone. / Only wind whistled. / And forty-seven years went by like Einstein." In keeping with this parallel, and against tradition, Berryman maintains that God "has not visited" Mary. Her fate is acted out not with the intersession of the Virgin Mary, but according to the dictates of her own psychology. Her story ends not with a holy death, but a barren, impersonal, scientifically modern passing of the years "like Einstein." And in a kind of ironic April Fool's joke, Berryman moves her feast day from April second to April first. It is a joke suggesting not saintliness, but the failure of religion.

The next "Dream Song" (#48) is one of Berryman's most direct confrontations with the possibilities of salvation through religion. It is composed in Henry's typical mixture of erudite standard English and slang, filled with ironic puns that suggest the clash of modern man's historical and every-day experience:

He yelled at me in Greek,
my God!—It's not his language
and I'm no good at—his is Aramaic,
was—I am a monoglot of English
(American version) and, say pieces from
a baker's dozen others: where's the bread?

but rising in the Second Gospel, pal:
The seed goes down, god dies.
a rising happens,
some crust, and then occurs an eating. He said so,
a Greek idea,
troublesome to imaginary Jews,

like bitter Henry, full of the death of love,
Cawdor-uneasy, disambitious, mourning

the whole implausible necessary thing.
He dropped his voice & sybilled of
the death of the death of love.
I ought to get going.

If Mary was uncomfortable in the presence of The Tomb, how is Henry, the bitter "monoglot of English," to do any better? Jesus is known to Henry through his scholarship (imperfectly known through the biblical languages, Greek and Aramaic, and what Henry has evidently picked up from Frazer's writings on the dying and reviving gods), but for an impure, modern man, an "imaginary Jew" like Henry, Jesus' "Greek idea" of salvation through the sacrificial rite of the Mass is "troublesome" and ultimately impossible. Like the "Old Pussy-cat" in the next poem, "Blind" (#49), Henry "*wants* to have eaten," but the bread and "eating" of the Mass, implausible and necessary though they may be, make him "Cawdor-uneasy, disambitious." The allusion to Macbeth seems paradoxical juxtaposed with the adjective "disambitious," but we may suppose Henry a jaded, timid, modern sort of Macbeth, unready to take up an energetic destiny of any kind. Having turned away from the possibility of salvation through love, Henry is "full of the death of love," and he turns also from Jesus' prophecy of "the death of the death of love." The religious mood, like the mood of love, is one Henry samples and rejects. The poems ends, like a number of others in the sequence, with the suggestion that Henry should be moving on ("I ought to get going."), though exactly where he can go is questionable. The questions point to a death wish, which has been there from the beginning but which Henry continually delays long enough to write more poems.

One of the most common types of poem in the sequence embodies these death wishes and what might be called statements of *ars poetica*. Indeed, poetry is Berryman's only enduring life-giving force, and without it the death wish has free play. The twenty-sixth "Dream Song," alluded to in part above, picks up both these themes in its last two stanzas:

All the knobs & softnesses of, my God,
the ducking & trouble it swarm on Henry,
at one time.
—What happen then, Mr Bones?
you seems excited-like.
—Fell Henry back into the original crime: art, rime

besides a sense of others, my God, my God,

and a jealousy for the honor (alive) of his country,
what can get more odd?
and discontent with the thriving gangs & pride.
—What happen then, Mr Bones?
—I had a most marvelous piece of luck. I died.

Henry falls from the original sin of stanza one (as from all his sins) to "the original crime" of his poetry. This is something rather different from Wilde's defiant sense of the artist as criminal in a bourgeoise society. Berryman's line has a tone of self-mocking desperation. The vocation of the artist helps him to exist, or "consist" in his claimed state of inanition, but it is no less painful than the other requirements of life, and in a world where "gangs & pride" regularly thrive, it threatens constantly to degenerate. The death wish, the ironic "piece of luck" in the last line, is seen as the only ultimate mitigation of Henry's discontent.

Poetry, whose "weapons" are the sharp pencils Henry classes with "Grenades, the portable rack, the yellow spout / of the anthrax-ray"(#50), offers only provisional solutions to the problems of a life Henry equates, like Mallarmé, with life in a hospital with "NO VISITORS" posted on his door:

Comfortable on my horseblanket
I prop on the costly bed & dream of my wife,
my first wife,
and my second wife & my son.

Insulting, they put guardrails up,
as if it were a crib!
I growl at the head nurse; we compose on one.
I have been operating from *nothing*,
like a dog after its tail
more slowly, losing altitude. (#54)

Rather disturbingly, Berryman seems to drop the mask of Henry in this poem and to offer the primal cry of a man isolated from the world and even from his family in a forced state of infantile helplessness. In an earlier poem, he was the empty "wag" of a vanished dog; now he is a dog itself, chasing its tail in a helpless circle, "operating from *nothing*" and "losing altitude." In his poetry, Berryman may give life "the worst look" he has left (#52), but the crash is coming. The *ars poetica* becomes an art of silence, longing for death. In a remarkable poem (#67), Henry imagines his role as a poet to be that of a doctor who must operate on himself:

I don't operate often. When I do,
persons take note.
Nurses look amazed. They pale.
The patient is brought back to life, or so.
* * * * *
I am obliged to perform in complete darkness
operations of great delicacy
on my self.
—Mr Bones, you terrifies me.
No wonder they don't pay you. Will you die?
—My friend, I succeeded. Later.

Here is Berryman's cynical passion at its best. The voice is jaded, the death wish assertive. The compulsion to practice his art, absurd in worldly terms ("I have a living to fail— / because of my wife & son—to keep from earning"), is the only call to life, and even this, as his play with time in the last lines suggests, is doomed to failure. Interestingly, the first group of songs in *His Toy, His Dream, His Rest* are titled "Opus posth." Art, no more than love or religion, can effect salvation. Berryman begins an elegy for Faulkner (one of many elegies for writers in the sequence) with a line of gruesome resonance: "The high ones die, die. They die. You look up and who's there"(#36)? The song about Henry finally putting "forth his book"(#75), the "unshedding bulky bole-proud blue-green moist / thing made by savage & thoughful / surviving Henry," is filled with ironic despair. Henry has published his book "like a madman," and though harmless it is an object of contempt: "Bare dogs drew closer for a second look / and performed their friendly operations there." Indeed, the "operations" of the dogs may be said to recall ironically the operations Henry has had to perform on himself to produce the book.

This despair, which is not motiveless but certainly in search of adequate motivation, is the real mystery of Berryman's later work, and it consumes the literate pose of his persona. Somewhat paradoxically, our best insights into its cause come not in the fully realized poems about Henry, but those poems where Berryman drops the mask and speaks of what is transparently his own grief. The death wishes and suicidal hints come into focus when Berryman forces himself to consider the event in his life no pose could ironize or mitigate, the suicide of his father. Significantly, the penultimate poems in both *77 Dream Songs* and *His Toy, His Dream, His Rest* deal with his father's death and Berryman's inability to come to terms with it. The dread beneath all of "Henry's" ennui is that the father's end has somehow fated the son's also. "Henry's Confession" (#76) offers a first

tentative and incomplete attempt to treat this theme:

> in a modesty of death I join my father
> who dared so long agone leave me.
> A bullet on a concrete stoop
> close by a smothering southern sea
> spreadeagled on an island, by my knee.

The voice here, with its different, quieter rawness, is Berryman's and not Henry's, but the solution, dictated by context and form, must be Henry's and proves inadequate:

> I offers you this handkerchief, now set
> your left foot by my right foot,
> shoulder to shoulder, all that jazz,
> arm in arm, by the beautiful sea,
> hum a little, Mr Bones.
> —I saw nobody coming, so I went instead. (#76)

"Seedy Henry," if not Berryman, is now once more "stript down to move on"(#77) in his world of fallen men: "Henry likes Fall. / Henry would be prepared to live in a world of Fall"(#77). And he is prepared to continue writing away death, to the tune of three hundred and eight more "Dream Songs," but the precarious balance of *77 Dreams Songs* is gone. The persona has exhausted its possibilities.

William J. Martz is certainly right that in the later poems "Henry *as* picaresque hero gives way to the quasi-fictional John Berryman"(41), a development he terms "unsettling"(40). This is not to suggest that there are not any number of moving poems in *His Toy, His Dream, His Rest.* There are many, such as the elegy for "Richard & Randall, & one who never did, / two who will never cross this sea again, / & Delmore" (#282), Berryman's fellow poets and tragic friends, or the evocation of Berryman's increasingly dark God, "a slob, / playful, vast, roughhewn," who "resembles one of the last etchings of Goya" (#238). Even Henry's characteristic lust is given rehearsals: "sad sights. A crumpled, empty cigarette pack. / O empty bottle. Hey: an empty girl. / Fill 'er up, pal" (#250). But the tone is flatter, darker, the desperation less under Berryman's artistic control. And there are more desperate attempts by Berryman to come to terms with his father.

One of the songs (#143) deals with Berryman's fears that his father would murder him along with himself:

> When he began taking the pistol out & along,

you was just a little; but gross fears
accompanied us along the beaches, pal.
My mother was scared almost to death.
He was going to swim out, with me, forevers,
and a swimmer strong he was in the phosphorescent Gulf,
but he decided on lead.

The use of the slang of the earlier songs ("pal," "forevers") cannot disguise the marked change of tone and control from *77 Dream Songs.* In these later poems there is a new desperation that "Henry" cannot domesticate. In the next song (#144), we learn that "death grew tall / up Henry as a child," and that "he feels his death tugging within him." The sins of the father, he fears, are visited upon him. Yet there are desperate attempts to forgive his father: "Also I love him: me he's done no wrong / for going on forty years—forgiveness time— / I touch now his despair"(#145).

Ultimately, however, Berryman cannot forgive his father. The second to last poem of *His Toy, His Dream, His Rest* (#384), where he visits his father's grave, is one of unleavened bitterness. The "Henry" in this poem is the thinnest of disguises for Berryman himself, stripped of his irony, boastfulness, and self-mockery:

The marker slants, flowerless, day's almost done,
I stand above my father's grave with rage,
often, often before
I've made this awful pilgrimage to one
who cannot visit me, who tore his page
out; I come back for more,

I spit upon this dreadful banker's grave
who shot his heart out in a Florida dawn
O ho alas alas
When will indifference come, I moan & rave
I'd like to scrabble till I got right down
away down under the grass

and ax the casket open ha to see
just how he's taking it, which he sought so hard
we'll tear apart
the mouldering grave clothes ha & then Henry
will heft the ax once more, his final card,
and fell it on the start.

This is a very powerful and very sad poem, and one of Berryman's most brilliant, but it embodies, in the fullest form he could give it, the obsession that tore apart his life and work. The balance between anguished confession and objective statement that Berryman established with the character of Henry in *77 Dream Songs* is completely destroyed. Their style, the mad comic jumble of voices that performed a strange and wonderful colloquy of the damned, has thinned to a single voice, overtly confessional, tragic, and helpless in the face of experience. As Wendell Berry has noted of these later poems, "brilliant as they sometimes are," they represent "the mortifications of a splendid intelligence helpless before its salient occasions"(19).

Whether Berryman will ever escape the judgment of brilliant but flawed is doubtful. Like Hart Crane, Sylvia Plath and Delmore Schwartz, Berryman seems to be one of those poets for whom, in his friend Richard Blackmur's phrase, "experience proved too much." And yet without a doubt the *Dream Songs,* in spite of their flaws, and perhaps in part because of them, are a vast and continually intriguing achievement, and deserve a prominent place in the history of twentieth century American poetry.

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Chapter 10

Moving the Dark to Wholeness: The Elegies of Wendell Berry

With each year, Wendell Berry claims a more significant position among contemporary American poets.[1] From his common beginnings as one of a generation of poets trained in the precepts of the New Criticism he has pursued his own "path," as he calls it, with uncommon intellectual rigor and poetic sensitivity. In our age of weak religious faith, many poets, faced with death and the threat of nuclear devastation, have fallen into sterility or despair. Berry, however, over the course of his career has come to terms with death and made its acceptance central to his philosophy of affirmation. For him, acceptance of death makes possible human love, fidelity, and the perpetuation of the community of men on earth.

Like so many poets of his generation, Berry has developed as an artist by escaping the ubiquitous enchantment of *Understanding Poetry*. Under the influence of Brooks and Warren, Berry began his career writing individual, "well-made" lyrics that emphasized paradox and irony, and drew for inspiration from the Elizabethans by way of Yeats and T. S. Eliot. A former Kentucky farm boy "exiled" to the freshman writing department of New York University, Berry found in the new critical approach a distancing irony to protect his sensibility from the city's hostile, alien environment:

> In the empty lot — a place
> not natural, but wild — among
> the trash of human absence,

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> the slough and shamble
> of the city's seasons, a few
> old locusts bloom.
> —"The Wild," *Poems* (19)

Berry has never "outgrown" the theme of the evils of the modern, industrial world, but he was not content for long to express himself in the manner of "The Wild."

In 1964, Berry made the most important move of his career, when he returned to Kentucky to teach and bought a small farm near Port Royal where his family had lived for generations. Indeed, his activities as a farmer have come gradually to dominate his life and work. Since his return home, urban imagery has faded almost completely from Berry's writing. Increasingly, he has come to emphasize history and place, a seeking of roots, and a refusal to separate literature from life's larger concerns. Berry has made himself the kind of poet, at once vatic and sane, who finds the creation of good literature inseparable from the creation of a good life. He has practiced and written about the spiritual discipline of the farmer's life. Such marriage to the land and fidelity to a place in the world involve, necessarily, the acceptance of death as part of accepting one's place in what he calls the "system of systems" (*Standing by Words* 46). It is, for Berry, the condition of our salvation.

Berry's elegies are vital to his work because they provide focus for his typical themes, such as his recurring metaphors that link past and future generations through their common working of the land. In "The Current," for instance, a complex poem about "marriage" to a place and the subtle relations of the generations involved in that place, the marriage is made by a man's "having put his hand into the ground I seeding there what he hopes will outlast him." The man thus becomes the "descendant" of all those who once worked this land, even the "old tribespeople" bending

> in the sun, digging with sticks, the forest opening
> to receive their hills of corn, squash, and beans,
> their lodges and graves, and closing again.

He is part of the "current" of their lives and the life of the land that flows

> to him through the earth
> flows past him, and he sees one descended from him,
> a young man who has reached into the ground,
> his hand held in the dark as by a hand. (119)

The hope of the nurturer against the impermanence of mortal life lies in this mystical connection through the land with the generations gone and to come. What remains, permanent in its cycles, is the land itself, the natural order.

As early as *The Broken Ground* (1964), farming began providing Berry with the central metaphor of the life and death cycle, though in the early poetry his use of the metaphor is tentative. The "Elegy" for his paternal grandfather, Pryor Thomas Berry, shows Berry working toward his characteristic vein. The poem considers death, implicitly at least, in terms of farming and the seasonal death and rebirth of the crops. The title of this volume is a complex pun suggesting at once burial, the plowing up of fields for planting, and even the breaking of new "literary ground" as Berry's first book of poems. The poem's imagery, however, is still relatively abstract in a manner typical of the late fifties and early sixties. For instance, the conversational free verse and the delicate touches of surreal imagery are reminiscent of the early Robert Bly:

> All day our eyes could find no resting place.
> Over a flood of snow sight came back
> Empty to the mind. The sun
> In a shutter of clouds, light
> Staggered down the fall of snow.
> All circling surfaces of earth were white.
> No shape or shadow moved the flight
> Of winter birds. Snow held the earth its silence.
> We could pick no birdsong from the wind.
> At nightfall our father turned his eyes away.
> It was the storm of silence shook out his ghost.
> —*Poems* (3)

This poem, despite its beauty, is conventionally lyrical in its emphasis on local effects of imagery, the heated expression of syntactically disconnected personal impressions. The snowy landscape offers the poem whatever unity it can, as well as the ironic contrast of its "light" with the "darkness" of the death it shrouds:

> he only wakes
> Who is unshapen in a night of snow.
> His shadow in the shadow of the earth
> Moves the dark to wholeness.
> —*Poems* (3)

Here is an embryonic form of the light/dark paradox so important in much of Berry's poetry about death, suggesting mystery beyond human comprehension and hinting at the possibility of some form of resurrection. As the "Elegy" progresses, the farm metaphor takes shape, though fitfully and by hints. Berry speaks, for instance, of adorning "the shuck of him / With flowers as for a bridal" (4). The word "shuck," used here for the body, suggests a pod or husk containing the seeds of future life.

Indeed, there is something of the traditional elegy here, with funeral "strewings," burning lamps, even what seems an appropriate response of nature to the event, the snowstorm. The language has a proprietous, at times even a quaint stateliness ("Snow held the earth its silence"), suggesting an acquaintance with Elizabethan habits of diction and syntax. And there is also the implication that death shall bring forth sweetness and new life, like Virgil's golden bees that swarmed from the bodies of eight sacrificed cattle (see Speer Morgan 869). The landscape, however, is not Arcadian. It is the farm country that in increasing detail will take on a dominant role in Berry's poetry, as in his life. This setting emerges in the bleak winter landscape and the "winter rain" that "breaks the corners / Of our father's house, quickens / On the downslope to noise" (*Poems* 4). On a metaphorical level, the ethos of farming is suggested by the "shuck" of the body and in one of the final lines: "The church heals our father in" (5). The word "heal," with its implications of restoration and cure, going back to the Germanic "*hailaz*," meaning whole, implies some hope of a resurrection. More specifically, "healing in" is a farming and gardening expression meaning to lay a plant in contact with the earth from which it will gain some sustenance before actual planting. Although the hope in "Elegy" is still only implicit, the language of farming, inaugurated here, leads Berry to increasingly firm assertions of such hope.

Berry's second book of poems, *Openings* (1969), greatly expands the consideration of death in terms of farming. Again the title puns on what might be "openings" for planting, for graves, and for literary development. A set of "Three Elegiac Poems" for Harry Erdman Perry, Berry's maternal grandfather, develops the metaphor suggested in the Pryor Berry elegy. The first poem takes the form of a prayer that Perry be freed into death from "hospital and doctor, / the manners and odors of strange places, / the dispassionate skills of experts," from all the torture chamber apparatus of modern medical technology with its "tubes and needles" and "public corridors" (49). If the hospital offers "the possibility of life without / possibility of joy, let him give it up" (50). Natural death, to Berry, is the joyous and preferred ending of a life. Thus the speaker asks that Perry be allowed "to die in one of the old rooms / of his living, no stranger near him," and that

the final
time and light of his life's place be
last seen before his eyes' slow
opening in the earth.

This way, the dying man, "like one familiar with the way," will go into the "furrowed" hill over which he lived and help sustain the land's future. Explicitly here, the "furrows" of planting are equated with the "furrow" of the grave.

The second poem in the set shifts from the subjunctive of the first poem's "prayer" to the dramatic present tense, using the speaker's personal point of view to describe the scene of the old man's dying.

I stand at the cistern in front of the old barn
in the darkness, in the dead of winter,
the night strangely warm, the wind blowing,
rattling an unlatched door.
I draw the cold water up out of the ground, and drink.

At the house the light is still waiting.
An old man I've loved all my life is dying
in his bed there. He is going
slowly down from himself.
In final obedience to his life, he follows
his body out of our knowing.
Only his hands, quiet on the sheet, keep
a painful resemblance to what they no longer are. (50)

The poem interestingly contrasts the "normal" activity of the speaker drinking well water near the farm with the extraordinary event taking place "at the house." But though the event is extraordinary, nature does not go sympathetically awry as it would in a classical elegy; the death is ordained and natural: "In final obedience to his life, he follows / his body out of our knowing." Death is a mysterious but natural metamorphosis, after which the dying man simply and quietly passes "out of our knowing." What disturbs the speaker is not so much the act of dying as the "painful resemblance" of the hands "to what they no longer are," that is, the living flesh.

The third poem, with its tone of praising acceptance, corresponds to the "apotheosis" of the classical elegy:

He goes free of the earth.
The sun of his last day sets
clear in the sweetness of his liberty.

The earth recovers from his dying,
the hallow of his life remaining
in all his death leaves.

Radiances know him. Grown lighter
than breath, he is set free
in our remembering. Grown brighter

than vision, he goes dark
into the life of the hill
that holds his peace.

He's hidden among all that is,
and cannot be lost. (51)

This is Berry in one of his more mystical moments, and yet his claims for "apotheosis" are still cautious, tempered with the realism of farm life. Though the dead man has "grown brighter / than vision," he still must go paradoxically "dark / into the life of the hill / that holds his peace." This paradox may not satisfy the orthodox yearnings of a critic like Richard Pevear for a resurrection in Christ, but it does offer Berry consolation; because the dead man is "hidden among all that is," he "cannot be lost." The corn of wheat that falls into the ground and dies may bring forth much fruit.

The elegies in *Openings*, though they make extensive use of realistic farm imagery, do not yet effect a completely natural combination of theme and material. The Arcadian echoes are still somewhat artificial and obtrusive. More important, the philosophy implicit in Berry's metaphor of seasonal death and resurrection has not yet been fully worked out and integrated into his expression. Though sometimes concerned with subjects addressed more effectively in his prose, the more speculative theoretical poems of the 1970s, such as "A Current" and "At a Country Funeral," have enabled Berry to practice and perfect the technique of the philosophical elegy.

In his most recent book, Berry has written the best elegiac poetry of his career. *The Wheel* (1982) refers by its title to the "Wheel of Life" of eastern religion, Berry's favorite theme of the recurring life cycle and the cyclical notion of time.

In an epigraph to the book, Berry quotes Sir Albert Howard, author of *The Soil and Health: A Study of Organic Agriculture*:

> It needs a more refined perception to recognize throughout this stupendous wealth of varying shapes and forms the principle of stability. Yet the principle dominates. It dominates by means of an ever-recurring cycle . . . repeating itself silently and ceaselessly .... This cycle is constituted of the successive and repeated processes of birth, growth, maturity, death, and decay.
>
> An eastern religion calls this cycle the Wheel of Life and no better name could be given to it. The revolutions of this Wheel never falter and are perfect. Death supersedes life and life rises again from what is dead and decayed. (231)

Berry divides *The Wheel* into six parts, as it were, six different spokes. The first part consists of three elegies for his friend Owen Flood. The second part includes a series of his poems reckoning Berry's desolation, the contemplation of one "well acquainted now / among the dead" (246). The third part is made up of four love poems to Berry's wife, Tanya, written in Berry's characteristically elegiac tone. The fourth part, addressing what Berry calls "The Gift of Gravity," consists of two longer poems on the transience of human life, with the river as the overriding metaphor. In the fifth part, a group of six poems, the metaphor shifts to the Wheel of Life as a "dance" including both the dead and the new and future generations. The sixth part contains a single poem, "In Rain," in which Berry considers the "path I follow" and the serene, accepting "marriage to place."

Easily the most powerful poems in *The Wheel* are those written in memory of Owen Flood, "Requiem," "Elegy," and "Rising." The most formal of these, corresponding to the rhetorical first section of the "Three Elegiac Poems" for Harry Erdman Perry, is "Requiem." But this formality of tone acts in a kind of counterpoint to the firm, informal image of the farmer at his work:

> We will see no more
> the mown grass fallen behind him
> on the still ridges before night,
> or hear him laughing in the crop rows,
> of know the order of this delight.

Whatever incongruity exists here is typical of the risk-taking in Berry's more mature work. Even the most "literary" poems grow naturally now from Berry's experience of the world and aim at fidelity to that world and the community of men.

These are a farmer's elegies, and they celebrate a way of life Berry has loved as much as they lament the passing from that life of his loved ones:

> Though the green fields are my delight,
> elegy is my fate. I have come to be
> survivor of many and of much
> that I love . . .
> * * *
> I have left the safe shore
> where magnificence of art
> could suffice my heart.

With an almost Yeatsean austerity, the poem reaches out to the world to rhyme the particular and the cosmic, one man's fate and the fate of all into the acceptance of life and place in the world which alone promises serenity:

> In the day of his work
> when the grace of the world
> was upon him, he made his way,
> not turning back or looking aside,
> light in his stride.
>
> Now may the grace of death
> be upon him, his spirit blessed
> in the deep song of the world
> and the stars turning, the seasons
> returning, and long rest. (233)

Berry's "Requiem" ends with a wide, spindrift, cosmic gaze that fixes the subject's life and death in the perspective of eternity.

The "Elegy" that follows, however, is a deeply personal, interior poem that does not yield up its human point of view. Ironically enough, the poem, cast in the form of a Dantean narrative, makes large claims in terms of literary antecedents. It begins with the typical Berry paradox that

> To be at home on its native ground
> the mind must go down below its horizon,
> descend below the lightfall
> on ridge and steep and valley floor
> to receive the lives of the dead. It must wake
> in their sleep, who wake in its dreams.

This stanza sets off an extended dream vision that forms the basis of the narrative. Berry is walking "on the rock road between / creek and woods in the fall of the year." He hears first "the cries / of little birds" and only "then the beat of old footsteps." At the moment of mystical vision, as Berry puts it,

> my sight was changed.
>
> I passed through the lens of darkness
> as through a furrow, and the dead
> gathered to meet me.

It is interesting to see again the old metaphor of the grave as a furrow in farming. In the dream vision of "Elegy," however, the speaker is able to cross into the world of the dead and talk with them in the manner of a Homeric hero or Dante. Of course, this literary device has many antecedents (apart from the classical epics, one might instance Dante Gabriel Rossetti's "Willowwood" sonnets and T. S. Eliot's encounter with the "dead master" in "Little Gidding"). But Berry's poem exercises this tradition with wonderful naturalness and daring simplicity. The dead whom the speaker meets are not symbols or allegorical figures, but members of his family and close friends who "wonder at the lines in my face, / the white hairs sprinkled on my head." There are first of all his grandparents, "a tall old man leaning / upon a cane . . . knowledge of long labor in his eyes," and "an old woman, a saver / of little things, whose lonely grief / was the first I knew" (234). They are followed by others of Berry's "teachers . . . who once bore / the substance of our common ground." Berry describes their dread as having been somehow transfigured: "Their eyes, having grieved all grief, were clear."

At this point, the beginning of the poem's second part, Berry recognizes his old friend Owen Flood, who died in the early spring of 1974, "standing aside, alone, / weariness in his shoulders, his eyes / bewildered yet with the newness / of his death." Handing him a "clod of earth" from "a certain well-known field," Berry begins a restrained colloquial dialogue with the dead man that laces the remainder of the narrative. The clod of earth is a sort of talisman enabling the conversation, like the blood in Homer's *Odyssey*. But Berry's is an appropriately homely talisman, and similarly the language is simple and natural, touching with a kind of philosophical humor on the subject of death:

> "Wendell, this is not a place
> for you and me." And then he grinned;
> we recognized his stubbornness—

it was his principle to doubt
all ease of satisfaction.

"The crops are in the barn," I said
"the morning frost has come to the fields,
and I have turned back to accept,
if I can, what none of us could prevent."

Couched in this homely conversation of two farmers is the essence of Berry's philosophy of death: acceptance of it as part of the natural scheme of things. Interestingly, the language of the poem, unlike the more forthright statements of Berry's prose, confesses some doubt ("if I can . . .") about the possibility of acceptance, the human frailty of the poet confronting what is ultimately unknowable. Berry's doubt is "answered" not with abstract assertion, but the felt experience of the narrative. Owen Flood, Berry's old mentor, appears now to have

cast off
his own confusion, and assumed
for one last time, in one last kindness,
the duty of the older man. (235)

This "duty" is to demonstrate for Berry, as he once demonstrated the techniques and joys of nurture, the equally natural acceptance of one's fate in death. To this end, Flood and Berry do what Dante, through the mouth of Francesca, suggested was so painful: recall their happy times in time of sadness. Yet, as Owen Flood will demonstrate, the time of death need not be one of unmitigated sadness. Indeed, the mood of the poem remains serene rather than miserable.

We stood on a height,
woods above us, and below
on the half-moved slope we saw ourselves
as we once were: a young man mowing,
a boy grubbing with an axe.
* * *
We made it [the old field] new in the heat haze
of that midsummer: he, proud
of the ground intelligence clarified,
and I, proud in his praise.

> "I wish," I said, "that we could be
> back in that good time again."
>
> "We are back there again, today
> and always. Where else would we be?"
>
> He smiled, looked at me, and I knew
> it was my mind he led me through. (236)

The larger memory of mankind consists in the interlinking memories of the generations, in the connections that we make and maintain with past and future. This theme, so prominent in Berry's writings, is once more poignantly suggested here. And how typical of Berry that it should involve the memory of daily work, the kind of thing some people would consider "drudgery." But it is with such "drudgery" that "we enact and understand our oneness with the Creation" (*The Unsettling of America* 138). The narrative continues now with a number of episodes like this, as Owen Flood moves Berry

> through all the fields of our lives,
> preparations, plantings, harvests,
> crews joking at the row ends,
> the water jug passing like a kiss.
>
> He spoke of our history passing through us,
> the way our families' generations
> overlap, the great teaching
> coming down by deed of companionship . . .

The encounter with and contemplation of death is actually the contemplation of life itself, of which death is an inevitable part. Berry tells us that Owen Flood's "passion" was "to be true / to the condition of the Fall/ to live by the sweat of his face, to eat / his bread, assured that the cost was paid" (237). This is Berry's highest compliment.

The fifth section of the poem deals with "the time of [Owen Flood's] pain," when in spite of "the sweet world" about him, "his strength failed / before the light." In one of the most moving passages, Berry for the first time senses mortal weakness in a man whose strength he had always taken for granted:

Again, in the sun
of his last harvest, I heard him say:
"Do you want to take this row,
and let me get out of your way?"
I saw the world ahead of him then
for the first time, and I saw it
as he already had seen it,
himself gone from it. It was a sight
I could not see and not weep.

This sudden, often untimely fading of strength that lies at the center of our wondering about death is perhaps, to the human imagination, its most tragic quality. Berry the philosopher knows what to say next about it, but Berry, the poet in the grip of his vision, cannot help pausing to weep for the tragedy of the human condition. Owen Flood himself does not weep. In the sixth section offers yet another touching vignette of the two men together, looking over the fields and seeing

the years of care that place wore,
for his story lay upon it, a bloom,
a blessing. (238)

It is the summer's end, and their conversation turns to "death and obligation, / the brevity of things and men" (238-39) . At this moment of heavily moving words and heavy thoughts, Owen Flood is not bitter, but filled with the wonder of nature and of life:

We hushed.
And then that man who bore his death
in him, and knew it, quietly said:
"Well. It's a fascinating world,
after all."

We are a long way here from the literary posturings of "A Man Walking and Singing." Owen Flood delivers his farmerly words with a perfect naturalness and simplicity. Indeed, the whole poem moves us with the sort of difficult simplicity that we find only in the mature works of certain masters; it is Berry's version of a *Heiligedankgesang*.

In the very hour he died, I told him,
before he knew his death, the thought

of years to come had moved me
like a call. I thought of healing,
health, friendship going on,
the generations gathering, our good times
reaching one best time of all. (239)

In the final sections of the poem, they return among the dead, and Berry has a vision of the essential unity in life and death of all the generations, even those to come.

Again the host of the dead
encircled us, as in a dance.
And I was aware now of the unborn
moving among them.

Berry's "teacher" speaks one more time, reminding him that "joy contains, survives its cost." And as he speaks, it is Berry's "gift" to hear the "song in the Creation":

In its changes and returns
his life was passing into life.
That moment, earth and song and mind,
the living and the dead, were one. (240)

At the end, Owen Flood, "completed in his rest," drops the earth Berry had given him, and waves the living man, "inheritor of what I mourned, . . . back toward the light of day."

Berry's haunting by Owen Flood is not yet over, however. There is another poem in the sequence entitled "Rising" that is dedicated to Owen Flood's son Kevin. The poem offers a more detailed memory of Owen Flood in his prime as Berry's model of a farmer. Again, this poem does not suppress narrative. It begins with an anecdote of a young Berry working with Owen Flood in the harvest after having rather foolishly "danced until nearly I time to get up." The harvest does not wait for young men with hangovers, however, and Berry must work "half lame / with weariness . . . dizzy, half blind, bitter / with sweat in the hot light." Owen Flood, however, taking"no notice" of Berry's distress, goes on ahead, "assuming / that I would follow," and leading Berry

through long rows
of misery, moving like a dancer

ahead of me, so elated
he was, and able, filled
with desire for the ground's growth.

As Berry puts it, "my own head / uttered his judgment, even / his laughter" (241). Owen Flood's only comment is gentle and laconic: "That social life don't get / down the row, does it, boy." The anecdote springs to life, full voiced and full of a kind of joy, the way our pleasant memories of the dead may spring to life again once we have come to terms with the primal tragedy of their death. Berry has done this through the visionary meeting of "Elegy," and now Owen Flood may live again in his memories, which may be a gift, as the dedication of "Rising" suggests, to the future generation.

The anecdote also engages the theme of generations subtly linked by the human activity of living and working together in one place. This activity represents in microcosm the heritage of the land itself, always an important element of Berry's writing. From Owen Flood, Berry learns to work not "by will" but "by desire," making what might seem an "ordeal" into "order / and grace, ideal and real." The conjunction of Berry's "awkward boyhood" with "the time of [Owen Flood's] mastery," troubles the younger man "to become / what I had not thought to be." Thus the disciplines of the system of systems are "made, remembered, taught, learned, and practiced" (*Standing by Words* 47), passing from one generation to the next. Owen Flood teaches Berry the role of the "cyclical" man at home and in place, the nurturer who stands in opposition to the constant "traveler," the exploiter of the land:

The boy must learn the man
whose life does not travel
along any road, toward
any other place,
but is a journey back and forth
in rows, and in the rounds
of years. His journeys end
is no place of ease, but the farm
itself, the place day labor
starts form, journeys in,
returns to: the fields
whose past and potency are one. (242)

In such a way, time past and time future may indeed both be contained in time present; and one may indeed experience the paradoxical joy of fidelity, those

"moments when what we have chosen and what we desire are the same" (*The Unsettling of America* 122). In *The Unsettling of America*, Berry quotes with approval Thomas Hardy's poem about the farmer, the "man harrowing clods" who "will go onward the same / Though Dynasties pass" (14); here he eulogizes Owen Flood in similar terms:

> The man at dawn
> in spring of the year,
> going to the fields,
> visionary of seed and desire,
> is timeless as a star. (242-43)

These lines form the emotional center of Berry's poem, and perhaps his work as a whole. Here Berry's gaze rises from the particular toward the universal, "personal at the beginning and religious at the end" (*Standing by Words* 50-51). And this movement of his vision suggests why what we have seen is "not the story of a life," but "the story of lives, knit together / overlapping in succession, rising / again from grave after grave." But the memories of living men are the keepers of this mystery, this "severe gift" we "keep / as part of ourselves" when "like graves, we heal over." As Berry puts it:

> There is a grave, too, in each
> survivor. By it, the dead one lives.
> He enters us, a broken blade,
> sharp, clear as a lens or mirror.
>
> And he comes into us helpless, tender
> as the newborn enter the world.

In such a way, "the dead become the intelligence of life" (243).

Berry ends his poem "Rising" with as deeply felt an "apotheosis" as we are likely to encounter in contemporary American poetry, and in it he sums up much of his attitude toward death and life. The mature version of Berry's song of death transforms itself into a song of life, "rhyming" flesh with flesh and generation with generation.

> But if a man's life
> continues in another man,
> then the flesh will rhyme
> its part in immortal song.
> By absence, he comes again.

> There is a kinship of the fields
> that gives to the living the breath
> of the dead. The earth
> opened in the spring, opens
> in all springs. Nameless,
> ancient, many lived, we reach
> through ages with the seed. (244)

This is an attitude which has been hard won, offering neither glibness of orthodoxy nor glibness of despair. It is an attitude proprietous and secure in man's place in the system of systems and the ultimate mystery surrounding it. The earth that opened one spring for Owen Flood opens in all springs to embrace the dead and to bring forth new life. Owen Flood's death was, as Berry would have his own, the good death of a farmer, a nurturer "reaching through ages."

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Chapter 11

Farm as Form: Wendell Berry's *Sabbaths*

Rhyme and meter have certainly known their ups and downs in this century.[1] Early on, it seemed that the great modernist poets, Eliot, Pound, Williams, and Stevens, had more or less banished them from serious poetry in favor of free verse. Of course, there was the recalcitrant figure of Frost, who refused to play his tennis without a net; and even Eliot, whose verse was soaked in Elizabethan cadences, warned that "good" *vers libre* was not really *libre* at all, that the ghost of a meter lurked somewhere behind the arras. Still, the main effort seemed to be, as Pound remarked of Williams's practice, to break the back of the pentameter line. Then the 'thirties ushered in what seemed to be a new dispensation altogether on the authority, practical as well as theoretical, of the New Critics. Perhaps someone had noticed that Eliot's favorite poets, the Elizabethans, had used rhyme and meter even in witty and paradoxical poems of undissociated sensibility. In any event, poet-critics like Ransom, Tate, Winters, and Blackmur not only heaped critical praise on unified, formally structured lyrics, but wrote such poetry themselves: lyric units making use of rhyme and meter as integral parts of their meaning. A glance at the magazine verse of the 'forties and 'fifties reveals that in spite of the continuing presence of the older modernists (as well as such isolated followers as Oppen and Zukofsky), the short, rhyming lyric was very much the mainstream poem in America.

The 'sixties brought an end to all this. Actually, the signs of change were in the

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air a decade earlier: the rediscovery of Ezra Pound, the emergence of the Black Mountain School and the Beat poets, the critical enthusiasm that began to devalue Donne's ratiocinative irony in favor of the passionate mysticism of the later Blake. But in the 'sixties, in America at least, the lid blew off traditional form altogether. Even punctuation was "out". Established poets like Lowell and Berryman, who had matured under the ægis of Ransom, made influential leaps into free verse. And a whole generation of younger poets, schooled at least in the precepts of the New Critics as disseminated in the ubiquitous text, *Understanding Poetry*, echoed Robert Bly's battle cry against "the Tate-Ransom nostalgia for jails" ("Looking for Dragon Smoke").

Wendell Berry is part of this generation, and for most of his career he has followed its predilections as to form. It is of some present interest, therefore, that in his most recent book of poems, *Sabbaths*, he has made a major investment in traditional forms. It is worth considering just what Berry expects to get from formal verse that he could not have gotten from his earlier, free verse forms. Could this be simply a nostalgia for the poetry of his student days, the poetic equivalent of the recent revival of "Greek" life on college campuses, or does it suggest something new and necessary in his expression?

Like most poets of his generation, Berry has worked away from his origins in the new critical school toward the establishment of a personal poetic idiom. Along with Bly and many others in the 'sixties, he sampled the promiscuous freedom of surreal techniques and felt the attraction of political protest poetry. Unlike Bly, however, Berry did not consider such impulses sufficient in themselves, either philosophically or poetically. Instead, he sought to reflect and articulate in his poetry the vital rhythms and satisfactions of rural life, and more specifically the life of a farmer at home in his community and accepting of his place in nature, what he has called "the system of nested systems" (*Standing by Words* 46). Berry's model of the nurturing (as opposed to the exploiting) man has been the farmer "whose life does not travel / along any road, toward / any other place, / but is a journey back and forth / in rows," in "the fields / whose past and potency are one"("Rising", *Selected Poems* 242). The idiom of poems like this one from *The Wheel* (1982), a supple, short-lined free verse, was admirably equipped to express Berry's mystical but rooted sense of farming. The language is simple and concrete—it is on easy, conversational terms with the outside world—but free enough, in telling moments, to rise into the higher temperatures of mystical expression. Its natural speech rhythms trace the landscape of hilly farmland and woods in Berry's native Kentucky, accurately registering the encroachments of one upon the other, reading closely the history of the land.

There has long been, perhaps, a latent contradiction in Berry's work between the formality of his philosophical positions, the "system of systems," for instance, which he calls "an updated, ecological version of the Great Chain of Being" (*Standing by Words* 46-47), and the colloquial freedom of his chosen verse forms. In his critical writings, Berry has been aware of a correlation between natural and literary form. In his essay, "Standing by Words," he notes that "one of the great practical uses of literary disciplines...is to resist glibness—to slow language down and make it thoughtful. This accounts for the influence of verse, in its formal aspect, within the dynamics of the growth of language: verse checks the merely impulsive flow of speech, subjects it to another pulse, to measure, to extra-linguistic considerations; by inducing the hesitations of difficulty, it admits into language the influence of the Muse and of musing" (*Standing by Words* 28). For Berry, a "merely impulsive flow of speech" is the linguistic correlative of philosophical rootlessness, of not knowing one's place in the decorum of nature. Such rootlessness represents a licentious and therefore dangerous freedom in a world whose survival is dependent on maintaining the delicate balance of its constituents. In another essay, "Poetry and Place," Berry relates the organic form of community and place to literary form: "one's farm...is indeed a form. It's not a literary form, but it is *like* a literary form....Like any other form, it requires us to do some things and forbids us to do others. Some acts are fitting and becoming, and some acts are not. If we fail to do what is required and if we do what is forbidden, we exclude ourselves from the mercy of Nature" (*Standing by Words* 192-93).

The somewhat prescriptive, neo-Augustan tone of much of this (the reader will note Berry's eighteenth century-like capitalization of Nature) is not surprising in a critic who has just spent a number of pages defending Alexander Pope's attitude toward nature against some rather ill-considered criticism by Robert Bly. But it may seem surprising coming from a poet who for most of his career has practiced a form of free verse. Berry has always been one for consistency, however, and in *Standing by Words* he is bringing his critical thinking into line with certain philosophical attitudes puzzled out over the last twenty years. It is fitting that the author of *The Unsettling of America* should come to see that "the work of poetic form is coherence, joining things that need to be joined, as marriage joins them—in words by which a man or a woman can stand, words confirmable in acts....Thus, for a couple, marriage is an entrance into a timeless community. So, for a poet (or a reader), is the mastery of poetic form. Joining the form, we join all that the form has joined" (*Standing by Words* 213). Berry does not luxuriate in currently fashionable notions of the indeterminacy of meaning. For him, form is not merely abstract or arbitrary, but is the animating structure of life as it is really lived in all

variety. It stands as warp to the weft of raw and transient experience.

In *Sabbaths*, the poet in Berry is attempting to work out the practical implications of these ideas, and it represents a daring move. It is always dangerous (though perhaps also necessary) for an artist to leave behind modes of expression he has found both congenial and serviceable. Therefore, on a certain level, the technique of *Sabbaths* is less assured than that of *The Wheel*. There is a "Sunday Best" tone in certain of these poems, a self-conscious formality that issues in biblical allusions and formal allusions to poets like George Herbert and Dante (a couple of the poems make use of *terza rima*). Occasionally, there are lapses into hollow versifying, as in these lines:

> To sit and look at light-filled leaves
> May let us see, or seem to see,
> Far backward as through clearer eyes
> To what unsightly hope believes:
> The blessed conviviality
> That sang Creation's seventh sunrise...(*Sabbaths* 9)

At moments like this, one has the impression that the meter and rhyme scheme are controlling Berry rather than the other way around. The nature mysticism here seems schoolish and awkward compared to such supple free verse efforts as "On the Hill Late at Night" (*Farming: A Handbook* 1970):

> The ripe grasslands bend in the starlight
> in the soft wind, beneath them the darkness
> of the grass, fathomless, the long blades
> rising out of the well of time. Cars
> travel the valley roads below me, their lights
> finding the dark, and racing on. Above
> their roar is a silence I have suddenly heard,
> and felt the country turn under the stars
> toward dawn. (*Selected Poems* 113)

Here the free verse rhythm delicately mimes the movement of "the soft wind", while the harsh cæsura before "cars", staring into the blank space at the end of the line, suggests the intrusion of the modern world. Equally effective is the other delayed cæsura before "above", whose hushed, lifting quality ushers in the tone of revelation in the next lines. The point here is not to make invidious comparisons, but to demonstrate something of the masterly free verse technique Berry has risked leaving behind.

A good part of *Sabbaths*, on the other hand, does attain to mastery of a different kind. One might consider these lines from the poem beginning "Here where the dark-sourced stream brims up":

> From cloud to sea to cloud, I climb
> The deer road through the leafless trees
> Under a wind that batters limb
> On limb, still roaring as it has
>
> Two nights and days, cold in slow spring.
> But ancient song in a wild throat
> Recalls itself and starts to sing
> In storm-cleared light; and the bloodroot,
>
> Twinleaf, and rue anemone
> Among bare shadows rise, keep faith
> With what they have been and will be
> Again: frail stem and leaf, mere breath
>
> Of white and starry bloom, each form
> Recalling itself to its place
> And time. (44-45)

Here Berry's native poetic instincts are fully in command of the form, wrestling with it (notice the sharp but telling enjambments) and rendering it supple enough to express his sense of the spring's explosive renewal. The language is concrete and colloquial, but the ultimate confines of the form nicely suggest the order of nature itself, which contains the explosion.

This order, together with the accommodations we must make with it as living beings within nature, is one of the main themes of *Sabbaths*, as it has become perhaps the central theme in all of Berry's varied work. The notion of nature as embodying a strict form of polyphonous spontaneity finds expression in a number of poems. Keenly and delicately, Berry observes its outlines:

> Over the river in loud flood,
> in the wind deep and broad
> under the unending sky, pair
> by pair, the swallows again,
> with tender exactitude,

> play out their line
> in arcs laid on the air,
> as soon as made, not there. (*Sabbaths* 71)

The effort of all these prepositional phrases is to place the flight of the swallows, evanescent at once and enduring, in the larger form of nature, and the method, the form is to match the swallows' own "tender exactitude". (Indeed, Berry's use of prepositions throughout his work to establish a firm sense of place would repay critical study.) When Berry wishes to place our "intellect so ravenous to know", it is with *terza rima* stanzas, invoking the authority of Dante and his ordered sense of the life of the world and man's position in it. Human intellect, as Berry has often told us and tells us once again, "must finally know the dark" (*Sabbaths* 35). Recognizing that "all orders made by mortal hand or love / Or thought come to a margin of their kind, / Are lost in an order we are ignorant of," we must learn to

> Leave word and argument, be dark and still,
> And come into the joy of healing shade.
> Rest from your work. Be still and dark until
>
> You grow as unopposing, unafraid
> As the young trees, without thought or belief;
> Until the shadow Sabbath light has made
>
> Shudders, breaks open, shines in every leaf. (36)

Not only here, but throughout *Sabbaths* this mystical play of light and dark on the leaves extends a prominent metaphorical concern of Berry's earlier work.

This poem touches also on two related issues of Berry's present book: his structuring of the work around various "Sabbaths" marked off by years from 1979 to 1986, and his repeated use of overtly Christian references. This latter has been an issue of some contention. Berry has never been a writer to fit anyone's pre-conceptions. Critics have chided him on occasion both for "preachiness" and lack of religious orthodoxy. I have argued on other occasions ("Moving the Dark to Wholeness" and "A Kinship of the Fields") that Berry is a deeply religious poet, though his religion has never been that of the strictly orthodox Christian, encompassing as it does the myths of eastern religions (the "Wheel of Life") and the Winnebago Indians as easily as the stories of the Bible. Berry is suspicious of the tendency in certain strains of orthodox Christianity to exalt spirit at the expense of the body, which he considers ultimately corruptive of man's respect for nature.

And he prefers the cyclical notion of time held typically by "primitive" religions to the linear vision of time enshrined in Christian dogma. On the other hand, in *Standing by Words* he explicitly accepts a sphere of religious interest standing protectively above and outside the system of systems:

> there has to be a religious interest of some kind above the ecogenetic [i.e., "the interest of the whole 'household' in which life is lived"(48)]....the system of systems is enclosed within mystery, in which some truth can be known, but never all truth....you cannot speak or act in your own best interest without espousing and serving a higher interest. It is not knowledge that enforces this realization, but the humbling awareness of the insufficiency of knowledge, of mystery. (49-50)

This is not, as some critics have charged, an attempt to make a religion of ecology, for Berry insists that the religious sphere, the sphere of ultimate mystery, stands outside the ecological system, but it is vague enough in its contours to disquiet the churchly. Even in *Sabbaths*, the "mad farmer" in Berry maintains his wonted "contrariness":

> The bell calls in the town...
> I hear, but understand
> Contrarily, and walk into the woods. (*Sabbaths* 10)

What is new in *Sabbaths* is not a conversion to orthodox theology, but the acceptance of a traditional, Christian vocabulary, which enforces a certain measure or form on Berry's previously unsponsored religious expression. The book is sprinkled with references to Resurrection, Creation, Paradise, Heaven, Eden, the forfeit Garden, the Lord, the Maker, God and His sepulcher, and of course Sabbath, all with their appropriate, numinous capitalizations. Berry makes discrete use, however, of this formal nomenclature. Resurrection, for instance, is not limited in its connotations to a doctrine of Christian theology, but serves to illuminate through its formal control the vast and spontaneous energy of spring:

> The tracked rut
> Fills and levels; here nothing grieves
>
> In the risen season. Past life
> Lives in the living. Resurrection
> Is in the way each maple leaf
> Commemorates its kind, by connection

Outreaching understanding. (*Sabbaths* 7)

The resurrection here is unique to Berry's sense of religious interest, of mystery "outreaching understanding." It functions to denominate formally the vital return of the year so important in Berry's cyclical notion of time. Berry absorbs the Christian nomenclature in all its intricacy, as he does the devices of formal verse, in order to express his own sense of the delicate relations informing the system of systems and the religious mystery surrounding it.

The title of the book itself is redolent with specifically Judeo-Christian associations. The word "sabbath" has its origins in a Hebrew verb meaning "to rest," and is used in the Bible to indicate the seventh day of the Creation, the Lord's day of rest. It has come to suggest either the seventh or the first day of the week, and in Christian tradition it is synonymous with Sunday, a day of abstinence from work and the day of Jesus' Resurrection. All these senses are allowed play in Berry's work, which gives it an uncommon associative density. For Berry, the sabbath represents the formal closure of one of the chief cycles of time. It marks at once the end of the work week and the beginning of the new week. Its repeatability in difference makes it especially important to a poet like Berry, who has long been interested in cyclical time as manifested in days, in the seasons, and in generations. The cyclical structure of *Sabbaths* is reinforced by its subdivision into eight parts, which refer specifically to eight years and by implication to eight days in the closed circle of a week, from Sunday to Sunday. Thus the sabbath connects meaningfully with the symbolism of the Wheel of Life and Berry's earlier work.

The epigraph of *Sabbaths* is taken from *Isaiah* 14:7: "The whole earth is at rest, and is quiet: they break forth into singing." This is an uncharacteristically gentle passage amidst a series of oracles of the Lord's doom on the *hubris* of foreign peoples, in the case of Chapter 14, the Babylonians. The eighth verse continues: "Yea, the fir trees rejoice at thee [the King of Babylon], and the cedars of Lebanon, saying, Since thou art laid down, no feller is come up against us." The "singing" would appear to be of the trees, and metonymically of the birds in the trees. That such singing should come as the harbinger of a great empire's destruction sets Berry's work subtly in a darker key. The absent fellers of trees are by implication modern Americans as well as Babylonians, with relevant environmental overtones. This suggests, of course, one of Berry's central themes, exploiting man's possibly imminent destruction of nature. The new note is the implication of divine, retributive force, and Berry's own awe in the face of it:

He steps

> Amid a foliage of song
> No tone of which has passed his lips.
> Watching, silent, he shifts among
>
> The shiftings of the day, himself
> A shifting of the day's design
> Whose outline is in doubt, unsafe,
> And dark. One time, less learned in pain,
>
> He thought the earth was firm, his own,
> But now he knows that all not raised
> By fire, by water is brought down. (*Sabbaths* 73)

The song of the trees and "the day's design" take on a dark and fearfully numinous aspect for one "learned in pain." Berry has always cautioned us to prepare for disaster by accepting death as a necessary part of nature, but here he seems conscious of the ultimately mysterious causes in the religious sphere. *Sabbaths*, however, represents also a provisionally hopeful dissipation of Berry's fears through meditative attention to nature and its intricate balance:

> what is afraid of me comes
> and lives a while in my sight.
> What it fears in me leaves me,
> and the fear of me leaves it.
> It sings, and I hear its song.
>
> Then what I am afraid of comes.
> I live for a while in its sight.
> What I fear in it leaves it,
> and the fear of it leaves me.
> It sings, and I hear its song.
>
> After days of labor,
> mute in my consternations,
> I hear my song at last,
> and I sing it. As we sing
> the day turns, the trees move. (*Sabbaths* 5-6)

The day of rest after labor becomes for Berry the day of unburdening his fears, of dispersing consternations in a formal song echoing the formality of nature itself.

The emphasis on the sabbath as a day of rest, however, contrasts with the workday feeling of so many of Berry's earlier farm poems. Where the farm poems allow mystical intuitions to arise from everyday encounters with the ecological sphere of nature, the sabbath poems, though rooted in nature, seek actively to penetrate the religious sphere through formal meditation, the prescribed activity of the seventh day. This occasions a greater reliance on mystical tropes than is usual in Berry's work, particularly in the pervasive images of light and song:

> Thrush song, stream song, holy love
> That flows through earthly forms and folds,
> The song of Heaven's Sabbath fleshed
> In throat and ear, in stream and stone,
> A grace living here as we live,
> Move my mind now to that which holds
> Things as they change. (*Sabbaths* 47)

The "songs" here function on several interactive levels of metaphor: the simple and familiar comparison of a bird's sounds with song, the somewhat less familiar comparison of the sound of the stream with song, the parataxis identifying these with the notion of "holy love," and the mystical representation of "the song of Heaven's Sabbath," which involves them all, and amounts to an experience of grace. Berry's meditative scheme also issues in a more elaborate and rhetorically driven syntax:

> Not again in this flesh will I see
> the old trees stand here as they did,
> weighty creatures made of light, delight
> of their making straight in them and well,
> whatever blight our blindness was or made,
> however thought or act might fail. (*Sabbaths* 81)

The extravagance of Berry's diction is held beautifully in check by the sinuous grammatical structure. Through formal artifice, Berry achieves, on this occasion and on many others in *Sabbaths*, a fine linguistic balance, an order cognate with those of agriculture and nature.

Berry's technique in *Sabbaths*, far from being simply nostalgic, an empty exercise in the "well-made" poetry of the 'forties and 'fifties, represents a logical and

compelling development of his craft. Berry has long been a poet of the internal relations—instinctual, formal, and ritual—which join together families, communities, even the past and future generations with themselves, with the ecological system, and with the ultimate sphere of mystery. For Berry, the farm is one, though not the only, form which embodies and sustains these relations:

> Enclosing the field within bounds
> sets it apart from the boundless
> of which it was, and is, a part,
> and places it within care.
> The bounds of the field bind
> the mind to it. A bride
> adorned, the field now wears
> the green veil of a season's
> abounding. Open the gate!
> Open it wide, that time
> and hunger may come in. (*Sabbaths* 18)

This poem, whose immediate subject is the farm as form, a dominant idea in Berry's work, might serve also as an *ars poetica* for *Sabbaths*. Artistic form shares the responsibilities of all other vital forms: recognizing limits and orders, and joining things to create new and fertile orders. Thus may time and hunger, the uncontrollables, be domesticated to substantial pleasures.

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Chapter 12

A Kinship of the Fields: Farming in the Poetry of R.S. Thomas and Wendell Berry

Nature has been an important subject of poets since the time of the ancients, and since the romantics a central one.[1] Poetry about farming, however, is much more rare; only odd acres of the many set aside in the poetic landscape for Arcadian contemplation have actually been tilled. There are few compatriots of Hardy's "man harrowing clods / In a slow silent walk" ("In Time of 'The Breaking of Nations' "). In recent years, however, this imbalance of poetic ambition has been redressed to some extent by the work of two very different poets, R. S. Thomas in Wales and Wendell Berry in Kentucky. Thomas, who spent his career as a country priest, has written many poems about the peasants among whom he conducted his ministry. Berry has gone even further, leaving a promising academic career to devote himself to farming and making farming the central theme of his mature work. While they share many assumptions, however, about the centrality of the experience of working as opposed to contemplating the land, Thomas and Berry approach farming from different perspectives and treat it in differing ways that reflect their very different cultural matrices.

For one thing, Thomas has always considered farming from the point of view of an outsider, who may or may not always empathize with his subjects. The calling of priest separates him distinctly and irrefragably from the lives of the

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peasants, to whose spiritual needs he officially ministers. Thomas makes no attempt to romanticize these peasants, but presents them in the fullness of their imperfections. They are likely to appear like Walter Llywarch, "Born in Wales of approved parents, / Well goitred, round in the bum, / Sure prey of the slow virus / Bred in quarries of grey rain" ("Walter Llywarch," *Selected Poems* 60). Thomas presents Walter as a sort of Welsh Everyman, one of many "who waited in the long queue / Of life that wound through a Welsh valley," whose life is characterized by its bleakness and banality. Like his parents, everything else about his life is "approved" and determined. Walter has taken

> as others had done
> Before, a wife from the back pews
> In chapel, rather to share the rain
> Of winter evenings, than to intrude
> On her pale body; and yet we lay
> For warmth together and laughed to hear
> Each new child's cry of despair.

The conditions of Welsh society oppress Walter, his wife, and his children with the sort of fearful determinism that characterizes Blake's "London."

Walter is not the only peasant locked in a miserable cycle of events. In "On the Farm," Thomas presents a portrait of the Puw family:

> There was Dai Puw. He was no good.
> They put him in the fields to dock swedes,
> And took the knife from him, when he came home
> At late evening with a grin
> Like the slash of a knife on his face.
>
> There was Llew Puw, and he was no good.
> Every evening after the plowing
> With the big tractor he would sit in his chair,
> And stare into the tangled fire garden,
> Opening his slow lips like a snail.
>
> There was Huw Puw, too. What shall I say?
> I have heard him whistling in the hedges
> On and on, as though winter
> Would never again leave those fields
> And all the trees were deformed.

> And lastly there was the girl:
> Beauty under some spell of the beast.
> Her pale face was the lantern
> By which they read in life's dark book
> The shrill sentence: God is love.
> (*Selected Poems* 82)

tic fashion. The Puws represent a society dominated by hard, soul-wearing work (readers of Thomas Hardy will remember his description of swede docking in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*), in which religion is known negatively when at all. Even then it is mostly excluded from the male world. Thomas seems aware, however, that his portrait is absurdly bleak to the point of parody. He suggests this with the nursery-rhyme repetitions in the first lines of the stanzas, which hint at the unreal and the fabulous, as well as the jingling rhymes of the names ("Huw Puw, too"), though the rest of the description is realistic enough. The life of the Puws, certainly, cannot be all there is to life? Perhaps there is a suggestion of affection for them, a pathetic sense that the Puws are victims of the anonymous "they" of the first stanza, but it remains a suggestion only. Life's book is dark, not only in the sense of bleakness, but in its obscurity also, and the peasants are the keepers of this obscurity. This mystery, rather than some sense of them as "holy fools," is the product of their witlessness.

In another poem entitled "Meet the Family" (*Selected Poems* 54), Thomas offers a dry litany of peasant types: John One, whose "eyes are dry as a dead leaf," John Two standing "in the door / Dumb," John Three "Drooling where the daylight died / On the wet stones," and finally John All's "lean wife, / Whose forced complicity gave life / To each loathed foetus." It is easy to see why a critic like Marie Peel can argue that Thomas' "incapacity to see himself with others and to share in a common natural humanity seems to have brought him to a point of hating and denying life itself" (66). Yet the case does not seem as simple as Peel makes out. Like Tolstoy, Thomas is well aware of the stubborn recalcitrance of the peasantry, what he has called their "mute beast-like endurance" (Lethbridge 38), but at the same time he claims that he "wanted to propagandize, on behalf of the small farmer in his fields" (Lethbridge 42). Thomas is interested in the paradox of the farmer, for whom the beauty of nature (as the romantics have conceived it) "doesn't seem to mean much," but whose "figure is human" and "casts a human shadow across the landscape," and who "may be just as close to the truth as anybody else" (Lethbridge 42). Calvin Bedient has spoken of Thomas' somewhat eccentric Anglicanism as "a badgering compassion" whose atmosphere "is

continually present — asserting the human, brightening when it finds it, darkening when it does not" (60-61). Thomas is compelled to take a difficult look at the peasant whose life he wants to propagandize, even when, as with John One, to "Look at him" is to "learn grief."

Thus, even Iago Prytherch, who appears in a number of poems, is described as having "a half-witted grin / Of satisfaction" as he churns "the crude earth / To a stiff sea of clods" ("A Peasant," *Selected Poems* 11). Thomas would have us see Iago

> fixed in his chair
> Motionless, except when he leans to gob in the fire.
> There is something frightening in the vacancy of his mind.
> His clothes, sour with years of sweat
> And animal contact, shock the refined,
> But affected, sense with their stark naturalness.

"A Peasant" gives clear expression to the ambiguous feelings aroused in Thomas by the Welsh peasantry. Thomas is indeed frightened by Iago's half-wittedness, "the vacancy of his mind," the frustrating lack of concern for the spiritual problems that occupy the refined poet himself. And yet the refined sensibilities of the poet and his literate readers (Iago, we may assume, is not among Thomas' readers) are treated with a certain irony. These sensibilities are not only "refined" but "affected," and as A. E. Dyson has pointed out, in the context of Thomas' poem these words become "near synonyms"(9). The effect is subtly to convert Iago's crude naturalness from a quality eliciting the readers' contempt to a quality challenging the readers' and poet's artificiality. After this "turn" in the poem, Thomas goes on to present this

> prototype, who, season by season
> Against siege of rain and the wind's attrition,
> Preserves his stock, an impregnable fortress
> Not to be stormed even in death's confusion.
> Remember him, then, for he, too, is a winner of wars,
> Enduring like a tree under the curious stars.

Exactly what kind of "prototype" Iago is remains subject to question. He is certainly not an idealized "noble savage," nor is he in any sense an inspiration for one's spiritual life, as we shall see Berry's farmers are. Thomas' farmer experiences life at its barest, in the absence of God, and indeed in the absence of any but

a physical dimension. What appears to claim Thomas' admiration is Iago's gaunt stoicism, his ability to hold out against the "siege" of nature, to endure "like a tree" in the vast and questionable universe suggested by the "curious stars." They are curious in the sense that they excite our speculation (though not Iago's) and remain, like Thomas' God, silent and unknowable.

What threatens his stoicism is not nature but the modern world, which Thomas considers basically villainous and emblematizes with tourism and the machine. Unlike some of Berry's farmers who have left the world behind in a mystical return to the soil and the natural techniques of farming (the chief threat to the farm culture in the United States, according to Berry, is agribusiness), Thomas' peasants are radically innocent and thus helpless before the corruptions of the modern world. Theirs is not a vitalizing reform culture, but the vestige of ancient custom, surviving because it is as yet untouched or overlooked. In a poem called "Invasion of the Farm" (*Selected Poems* 37), Iago Prytherch addresses the curious tourists who have come to gaze at what they consider a picturesque Welsh scene:

> I am Prytherch. Forgive me. I don't know
> What you are talking about; your thoughts flow
> Too swiftly for me; I cannot dawdle
> Along their banks and fish in their quick stream
> With crude fingers. I am alone, exposed
> In my own fields with no place to run
> From your sharp eyes. I, who a moment back
> Paddled in the bright grass, the old farm
> Warm as a sack about me, feel the cold
> Winds of the world blowing. The patched gate
> You left open will never be shut again.

As in "A Peasant," Thomas' irony here seems to be directed not at the ignorant Iago, but at the cultivated tourists with their "quick stream" of thoughts. Iago himself is pathetic in his modesty and helplessness, the protection of his "old farm" lost forever. What there is of protection (salvation, of course, is not in question here) seems to lie in avoidance if possible of the contamination of the modern world, a kind of physical and secular equivalent of asceticism. As Thomas notes in his affectionate portrait of eighty-five year old Job Davies ("Lore," *Selected Poems* 68):

> Rhythm of the long scythe
> Kept this tall frame lithe.

> What to do? Stay green.
> Never mind the machine,
> Whose fuel is human souls.
> Live large, man, and dream small.

The advice is anti-romantic and indeed anti-modern, asserting, as it does, that our grasp should exceed our reach, but there is a stern sanity about it that recalls similar statements by Wendell Berry.

At times — one might almost say in certain moods, for Thomas has confessed himself a creature of changeable moods (Lethbridge 39) — he can come very close to Berry's sort of farm mysticism. An early poem entitled "Soil" (*Selected Poems* 17) presents a dignified portrait of a peasant working "A field tall with hedges, ... slowly astride the rows / Of red mangolds and green swedes / Plying mechanically his cold blade." Having set this scene out of Millet, Thomas penetrates what one might call its mystical basis:

> This is his world, the hedge defines
> The mind's limits; only the sky
> Is boundless, and he never looks up;
> His gaze is deep in the dark soil,
> As are his feet. The soil is all;
> His hands fondle it, and his bones
> Are formed out of it with the swedes.
> And if sometimes the knife errs,
> Burying itself in his shocked flesh,
> Then out of the wound the blood seeps home
> To the warm soil from which it came.

In many ways this beautiful poem sums up Thomas' paradoxical view of the farmer. His mind, as the present civilized society would define it, is limited by the hedged enclosure of his field. The boundless sky, suggestive of spiritual aspiration (one remembers Coleridge's assertion that the blue of the sky is nature's fittest emblem of pure feeling), is of no interest to him. To the farmer the dirt is all. Yet Thomas modulates our attitude with a word more positive than dirt, the "soil." The farmer's "gaze is deep in the dark soil," suggesting a mystical experience of the mystery of nurturing earth, surely nature's "poetry" in its most sublime manifestation. Thomas' farmer, unlike those who watch him (including the poet himself), is something completely natural like the mangolds and the swedes. And as these crops suggest (consider the association of mangold, or mangel, with

Wurzel, he is something rooted, in intimate contact with the source of life itself. His blood, which he spills for our nurture, is at home in the "warm soil." Thomas will not romanticize the farmers' dreary existence, nor is he quick, in the vein of Seamus Heaney, to equate digging with a "cold blade" and "digging" with a pen; his own life and concerns are quite different. But in poems like "Soil" he celebrates a fundamental tragedy and glory of human life emblematized in the figure casting "a human shadow across the landscape."

Wendell Berry's farmers are very much of a newer world than Thomas' peasants, though their ways, as he celebrates them, seem traditional enough. In the context of modern America, however, traditional, organic farming constitutes a form of spiritual rebellion against the deracinated modern world and the soul- and soil-destroying machinery of agribusiness. (One of Berry's frequent *personae,* characterized, as he puts it, by "contrariness" toward the modern world, is known as "the mad farmer.") Unlike Thomas, whose work he admires, Berry has not contented himself with observation, but has made farming his way of life, and indeed has written numerous polemical essays on the theoretical and practical aspects of farming as he would practice it in the modern world. Traditional farming is for Berry nothing short of a revolutionary calling, and his treatment of it in poetry is filled with mystical fervor. In a volume with the ironically practical and American title, *Farming. A Hand Book,* Berry presents a farmer whose joyful mysticism mitigates and renders meaningful his intimate experience of death:

> The grower of trees, the gardener, the man born to farming,
> whose hands reach into the ground and sprout,
> to him the soil is a divine drug. He enters into death
> yearly, and comes back rejoicing. He has seen the light lie down
> in a dung heap, and rise again in corn.
> His thought passes along the row ends like a mole.
> What miraculous seed has he swallowed
> that the unending sentence of his love flows out of his mouth
> like a vine clinging in the sunlight, and like water
> descending in the dark?
> ("The Man Born to Farming," *Collected Poems* 103)

Whereas Thomas' religious concerns and his social concern for the peasantry tend scrupulously to be kept distinct, Berry's farmer is the keeper and carrier of the mystical intuition that lies at the center of his religious thought. "The man born to farming" is born also to an understanding of the cyclical dying and reviving of the earth, the delicate balance of death and life that informs and underlies our

existence. Far from being ignorant, picturesque, or peripheral, he tends the paradoxical knowledge that according to Berry is of central importance to us as human beings: that "without death and rot there can be no new life" (*The Unsettling of America* 193). The passage about the light rising in the corn subtly echoes one of Berry's favorite biblical passages about "the corn of wheat" that falls into the earth and dies and thus "bringeth forth much fruit." The farmer's hands reach into the earth not simply to fondle it, but to "sprout" with new life. For Berry "the soil is a divine drug," in which the mystery of existence, ready to burst out in an "unending sentence of...love," is maintained.

Unlike Thomas, Berry writes not as an outsider but from the perspective of the farmer. In "Sowing" (*Collected Poems* 104-05), the act of sowing new seed to reclaim a neglected piece of land involves the speaker in the history of the place and indeed in the fate of the world as it unfolds there:

> In the stilled place that was once a road going down
> from the town to the river, and where the lives of marriages grew
> a house, cistern and barn, flowers, the tilted stones of borders,
> and the deeds of their lives ran to neglect, and honeysuckle
> and then fire overgrew it all, I walk heavy
> with seed, spreading on the cleared hill the beginnings
> of green, clover and grass to be pasture. Between
> history's death upon the place and the trees that would have come
> I claim, and act, and am mingled in the fate of the world.

For Berry, no place is an imprisoning backwater, as Thomas' Wales may sometimes seem to be. The farmer reads intimately the history of his place, and even where history has decreed "death upon the place," he may "claim" and "act" to revitalize it, spreading the "beginnings" of new life.

The establishment of roots, of a connection with place, is of central importance to Berry's philosophy. This is quite possibly a result of Berry's being American. Where Thomas is certain of his "place in the world" and his relations to others (his colleagues, his parishioners, the businessmen and literati of the outside world with whom he sometimes has contact), Berry seems relatively uncertain of his place, and is constantly in need of reaffirming such a place. Indeed, the fundamental act of his career was his decision to leave a teaching post in New York and return to a farm in Kentucky where he was born. Berry refuses the much bandied about notion that "you can't go home again," and his efforts as a man and thinker have been to be rerooted in place, community, agriculture, nature — what he has called the "system of nested systems" (*Standing by Words* 46). The calling of the farmer

and the quasi-mystical involvement in place which it entails are central to his enterprise. In "The Current" (*Collected Poems* 119), Berry writes that

> Having once put his hand into the ground,
> seeding there what he hopes will outlast him,
> a man has made a marriage with his place,
> and if he leaves it his flesh will ache to go back.
> His hand has given up its birdlife in the air.
> It has reached into the dark like a root
> and begun to wake, quick and mortal, in timelessness.

This paradoxical state of connection with the land, "quick and mortal, in timelessness," establishes the farmer as the mediator of past and future, the bearer of "The current flowing to him through the earth." It is a mystical state enabling him to witness his ancestors, "the bearers of his own blood," as well as "one descended from him, / a young man who has reached into the ground, / his hand held in the dark as by a hand." Unlike Thomas' peasants, who seem sometimes to pass a curse of the land from generation to generation, Berry's farmers offer each other a mystical communion of place, the "current" flowing through the generations and redeeming them from the tragedy of time.

In a poem entitled "On the Hill Late at Night" (*Collected Poems* 113), he describes his own sense of willing rootedness:

> I am wholly willing to be here
> between the bright silent thousands of stars
> and the life of the grass pouring out of the ground.
> The hill has grown to me like a foot.
> Until I lift the earth I cannot move.

These lines compare interestingly with Thomas' description of the peasant in "Soil." Thomas' tragic determinism is quite alien to Berry and absent from his poem. Though the hill has grown to him "like a foot," he insists on his willingness to be there and expresses what amounts to a mystical delight in his position as a farmer "between the bright silent thousands of stars / and the life of the grass." And this delight remains with Berry even when his position involves knowledge of the darkest aspects of life.

Farming, with its intimate experience of death, provides Berry with the rich system of metaphors that informs his work. The putting of hands into the ground, for instance, becomes for Berry something more than a simple act of farming. It

suggests not only the communion with past and future generations, the mystical handshake in the dark that Berry would achieve, but the acceptance of death as a natural and even a desirable part of life. "Song in a Year of Catastrophe" (*Collected Poems* 117-18) treats the necessity of accepting the death of "the things that you love" as well as one's own death. Written in 1968, it is perhaps haunted by the circumstances of the Vietnam War, but its concerns are at once more personal and more general than those of the mass of "protest" poems of the period. Berry's response to international catastrophe (interestingly like Thomas Hardy's during another war) is the age-old response of the nurturing farmer:

> And I went and put my hands
> into the ground, and they took root
> and grew into a season's harvest.
> I looked behind the veil
> of the leaves, and heard voices
> that I knew had been dead
> in my tongue years before my birth.
> I learned the dark.
>
> * * *
>
> I let go all holds then, and sank
> like a hopeless swimmer into the earth,
> and at last came fully into the ease
> and the joy of that place,
> all my lost ones returning.

Berry has argued, in what can be taken as a gloss on these lines, that "because death is inescapable, a biological and ecological necessity, its acceptance becomes a spiritual obligation, the only means of making life whole" (Recollected Essays 199).

This insight, the cynosure of Berry's thought, is essentially an agricultural one, which parallels in farming cultures as diverse as those of the Winnebago Indians, the Bible, and Virgilian Rome. Berry has been taken to task by Richard Pevear for his unorthodox religious views, for making, as Pevear puts it, "A 'religion' of his cause" (346), but this view seems, in a bad sense, churchly, limiting, and wrong-headed. A more serious criticism might be that Berry romanticizes farming and farmers in the service of a theoretical and personal ideal, and that in doing so he neglects what is really dark, uncommunicative, and socially limiting in modern agricultural life, aspects Thomas, with his stern but relatively traditional sense of the Christian mission, focuses on with compassionate penetration. Yet Berry's

agricultural mysticism enables him to do what Thomas' Anglicanism cannot: to find in the ordinary activity of farming a living and deeply religious significance. For Berry, there is no separation of religious aspiration and the reality of working the land. This is a profoundly optimistic and perhaps an essentially American notion, and it lends to Berry's farmers a spiritual dignity denied Thomas' peasants, who must reveal their human centrality and importance in a spiritual vacuum. It is significant that in his later books, as he begins to deal more insistently with religious themes, Thomas recurs with surprising infrequency to the peasant characters who played so important a role in his early poetry.

Berry, meanwhile, has continued to make farming and farmers the philosophical and metaphorical center of his work. Among the most moving poems in his recent book, *The Wheel*, are a series of elegies for his friend and mentor, Owen Flood. Flood is presented as perhaps Berry's ideal of a farmer, though it should be pointed out that he seems ordinary and real enough. In "Rising" (*Collected Poems* 241-44) we see him at work:

> a man well known by his back
> in those fields in those days.
> He led me though long rows
> of misery, moving like a dancer
> ahead of me, so elated
> he was, and able, filled
> with desire for the ground's growth.

Owen Flood teaches the young Berry how to transmute the "misery" of his labor into a "desire" with spiritual as well as physical implications. He is Berry's perfect cyclical man, the model nurturer. His life may be "a journey back and forth / in rows, and in the rounds / of years," but in his fields "past and potency are one," and "many-lived," he may "reach / through ages with the seed."

Thomas and Berry have produced very different and to some degree complementary bodies of work about a subject little treated but of tremendous importance in the history and continued presence of man. Thomas' poetry about farming is characterized by its control, objectivity, and basically tragic persuasion. Berry's poetry is freer in form, subjective (as any writing suggesting mystical experience must be), and essentially optimistic. Thomas' characters endure in a world where traditional life is punishing, the changes wrought by industrialism are equally if not more painful, and God (as we can know Him) is silent or uncaring. The peasant, as Thomas sees him, is a lonely figure on the landscape, "endlessly ploughing .... wrestling with the angel / Of no name," his face "Unglorified, but stern like the

soil" ("The Face," *Selected Poems* 93). Berry's farmers, on the other hand, find meaning and solace in a tradition they seek out, and a kind of spiritual ecstasy in their work. Far from being helpless against the intrusions of the modern world, they are prophets of an alternative life, and far from being lonely, they establish "a kinship of the fields" ("Rising"), a convivial communion with the dead of nature's past and the unborn of her future.

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Chapter 13

The Halo Upon the Bones: R.S. Thomas's Journey to the Interior

It is an unfortunate fact that mention of the Welsh poet R.S. Thomas to Americans is still likely to produce such responses as who? or don't you mean Dylan?[1] Although R.S. Thomas was born a year before his better known namesake and has been turning out poetry of very high quality since the nineteen forties, he has lived a relatively quiet and contemplative life. He has not made a practice of visiting the United States for protracted tours of poetry readings and drinking, and he did not take the precaution of dying romantically, poetically, and pathetically young. Perhaps because of this, his successes are only barely audible in the United States. And yet in Great Britain his poetic reputation today easily eclipses that of the "other Thomas." Certainly in Wales his position as the preeminent Anglo-Welsh poet is secure. For young Welsh poets, particularly those disposed to write in the English language, R.S. Thomas is nothing short of a poetic guru. Peter Elfed Lewis has argued that "the achievement of R.S. Thomas in itself justifies the Anglo-Welsh poetic tradition"(quoted by Bianchi 73), while Tony Bianchi, himself an Anglo-Welsh poet, looks to R.S. Thomas rather than Dylan as "the dominant voice in the attempt by Anglo-Welsh writers to define an audience"(84).

In the larger context of contemporary British literature, R.S. Thomas's stature

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Figure 13.1: Thomas's Last Parish Church in Aberdaron

has also been recognized. Kingsley Amis goes so far as to call him "one of the half-dozen best poets now writing in English (dust cover, *Selected Poems),* an assessment echoed by A.E. Dyson (21). A critic for the *Western Mail* claims for Thomas a position "with the greatest poets of the century," and indeed, there have been a number of comparisons with Yeats and Eliot (see Bianchi 73).

If a capacity for considerable and telling poetic development determines our judgment of a poet's stature, such claims may not seem unjustified. Since the appearance of *The Stones of the Field* in 1946, Thomas has written over twenty volumes of poetry, most recently *Preparations for an A-Men,* published by Macmillan in 1985. Although Thomas has confined himself to the rather narrow compass of the lyric, within this compass his growth and range have been remarkable. Thomas's development may usefully be seen in terms of his continuing exploration of place, his Welsh surroundings first, and later the subtle and interior terrain of the spirit. As his most recent poems suggest, though he may be more forgiving now, the fervor of his exploration is unabated. Old men, perhaps, should be explorers.

An intense consciousness of place, in particular of place in Wales, is what first

sparks and informs the poetry of R.S. Thomas. Here the ancient and modern, the secular and spiritual meet one another and coexist—often uneasily. In the early poem, "Welsh Landscape," Thomas sets forth these concerns:

> To live in Wales is to be conscious
> At dusk of the spilled blood
> That went to the making of the wild sky,
> Dyeing the immaculate rivers
> In all their courses.
> It is to be aware,
> Above the noisy tractor
> And hum of the machine
> Of strife in the strung woods,
> Vibrant with sped arrows.
> You cannot live in the present,
> At least not in Wales. (*Selected Poems* 16)

"Welsh Landscape" can be read as a sort of overture to Thomas's work, an early attempt to position himself, not merely in physical place, but historical place as well. In Thomas's later works, this positioning becomes more intense and more problematical, as he tries to reconcile physical and historical place with man's spiritual place in the modern world. The early books, however, concern themselves primarily with locating a starting point in the human world.

Indeed, the subjects of Thomas's early poems are very earthly. His first efforts to establish and experience a sense of place issue in the poems about Welsh villages and farmers. These are hardly picturesque or pastoral images, however. The Wales of Thomas's early poems seems claustrophobically small and small-minded; Thomas grants his subjects a certain dignity only by way of paradox. Iago Prytherch, a peasant character who appears in a number of poems, is described as "an ordinary man of the bald Welsh hills ... with a half-witted grin" and "spittled mirth / Rarer than the sun that cracks the cheeks / Of the gaunt sky perhaps once in a week." And yet, as Thomas reminds his readers, he "is your prototype, who, season by season / Against siege of rain and the wind's attrition, / Preserves his stock,...he, too, is a winner of wars, / Enduring like a tree under the curious stars" (Selected Poems 11). Prytherch is no ideal pastoral man for Thomas—indeed, he shocks "the refined, / But affected sense with [his] stark naturalness." But he is valuable, for one thing, in placing the refined and affected sense of Thomas and his readers, and also for his brute stoicism in the face of adversity. As in many of the early poems, Thomas's attitude is ambivalent—some critics have taken it

simply as condescending—hovering between admiration and disdain. Thomas is certainly not concerned to romanticize the lives of the Welsh peasants. As Walter Llywarch, another of Thomas's characters puts it, his life in Wales is filled with

> Months of fog, months of drizzle;
> Thought wrapped in the grey cocoon
> Of race, of place, awaiting the sun's
> Coming, but when the sun came,
> Touching the hills with a hot hand,
> Wings were spread only to fly
> Round and round in a cramped cage
> Or beat in vain at the sky's window.
> (*Selected Poems* 60).

Thomas's sense of the claustrophic smallness of life in rural Wales is expressed also in a poem called "The Village." The village has "Scarcely a street, too few houses / To merit the title; just a way between / The one tavern and the one shop / That leads nowhere and fails at the top / Of the short hill" (Selected Poems 35). The village, a "last outpost of time past," fights a losing battle against oblivion, "the green tide / Of grass" that threatens it. Almost nothing goes on there, and yet it too is a place where living happens: "the girl who crosses / From door to door moves to a scale / Beyond the bland day's two dimensions." Like Iago Prytherch, the girl in "The Village" endures as something real, and as such compels Thomas's admiration:

> Stay, then, village, for round you spins
> On slow axis a world as vast
> And meaningful as any posed
> By great Plato's solitary mind.

The poet's admiration is paradoxical, however; he cannot help bringing together the ordinary and the sublime. Indeed, the irony is aimed in both directions here, but in most of the poems brute endurance is clearly not enough. Unlike Wendell Berry's farmers, who joyfully and even mystically establish their place on earth, the lives of Thomas's peasants are tragic and determined. The mind of the peasant in "Soil," who works his field "Plying mechanically his cold blade," is defined and limited by the bordering hedge: "only the sky / Is boundless, and he never looks up." Like Prytherch, he endures as a product of the soil, which to him "is all"; when he bleeds, his "blood seeps home / To the warm soil from which it

came" (Selected Poems 17). In the early poems, Thomas's gaze is almost always stern. As the title of one of his books, *Tares,* suggests, his countryside is not a pastoral landscape, but a place of weed-like plants used as fodder. Interestingly, tares were thought in Biblical times to stupefy the senses with their poison. Thomas's quest for the spiritual must struggle constantly with the stupefying inertia of matter.

Thomas's own place, as a pastor in this country, is especially ambiguous, and a number of poems try to stake out this difficult terrain. In "Those Others," he writes:

> I have looked long at this land,
> Trying to understand
> My place in it—why,
> With each fertile country
> So free of its room,
> This was the cramped womb
> At last took me in
> From the void of unbeing
> (*Selected Poems* 67).

Thomas broods over the accident of his birth in a way none of the peasants he has looked at does. For him, the soil is not all, and he does not spring from it naturally, as Iago does, "like a tree." Having a mind for something more than his field is not an unmixed blessing, however. Unlike the peasants, he is quite aware of "the void of unbeing" from which he came and where some part of him at least is surely heading. The feelings engendered by this state are, as he suggests in "Those Others," alienation and hate: "Hate takes a long time / To grow in, and mine / Has increased from birth." Thomas is unsure, however, just what he hates. It is "Not for the brute earth," and not even (though he considers the possibility) for all of "my own kind, / For men of the Welsh race." His heart goes out to those others he calls "Castaways on a sea / Of grass, who call to me, / Clinging to their doomed farms," whose "slow wake / Through time bleeds for our sake." This is one of Thomas's difficult poems, its statements tentative, shifting, and provisional. Indeed, another poem, "The Cry" *Selected Poems* 56), begins: "Don't think it was all hate / That grew there; love grew there, too." But "Those Others" expresses powerfully Thomas's more characteristic sense of alienation from his fellows and his place.

In a number of poems he considers the difficulty of his relations with his own parishioners, who do not share his most vital concerns. "The Priest" (Selected

Poems 106) is seen as an outsider moving among superstitious villagers, "limping through life / On his prayers." He

> picks his way
> Through the parish. Eyes watch him
> From windows, from the farms;
> Hearts wanting him to come near.
> The flesh rejects him.

Calvin Bedient has observed that Thomas's peasants are "as opaque and unforthcoming as a spot of ink....Closing their doors to him as the farmers do, they leave him in the hollow vastness of the plausible. Dumb and distant, they perforce become a sounding board for his own changing guilts, humiliations, and arrogances....Yet he experiences this licence as anguish"(67). Thomas is certainly aware of the difficulty of his position. As "The Priest" suggests, he is rejected by the flesh before he may reject it. And the word "flesh" here is ambiguous: it implies, of course, the earthly life of the peasants, but there are overtones also of Christ, the word made flesh, the object of those prayers on which he limps. In "There," Thomas tries to define himself as the pastor and poet of "those that life happens to" (Selected Poems 89). These people, for whom life is little more than "an experiment / In Patience," can be expected neither to share his own faith nor to applaud his literary representations of them, and he resists, out of a kind of decorum, his temptation to pass judgment:

> I have watched them bent
> For hours over their trade,
> Speechless, and have held my tongue
> From its question. It was not my part
> To show them, like a meddler from the town,
> Their picture, nor the audiences
> That look at them in pity or pride.

Thomas realizes that pity (which in its way is a form of pride) and prayers will not help the sufferings of the people. Yet his duty as a priest is to minister to their spiritual needs, and his duty as a poet is to record their sufferings. Thomas once wrote that

> the ability to be in hell is a spiritual prerogative, and proclaims the true nature of [a poet]. Without darkness, in the world we know, the

> light would go unprized; without evil, goodness would have no meaning. Over every poet's door is nailed Keats's saying about negative capability. (Quoted by Merchant 72)

A poem entitled "Evans" (Selected Poems 46) is Thomas's version of "Felix Randall."

> Evans? Yes, many a time
> I came down his bare flight
> Of stairs into the gaunt kitchen
> With its wood fire, where crickets sang
> Accompaniment to the black kettle's
> Whine, and so into the cold
> Dark to smother in the thick tide
> Of night that drifted about the walls
> Of his stark farm on the hill ridge.
> It was not the dark filling my eyes
> And mouth appalled me; not even the drip
> Of rain like blood from the one tree
> Weather-tortured. It was the dark
> Silting the veins of that sick man
> I left stranded upon the vast
> And lonely shore of his bleak bed.

Unlike Hopkins, however, Thomas does not exalt the sick man, or his own ministry. Evans is left "stranded" in the dark that was always the fabric of his life. Watching life happen to this man, Thomas has no thought that "My tongue had taught thee comfort, touch had quenched thy tears"; indeed, he is not so much saddened as appalled at Evans' fate. Thomas respects the peasant's fortitude, and he retains his image—"That bare hill with the man ploughing, / Corrugating that brown roof / Under a hard sky"—but he realizes that "there is no applause / For his long wrestling with the angel / Of no name"("The Face," *Selected Poems* 93).

And of course, Thomas has his own wrestling to think about—with the "silent" God who has preoccupied him increasingly since the publication of *Pietà* in 1966. As he puts it in "Via Negativa" (*Later Poems* 23), "I have never thought other than / That God is that great absence / In our lives, the empty silence / Within, the place we go / Seeking, not in hope to / Arrive or find." The difficulty of praying to a seemingly uncommunicative God had long been a minor theme in Thomas's work. As early as *Song at the Year's Turning* (1955), he was producing lines like these from "In a Country Church" (Selected Poems 43):

> To one kneeling down no word came,
> Only the wind's song, saddening the lips
> Of the grave saints, rigid in glass;
> Or the dry whisper of unseen wings,
> Bats not angels, in the high roof.

The desire for supernatural intelligence struggles here against the sheer physicality of nature: the wind is simply wind, and the bats are simply bats, and God withholds His word from the supplicant. The poem presents the physical image, but not the spiritual substance of prayer. The location, like his rural scenes, is quite specifically Wales. The poems in *Pietà*, however, move beyond the physical limitations of a poem like "In a Country Church." The title poem, "Pietà," announces this movement through its ambiguity of place:

> Always the same hills
> Crowd the horizon,
> Remote witnesses
> Of the still scene.
> And in the foreground
> The tall Cross,
> Sombre, untenanted,
> Aches for the Body
> That is back in the cradle
> Of a maid's arms. (*Selected Poems* 85)

A.E. Dyson, comparing this poem to "Western Wind" and "The Sick Rose," calls it "one of those rare short poems that keeps most of its secret"(6). Part of that secret, at least, has to do with the ambiguity of its setting. The first stanza of the poem could easily pass for a typical Thomas image of Wales. Only in the second stanza does the poet reveal that his setting is Palestine, and even here he is ambiguous. Is he imagining the historical scene itself, its representation in a work of art, or a contemporary scene, the modern world, as it were, aching for its past? On closer inspection, the only image verifiably present in the poem is the "untenanted" Cross. Thus our sense of the poem, like our consciousness of the religious experience it suggests, shuttles among these possibilities. Like the surrounding hills, we remain "remote witnesses" of the event, guessing or intuiting its significance. The "witness" of this poem, however, is interestingly different from the "witness" of the earlier poems about Wales. Its place is the consciousness of the poet. Unlike the image of prayer in "In a Country Church," the image

in "Pietà" is freed from its sheer and silent physicality and resonates *symbolically* in the realm of religious imagination. Another poem in the same volume, entitled "Kierkegaard," speaks of how "the acres / Of [his] imagination grew / Unhindered" (Selected Poems 86), suggesting what Thomas intends now for himself. In place of the acres of Wales that furnished the settings of his early poems, the later poems of Thomas increasingly cultivate the acres of his imagination. This is perhaps what R. George Thomas had in mind when he argued that in Thomas's later poems "the meditative ideas dominate over the visual images"(61).

It is certainly in the imagination that Thomas searches for the God whose "most consistent feature," as Vimala Herman puts it, "is his absence"(713). The modern world, it becomes increasingly apparent, is not hospitable to God or spiritual salvation. "St Julian and the Leper" considers a kind of sacrifice no longer possible or even desirable in our society:

> Though all ran from him, he did not
> Run, but awaited
> Him with his arms
> Out, his ears stopped
> To his bell, his alarmed
> Crying. He lay down
> With him there, sharing his sores'
> Stench, the quarantine
> Of his soul; contaminating
> Himself with a kiss,
> With the love that
> Our science has disinfected. (*Selected Poems* 99)

This poem from *Not That He Brought Flowers* (1968), reveals a number of interesting departures from Thomas's earlier practices. For one thing, Thomas's verse form is more experimental than before, making use of severely enjambed free verse lines reminiscent of William Carlos Williams, which refuse to come to rest. Thomas also allows a deliberate confusion of pronouns to reign, suggesting Julian's selfless identification with the leper. What is also new is the explicit ironic attack on the modern world. For traditional Christianity, the essence of Julian's sainthood is his "contaminating / Himself with a kiss," an image of Christian love. This love, however, has been "disinfected" by modern science. The efforts of modern humanitarianism remove ironically the central virtue of our humanity, our ability and desire to share the sufferings of our fellows. In the disinfected

world of the machine, sacrifice may no longer be necessary, but at the same time its spiritual benefits are no longer available.

In an aggressively secular world, the efficacy of prayer to an absent God may be questioned. *Not That He Brought Flowers* contains for the first time foreign landscapes, but these are as desolate as the landscapes of Wales. "Coto Donana," "Burgos," and "No, Señor" offer a kind of counter-Wales that is, if anything, more disturbing for being foreign:

> We saw the asses
> Hobbling upon the road
> To the village, no Don Quixote
> Upon their backs, but all the burden
> Of a poor land, the weeds and grasses
> Of the mesa. ("No, Señor," *Selected Poems* 109)

The awareness of an outside world does not so much liberate Thomas from his typical concerns as intensify the burden of his prayers. In "After the Lecture" (Selected Poems 103), Thomas asks: "From one not to be penned / In a concept, and differing in kind / From the human ... what can my prayers win / For the kindred, souls brought to the bone / To be tortured?" Thomas is not a mystic. His prayers, as Julian Gitzen argues, "are not intended as monologues," but look for the divinity to "assume some tangible form"(2-3). God, however, is almost always silent. The poem, "Kneeling," is typical in this respect:

> Moments of great calm,
> Kneeling before the altar
> Of wood in a stone church
> In summer, waiting for the God
> To speak; the air a staircase
> For silence; the sun's light
> Ringing me, as though I acted
> A great rôle. And the audiences
> Still; all that close throng
> Of spirits waiting, as I,
> For the message.
> Prompt me, God;
> But not yet. When I speak,
> Though it be you who speak
> Through me, something is lost.

> The meaning is in the waiting. (*Selected Poems* 107)

This poem makes an interesting comparison with "In a Country Church." As in the earlier poem, the prayer is met with silence, but there is something more positive here than the poet's desire jarring against the inanimate objects of wood and stone that surround him. The prayer becomes a kind of performance animating, if only into "waiting," the audience of spirits. The action of the prayer is thus recognized to be separate from its meaning, which is said to reside "in the waiting." The books of the early 'seventies,
H'M and *Laboratories of the Spirit*, develop the more mature themes announced in *Not That He Brought Flowers.* In "Petition" (*Later Poems* 12), Thomas confesses his helplessness as an observer of life's pain: "Seeking the poem / In the pain, I have learned / Silence is best, paying for it / With my conscience. I am eyes / Merely, witnessing virtue's / Defeat." God will not grant even an aesthetic satisfaction:

> One thing I have asked
> Of the disposer of the issues
> Of life: that truth should defer
> To beauty. It was not granted.

"Echoes" is a parable of God and pre-animate nature in confrontation. "What is this? said God. The obstinacy / Of its refusal to answer / Enraged him. He struck it / Those great blows it resounds / With still" (*Later Poems* 14). This sort of parable or fable becomes quite common in Thomas's work at this period. Julian Gitzen notes that

> the fables serve as a forceful reminder that Thomas's God functions primarily as a creator....While the miniature mythical fable differs strikingly in character from Thomas's early pieces of regional realism, it serves his current needs by permitting him to escape constraints of time and space, the better to conceptualize his supernatural subject. (5)

Gitzen is right in so far as Thomas is concerned to carve out a spiritual *place*, acres of the imagination which may be counterpoised against the sullen acres of the material world and where God may be felt as a positive force.

Indeed, the material world and its concomitant, the machine, are seen by Thomas as the chief life-destroying forces. "The Hearth" compares the "eternity" in a small room where "our love / Widens" with what is outside: "time and the

victims / Of time, travellers / To a new Bethlehem, statesmen / And scientists with their hands full / Of the gifts that destroy" (*Later Poems* 24). The exact nature of the "machine" Thomas inveighs against is somewhat vague. It may be associated with nuclear weapons, as in "Digest," where politicians plan the next war "exempted / From compact by the machine's / Exigencies" (*Later Poems* 19), or it may suggest simply the hum of tractors. In general, the machine appears as an overarching metaphor for the modern industrial world, as in E.M. Forster's "The Machine Stops." "Digest" closes with a grim futuristic prediction:

> The labour of the years
> Was over; the children were heirs
> To an instant existence. They fed the machine
> Their questions, knowing the answers
> Already, unable to apply them.

In "No Answer" (*Later Poems* 17), Thomas notes: "Over the creeds / And masterpieces our wheels go." Industrialism, of course, provides an invidious and rival creed, that of materialism. "Cain" is a parable of the materialistic way. The first murderer challenges God with the evidence of his easy materialistic faith: "I offered you / Clean things: the blond hair / Of the corn; the knuckled vegetables; the / Flowers" (*Later Poems* 22), but he does not understand God's more mystical relations with man, his need for the lamb "torn / From my own side." And thus Cain, in Thomas's reading, prepares the "doomed tree" of Christ's sacrifice.

"Invitation" may be read as Thomas's "Everlasting Nay" to the enticements of the material world. In it the speaker is tempted by two voices, one of which invites him to "Come / Back to the rain and manure / Of Siloh, to the small talk, / Of the wind, and the chapel's / Temptation" (*Later Poems* 15). All this seems pleasant enough in its way, though it suggests a world of material comfort and discomfort, the "temptation" of the chapel and "the pale, / Sickly half-smile of / The daughter of the village / Grocer." In a sense, it suggests the world of Thomas's early poems, stern and spiritually exhausted. The other voice offers the temptation of the modern world, "the streets, where the pound / Sings and the doors open / To its music, with life / Like an express train running / To time." This world is certainly not exhausted, but the evil of materialism provides its energy, and it is even more dangerous. The speaker's solution is to refuse either way, to "stay / Here, listening to them, blowing / On the small soul in my / Keeping with such breath as I have." The solution Thomas proposes is personal, and it involves him in a new exploration of interior space. As "The Kingdom" suggests, the laws of the material world do not apply when spiritual salvation is at issue:

It's a long way off, but to get
There takes no time and admission
Is free, if you will purge yourself
Of desire, and present yourself with
Your need only and the simple offering
Of your faith, green as a leaf. (*Later Poems* 35)

Thomas undercuts the claims of the material world by using its language, the language of advertising and the amusement park, ironically to describe the kingdom of heaven. It takes no time to get there, of course, because it is not in space and time; the journey is made through a self conceived in spiritual terms, "need only" and simple faith. In *Frequencies*
(1978), Thomas explores this theme in a number of powerful poems. "Groping" *Later Poems* 99) is an important statement of the need to find a spiritual place in the interior of the self:

Moving away is only to the boundaries
of the self. Better to stay here,
I said, leaving the horizons
clear. The best journey to make
is inward. It is the interior
that calls.

Like Eliot and Wordsworth, Thomas proposes to make a journey to the interior, and as in Kierkegaard, this journey involves a leap into the darkness.

But there are hands
there I can take, voices to hear
solider than the echoes
without. And sometimes a strange light
shines, purer than the moon,
casting no shadow, that is
the halo upon the bones
of the pioneers who died for truth.

This is Thomas in his most mystical mood, seeking like Wendell Berry a communal handshake in the dark. For Thomas, however, the darkness lies not in the furrowed earth but in the self. It is here, if anywhere, that God will speak to him. In "Shadows" *Later Poems* 107), he writes: "I close my eyes. / The darkness implies your presence, / the shadow of your steep mind / on my world. I shiver

in it." The interior blinds him not with light (the rational response that earlier prayers seemed to look for), but with "the splendour / of [God's] darkness." Indeed, "Shadows" is a culmination of the series of prayer poems. As in so many of them, Thomas listens and hears "the language / of silence, the sentence / without an end." But here the silence is presented as paradoxical rather than frustrating, a consequence of God's more perfect but humanly incomprehensible medium:

> Is it I, then,
> who am being addressed? A God's words
> are for their own sake; we hear
> at our peril. Many of us have gone
> mad in the mastering
> of your medium.

God does not betray us; we are betrayed by our own inability to comprehend Him, reflected in the frailties of our language. Indeed,
human language, imperfect and corrupted, is increasingly seen by Thomas as the source of our religious disappointment. In "Directions" (*Later Poems* 131), he speaks of the "desert of language / we find ourselves in," while in "Code" (*Later Poems* 144), he calls it a "duplicity / of language, that could name / what was not there." "Minor" (*Later Poems* 149) argues that the language of the atheist Nietzsche has been discredited by history, while "ours / more quietly rusts / in autumnal libraries / of the spirit." "Waiting" (*Later Poems* 111) questions the traditional language used to discuss and address God:

> Face to face? Ah, no
> God; such language falsifies
> the relation. Nor side by side,
> nor near you, nor anywhere
> in time and space.
> * * *
> Young
> I pronounced you. Older
> I still do, but seldomer
> now, leaning far out
> over an immense depth, letting
> your name go and waiting,
> somewhere between faith and doubt,
> for echoes of its arrival.

The physical act of pronouncing God's name in human language will no longer do by itself. Thomas sounds for God in the "immense depth" of spiritual imagination, which is our only way of probing the boundaries of time and space. What one hopes for cannot be an answer in language, but an echo suggesting by its return from the boundaries of human imagination that a further dispensation has been reached.

Thomas views this exploration of interior space as an heroic act of travel before returning home, perhaps with something "to show / you have been there: a lock of God's / hair, stolen from him while he was / asleep; a photograph of the garden / of the spirit" ("Somewhere", *Later Poems* 73). Thomas's career can be seen as a series of such explorations, probing first the physical world and later the world of the interior, the acres of Wales and, equally stony, the acres of the imagination. The point of traveling, however, "is not / to arrive, but to return home / laden with pollen you shall work up / into honey the mind feeds on." One seeks "the proof / of experiences it would be worth dying for," and like Herakles one must wear "a shirt of fire" that can be "hung up now / like some rare fleece in the hall of heroes." For Thomas, such journeying now seems the essence of our lives, those "harbours / we are continually setting out / from" in search of "the one light that can cast such shadows."

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Chapter 14

R.S. Thomas and the Problem of Welsh Identity

One aspect of R.S. Thomas's work which is perhaps most difficult for Americans to fathom is his relation to Welsh nationalism.[1] This rather arcane issue is complicated even further by the fact that Thomas is an Anglo-Welsh poet, indeed the guiding spirit of what is known as the Anglo-Welsh movement. Tony Bianchi has called Thomas "the dominant voice in the attempt by Anglo-Welsh writers to define an audience" (84). Throughout his career, Thomas has been faced with the difficult choice of writing poetry in what he considers a foreign language, or committing creative suicide. Having been born in "the capital of a fake nation" (*The Echoes Return Slow* 4), that is, Cardiff in English speaking southern Wales, Thomas did not learn Welsh until he was thirty, too late for it to be of use for poetry (*Selected Prose* 182). The resultant tensions in his work are sometimes overlooked by English critics, who would rather welcome Thomas as a distinguished "colonial" contributor to their own literature, and who thus concentrate for the most part on his celebrated movement in later years toward more inward, spiritual, and therefore more international themes. And yet even Thomas's later religious poetry should be understood in the context of his distinctly national concerns, as indeed many of the pieces in his *Selected Prose*, as well as passages in his most recent work, *The Echoes Return Slow*, make clear.

In order to facilitate our understanding of this problem, it will be helpful to consider first two passages by T.S. Eliot and James Joyce, which are quite well

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known in America. The first is Eliot's famous discussion in *Notes towards the Definition of Culture* of the role of what he termed "satellite cultures." Eliot defines a satellite culture as "one which, for geographical and other reasons, has a permanent relation to a stronger one" (128). Satellite cultures of England are to be found, according to Eliot, in Ireland, Scotland, and Wales. In a mediating if somewhat patronizing way, Eliot argues against the "complete absorption" of these cultures into the dominant culture. First of all, as Eliot notes:

> it is the instinct of every living thing to persist in its own being. The resentment against absorption is sometimes most strongly felt, and most loudly voiced, by those individuals in whom it is united with an unacknowledged awareness of inferiority or failure; and on the other hand it is often repudiated by those individuals for whom adoption into the stronger culture has meant success....But when the testimony of both these types of individual has been discounted, we may say that any vigorous small people wants to preserve its individuality. (128)

Eliot's second argument against absorption is quite disingenuous. Since the satellite culture influences the stronger culture, it "plays a larger part in the world at large than it could in isolation. For Ireland, Scotland and Wales to cut themselves off completely from England would be to cut themselves off from Europe and the world" (129). Furthermore, "it would be no gain whatever for English culture, for the Welsh, Scots and Irish to become indistinguishable from Englishmen....it is of great advantage for English culture to be constantly influenced from Scotland, Ireland and Wales" (129). It is all very neat: by offering what Thomas has called a "blood transfusion" to "the ageing body of English literature" *Selected Prose* 52), the Welsh may help themselves by helping the English. (Indeed, Thomas would point out that the Welsh have offered a different sort of "blood transfusion" to England in two world wars.) On the other hand, the demeaning sense of second-class status, of being part of Europe, for instance, only through the medium of England, persists. Interestingly, Thomas recently expressed enthusiasm for the coming creation of a more unified European Economic Community, under which, he hopes, Wales will achieve a greater degree of autonomy (Personal Interview). Thomas looks upon Eliot's arguments, the well-meaning intervention of an outsider turned "classicist in literature, royalist in politics, and anglo-catholic in religion," as a rather sly defense of the status quo in Britain that has continually deprived the Welsh of their heritage. Thomas looks on Anglo-Welsh literature not as a means of magnifying Welsh influence through English culture, nor as a charitable contribution to English culture, but "as a means of rekindling interest

in the Welsh-language culture, and of leading people back to the mother-tongue" (*Selected Prose* 53). This hope that the Anglo-Welsh movement might "simply be a phase in the re-cymrification of Wales" (*Selected Prose* 33) has been an important part of Thomas's thinking all through his career. To this day he maintains that Anglo-Welsh poets are writing in a foreign language.

We may appreciate how sharply this sense of being under the sway of a foreign language is felt by Welshmen like Thomas when we consider the famous scene in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* where Stephen Dedalus and the Jesuit dean argue about the lamp:

> —To return to the lamp, [the dean] said, the feeding of it is also a nice problem. You must choose the pure oil and you must be careful when you pour it in not to overflow it, not to pour in more than the funnel can hold.
>
> —What funnel? asked Stephen.
>
> —The funnel through which you pour the oil into your lamp.
>
> —That? said Stephen. Is that called a funnel? Is it not a tundish?
>
> —What is a tundish?
>
> —That. The ... the funnel.
>
> —Is it called a tundish in Ireland? asked the dean. I never heard the word in my life.
>
> —It is called a tundish in Lower Drumcondra, said Stephen laughing, where they speak the best English.
>
> —A tundish, said the dean reflectively. That is a most interesting word. I must look it up. Upon my word I must.
>
> His courtesy of manner rang a little false, and Stephen looked at the English convert with the same eyes as the elder brother in the parable may have turned on the prodigal. (188-89)

The amused condescension of the dean about this "little word"[2] stirs up one of Stephen's many epiphanies. Reflecting that the man to whom he was speaking was "a countryman of Ben Jonson," he goes on to consider:

[2]Ironically, the *Century Dictionary* and *OED* entries for "tundish" (or "tun-dish") both indicate that the word has a long and honorable tradition in English, and was used by no less a countryman of Ben Jonson than Shakespeare himself

> —The language in which we are speaking is his before it is mine. How different are the words *home, Christ, ale, master,* on his lips and on mine! I cannot speak or write these words without unrest of spirit. His language, so familiar and so foreign, will always be for me an acquired speech. I have not made or accepted its words. My voice holds them at bay. My soul frets in the shadow of his language. (189)

Stephen Dedalus, as Joyce conceives him, is hardly a Gaelic speaking peasant, but as the representative of a "satellite culture," he feels nonetheless that English can only be for him "an acquired speech," and he chafes inwardly under its sway. I would suggest that a quite similar chafing underlies all of R.S.Thomas's work, and that for him the necessity of writing poetry in English is not so much an opportunity to enjoy the stage of Europe as a tragic fate. "Let nobody imagine," he has written, "that because there is so much English everywhere in Wales it is not a foreign language" (*Selected Prose* 181).

Thomas is quite clear about this in an article published in 1978 entitled "The Creative Writer's Suicide." In it he struggles to elucidate the difficult choices facing all writers in Wales and particularly the Anglo-Welsh:

> This devilish bilingualism! O, I know about all the arguments in favor of it: how it enriches one's personality, how it sharpens one's mind, how it enables one to enjoy the best of two worlds and so on. Very likely. But to anyone in Wales who desires to write, it is a millstone around his neck. (*Selected Prose* 179)

The Anglo-Welsh writer, according to Thomas, faces the choice of writing in English or "committing suicide as a true writer" (*Selected Prose* 180). The problems of the Anglo-Welsh writer are different from those of the writer of Welsh, whose main concern must be to save the culture of his nation from extinction, even at the cost of denying himself the possibility of writing at his best. Thomas believes that the Anglo-Welsh writer has it worse, for he "is neither one thing nor the other. He keeps going in a no-man's land between the two cultures" (*Selected Prose* 180). Obliged for various reasons to write in English, he cannot help "contributing to English culture, and deserves the strictures of his fellow-Welshmen on that account. If he endeavours to make his work more Welsh, he either gains the hostility of his English readers or loses their interest" (*Selected Prose* 180). Even when the Anglo-Welsh writer learns Welsh (and Thomas believes that a "true Welshman" will endeavor to do so), it is unlikely that he will know Welsh well enough to write poetry in the language. Indeed, this is the situation with Thomas himself:

he "is constantly conscious of the fact that he speaks a foreign language" (*Selected Prose* 180), but equally aware of insuperable barriers between himself and what should be his mother tongue. Thomas's solution has been to write poetry in English and sermons and other prose pieces in Welsh, and indeed it may be seen that these latter are notably more nationalistic in tone than the poems. Yet such an easy distinction between the two sides of Thomas's work is neither comfortable nor profitable.

It is a critical commonplace to note a sharp division between Thomas's earlier and later poetry, beginning with *H'M* (1972) and *Laboratories of the Spirit* (1974). The earlier and more frequently anthologized poems deal very prominently with the peasants of the Welsh hill country and naturalistic scenes of village life in Wales. These stern portraits tend to be so brutally honest that one is tempted to ignore Thomas's own statement that in these poems he "wanted to propagandize, on behalf of the small farmer in his fields" (Lethbridge 42). The chief virtue Thomas seems to give these peasants (and even this is not unmixed) is a radical innocence in the face of their corrupters, the English industrialists and tourists who are slowly changing and taking away the peasants' way of life. Typical is the character known as Iago Prytherch, who cannot understand the English of the tourists gazing at him in his field and who confesses to being "alone, exposed / In my own fields with no place to run / From your sharp eyes" ("Invasion of the Farm," *Selected Poems* 37). The nationalist motive behind poems like these seems obvious enough, and it is interestingly with these early poems that Thomas is still largely represented in Anglo-Welsh anthologies (See Bianchi 85). English critics, on the other hand, have made much of Thomas's movement in his later poetry toward more inward, spiritual themes. Many of these poems center on the search for a God whose "most consistent feature," as Vimala Herman notes, "is his absence" (713). The scenes are no longer obviously those of Wales, but seem to suggest an inward landscape. Even those poems that inveigh against "the machine" and the intrusions of modern science use these images in a more general way. R. George Thomas is certainly right when he argues that in Thomas's later poetry "the meditative ideas dominate over the visual images" (61). When language is at issue in these poems, it is not obviously the problem of the Welsh and English languages (as to some extent it is even in a poem like "Invasion of the Farm"), but the problem of the inadequacy of human language for addressing or communicating with God, as in "Waiting":

> Face to face? Ah, no
> God; such language falsifies

> the relation. Nor side by side,
> nor near you, nor anywhere
> in time and space. (*Later Poems* 111)

Indeed, one of Thomas's chief concerns in his later poems has been what he calls "the duplicity / of language, that could name / what was not there" ("Code," *Later Poems* 144), and yet remains our most intimate means and hope of sounding for God. But God, whose "chosen medium / of communication" *Later Poems* 145) is silence, stands above the fray of languages, in which the poet cannot help but be embroiled. Thomas's solution is not to deny his human perspective and answer silence with silence, but to advance "with all his vocabulary / intact to his final / overthrow by an untruth" ("The Vow," *Later Poems* 188). We should keep in mind that for Thomas "*all* his vocabulary" involves both Welsh and English, as well as the silence which seems to be God's own language. Indeed, there may be an interesting analogy between Thomas's frustrations with earthly languages and his frustration in trying to interpret the silent language of God.

What I mean to suggest is that there is some danger in accepting a facile separation of Thomas's Welsh or "regional" pieces and his later "spiritual" poetry. In an interesting prose meditation entitled "Two Chapels" (1948), Thomas distinguishes an Anglicized Welsh chapel, Maes-yr-Onnen, from a more native Welsh chapel, Soar-y-Mynydd. The first he terms "the Chapel of the Spirit" and the second "the Chapel of the Soul." Visiting the first chapel, he has "a glimpse of the spirit of man," while in the second he sees "the soul of a special type of man, the Cymro or Welshman" (*Selected Prose* 46). Given a choice between the two, Thomas notes that he would prefer Soar-y-Mynydd on the grounds that "a nation that is fighting for its survival cannot afford to change its soul for some obscure spirituality no matter how excellent that may be from the individual's point of view" (*Selected Prose* 47). Indeed, though he is "ready to admit the value of the spirit," he warns that the spiritual is often held up "as something opposed to ideas of nationalism" (*Selected Prose* 47). The spiritual finds its special place in the towns, and "especially the towns in England," which according to Thomas "are not characteristic of Wales; they are evidence of foreign influence, and the sooner they disappear the better" (*Selected Prose* 47). "Two Chapels," of course, is an early piece, but its motives and tone are consistent with Thomas's most recent efforts in prose. How then are we to account for his shift toward more spiritual poetry?

It is misleading to believe that Thomas has become less national as he has explored more spiritual themes. Rather, he seems to have become more comfortable

with his own Welshness, and thus has felt freer to explore other areas in his poetry. As he once told Dylan Iorwerth in an interview for Radio Cymru:

> When I started writing, Anglo-Welsh literature had come into existence, and I think every writer belonging to that school felt a certain necessity to tell the world "I am a Welshman"... By the time I reached Llŷn [his last ministry in Welsh speaking Aberdaron] I felt I had come home, I had achieved my aim—I changed my subject matter but became more of a Welshman, a straightforward Welshman, speaking Welsh every day, and therefore I was ready to act like a Welshman, so there was no need for me to write like a Welshman. (Quoted by Ned Thomas 16)

This passage touches on the central insecurity of Thomas as an Anglo-Welsh writer, the struggle to establish a truly Welsh identity while using as his primary vehicle what he considers a foreign language. As we have seen in "The Creative Writer's Suicide," this insecurity has continued to trouble Thomas even in the period of spiritual poetry. An interesting passage in the autobiographical piece from 1972, "The Paths Gone By," gives us some idea of its intensity.

In the early 1940's, Thomas took over the parish of Manafon, a town near the English border where "most people spoke with a Shropshire accent using a strange admixture of Welsh idioms" (*Selected Prose* 139). Thomas speaks of himself at the time as "a proper little bourgeois, brought up delicately, with the mark of the church and the library on me" (*Selected Prose* 138). In the hill country around Manafon, however, he began to experience the ways of the Welsh hill farmers who would provide so many of his early subjects and to become versed, as it were, in country things. Although Manafon itself was basically English speaking, there were still those in the hill who could speak Welsh, and Thomas himself began to study Welsh with a neighboring minister. His first effort to express himself publicly in Welsh was an address at the Welsh-speaking minister's chapel:

> I remember the evening: the chapel with its oil lamps, the wind blowing outside, and about twenty local farmers and their wives, come to listen to this freak—an Englishman who had learnt Welsh. Then off I went for about three quarters of an hour, like a ship being blown this way and that by the wind. Somehow or other I reached dry land, and after some discussion everyone went home. (*Selected Prose* 143)

Thomas's self-deprecating reference to himself as a "freak—an Englishman who had learnt Welsh" conveys his uneasy sense of being an outsider in his own cul-

ture. (Indeed, this sense of himself as an outsider informs much of the early poetry.) The "foreign" language here is the language he feels should be his mother tongue. Thomas's effort since then has been to remake himself into a real Welshman; that is, one in full possession of his native culture. Interestingly, his career as a minister suggests a gradual movement from English speaking parishes like Manafon to Welsh speaking Aberdaron near the tip of the remote Llŷn peninsula, and with it the increasing mastery of the Welsh language that freed him from the need to announce his Welshness through the subject matter of his poetry.

But even this dichotomous map of Thomas's career is no longer as simple as it once seemed. A writer like Thomas is always difficult to pin down with a neat formula. As I suggested above, Thomas's concern with the frailties of human language as a vehicle of discourse with God may well have its origin in his own ambiguous position as an Anglo-Welsh writer in the no-man's land between Welsh and English. What is clearly announced in the prose of the period finds its way indirectly into poems whose ostensible theme is purely religious. In his most recent volumes, *Experimenting With An Amen* (1986) and *The Echoes Return Slow* (1988), a new element may be detected. Thomas seems to be turning now to more explicitly autobiographical subject matter, the sort of thing he once reserved for prose. The Welshness is thus again making itself felt in his work alongside the spirituality. *The Echoes Return Slow* is almost wholly given over to autobiographical meditation, with alternating prose and verse poems that challenge and answer each other on facing pages. One of the more beautiful of these poems considers Thomas's efforts to realize in the fullness of its particulars the soul of the country he once gazed at in wonder from the windows of an English train:

> What had been blue shadows on a longed-for horizon, traced on an inherited background, were shown in time to contain this valley, this village and a church built with stones from the river, where the rectory stood, plangent as a mahogany piano. The stream was a bright tuning-fork in the moonlight. The hay-fields ran with a dark current. (*Echoes* 24)

The last sentence, however, closes the poem on a troubling note that we might consider characteristic of the Anglo-Welsh self-doubter: "The young man was sent unprepared to expose his ignorance of life in a leafless pulpit" (*Echoes* 24). For Thomas, this is not simply a confession of his "callow youth"; ignorance of life, in this instance, comprehends particularly ignorance of Welsh life, its customs, its language, and what one might call its fate. To a large degree, Thomas's

real calling has been to recover this fate and to position himself in Wales. Only then could he begin to position himself before God.

"Sarn Rhiw" is a beautiful little poem about the medieval cottage overlooking Cardigan Bay in Rhiw, near Aberdaron, where Thomas has lived since his retirement:

> So we know
> she must have said something
> to him—What language,
> life? Oh, what language?
>
> Thousands of years later
> I inhabit a house
> whose stone is the language
> of its builders. Here
>
> by the sea they said little.
> But their message to the future
> was: Build well. In the fire
> of an evening I catch faces
>
> staring at me. In April,
> when light quickens and clouds
> thin, boneless presences
> flit through my room.
>
> Will they inherit me
> one day? What certainties
> have I to hand on
> like the punctuality
>
> with which at the moon's
> rising, the bay breaks
> into a smile as though meaning
> were not the difficulty at all? (*Experimenting* 26)

Early in his career, Thomas wrote that "You cannot live in the present, / At least not in Wales" ("Welsh Landscape," *Selected Poems* 16). "Sarn Rhiw," in its subtler way, treats this same notion, taking it a step further. Here Thomas senses not

only the intersection of past and present, of daily life and history, but the intersection of human time and divine timelessness, the interplay of human endeavor and divine will. Once again, the concern is language in its various forms: the pre-human language of the earth and the creating God, as well as the "language" of the builders, those stones through which they address the future. These are the difficult, *acquired* languages with which Thomas, the sentient, transitory being of the present, must contend in contemplating his surroundings. As in "Welsh Landscape," Thomas is haunted by the presence of the past, the faces staring at him from the fire, the "boneless presences" waiting to "inherit" him. Indeed, the poem is not glibly comforting. The generations are bound together in a chain of inheritance, but Thomas wonders if his will not prove the weak link. Underlying all this is the idea that no man can (or should) escape the web of his culture. And for Thomas, such a culture is at once universal, involved with the deity, and particular, rooted in one human place. The cottage in Rhiw, the place Thomas has marked out as the end of his quest for Wales and Welsh identity, unites the spiritual with the local, the timeless with the timeful, and manifold identity with the personality of one man.

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Chapter 15

Hurt into Poetry: The Political Verses of Seamus Heaney and Robert Bly

One of the stubborn issues in modern poetry is the question of its proper, or most effective, political role.[1] Since the time of the romantics, poets have tended by nature and habit toward inwardness, but certain exigent occasions, wars and revolutions, have continually "hurt" them into public utterance. Still there is always an uneasiness attending these public occasions, a sense that the true business of the poet lies elsewhere. Modern poets have only rarely played an active part in the public events surrounding them, and they have been likely to waver between Shelley's injunction to act as "unofficial legislators" and Yeats's more sobering advice: "I think it better that in times like these / A poet's mouth be silent, for in truth / We have no gift to set a statesman right."

The poets who followed the New Critical approach, at least, were unambiguous when it came to adjudicating the rival claims of poetry and propaganda on a poet's loyalty: passionate commitment meant nothing less or more than passionate commitment to one's art. Political poems were to be judged, not by the effectiveness of their discourse, but by their success as linguistic objects. The tense but relatively quiescent decade of the 'fifties helped to foster such an ideal. An era of outward calm produced a poetry of personal concerns, which could be considered political only by implication. The "well wrought" poem's external, formal

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balance held in check its inward ironies, its seething and often paradoxical emotions. It is not surprising that modern Marxist critics like Terry Eagleton consider the New Critical approach "a recipe for political inertia, and thus for submission to the political status quo".[2] This seeming calm, of course, was shattered in the 'sixties, when once again social violence and the violence of war stimulated the "unofficial legislator" in many a poet, while at the same time blasting the formal strictures of the New Critics in favor of what came to be known as open form. It is worth noting that political poetry in recent times, as the pun in my title may suggest, is almost certain to be adversarial rather than celebratory, a poetry of protest against one "political status quo" or another.

The poets I shall be concerned with here, Robert Bly and Seamus Heaney, embody very different approaches to the problem of a poet's social and political responsibility. Both began their careers writing personal, even pastoral lyrics, but turned because of what they perceived as political necessity—in Bly's case the Vietnam War, in Heaney's case the "troubles" in Northern Ireland—to poetry of overtly political significance. Both have remained devoted in their own ways to the craft of poetry. Their difference stems from the traditions to which they have allied themselves and the balances they have struck between the rival claims of dissertation and of craft.

More than most American poets this side of Ezra Pound, Bly has excited extremes of critical appreciation. He has been called, on the one hand, "a windbag, a sentimentalist, a slob in the language," dangerously imitable "by fledgling poets".[3] Another view considers him a sort of poetic guru, comparable in his way with Blake, Whitman, and Lawrence, and concerned "to domesticate the sublime".[4] What both of these appraisals remark from their different perspectives is Bly's persistent and rather calculated pursuit of a public and controversial role.

Bly's early poetry seems, if anything, rather too scrupulously personal. The lyrics in his first published volume, *Silence in the Snowy Fields* (1962), assiduously cultivate what came to be known as "deep images," autonomous moments of perception joined together not rationally but through the surreal syntax of the unconscious mind. The speaker is alone in nature, open to its invitations for communion, and perfectly free, therefore, to tamper with its constituents:

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[2]Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1983) 50.

[3]Eliot Weinberger, "Gloves on a Mouse," *The Nation* 229.16 (November 17, 1979): 503.

[4]Charles Molesworth, *The Fierce Embrace: A Study of Contemporary American Poetry* (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 1979) 138.

The small world of the car
Plunges through the deep fields of the night,
On the road from Willmar to Milan.
This solitude covered with iron
Moves through the fields of night
Penetrated by the noise of crickets.
("Driving Toward the Lac Qui Parle River,")[5]

Bly's technique here is to seek the kind of excited and heightened awareness that the Russian Formalists and the Spanish surrealist poets sought in dislocated or estranged language. Aside from the fairly quotidian reference to "the road from Willmar to Milan," all the images subtly deviate from common usage. The inside of the car is a "small world," a "solitude covered with iron," which "plunges" rather than simply driving through "deep fields of the night." "The noise of crickets," surely something commonplace in itself, "penetrates" the speaker's solitude as if it were a sharp instrument. The word may even bear subtly phallic associations. The effort is to give ordinary, personal experience a mystical intensity by estranging the language used to describe it. The danger of such a technique is that the language, which has, after all, ordinary allegiances that antedate the poet's use of it, may resist his effort to make it do transformative work. The heightened experience may seem merely bizarre, a kind of solipsistic phantasy.

"Surprised by Evening," another fairly typical early poem, illustrates both the strengths and weaknesses of this approach. Although the poem makes use of the plural personal pronoun, it is clearly the speaker's solitary consciousness manipulating the imagery. "We," in this instance, suggests not so much that the speaker has taken a social or political stance, as a purely linguistic attempt to impose a kind of universality on what is very much a private experience:

There is unknown dust that is near us,
Waves breaking on shores just over the hill,
Trees full of birds that we have never seen,
Nets drawn down with dark fish.

The evening arrives; we look up and it is there.
It has come through the nets of the stars,
Through the tissues of the grass,
Walking quietly over the asylums of the water.

[5]Robert Bly, *Selected Poems* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986) 45.

> The day shall never end, we think;
> We have hair that seems born for the daylight.
> But, at last, the quiet waters of the night will rise,
> And our skin shall see far off, as it does under water.
> (*Selected Poems* 41)

Once again, the method here is to produce a sense of mystery before nature by deviating significantly from the expectations of common usage, though Bly tries to ballast these deviations with some fairly ordinary sentences ("The evening arrives;" "The day shall never end, we think"). Grass is not usually described as being composed of "tissues," hair is not usually "born," nor does skin "see" in the usual sense of that word. And while the evening arrives fairly normally, Bly quickly personifies it as "walking...over asylums of water," rather in the miraculous manner of Jesus. One can see why Eliot Weinberger, perhaps disingenuously, is moved to characterize Bly's poetry as "a festival of pathetic fallacy"(504). Indeed, for Bly estranging language seems sometimes to constitute the essence of poetry itself. Insofar as such language does heighten our awareness, however, it is a valid technique, though perhaps not enough in itself to create a major poetry. One can well imagine the nets of dark fish, or the microscopic "tissues of the grass;" these images are disturbing in a strange, rather unspecific way. Perhaps the best approach to a poem like this is through free association, which, as George Steiner notes, "is a device exactly calculated to pierce the membrane between inner and outer speech, to deflect into the diagnostic light and echo-chamber the unpremeditated rush and shadows of self-colloquy."[6] The problem is the extent to which Bly's images allow themselves to be deflected "into the diagnostic light" as publicly available referents, even as purely linguistic constructs, or simply reverberate in the hermetic isolation of the poet's consciousness.

Bly himself is aware of the problem of isolation in such personal poetry, and admits as much in a comment on the *Snowy Fields* poems: "I don't feel much human relationship in these poems, and the hundred thousand objects of twentieth-century life are absent also" (*Selected Poems* 27). He claims that his purpose was "to gain a resonance among the sounds," as well as "between the soul and a loved countryside" (*Selected Poems* 27). This vein being worked, his solution was to follow Neruda toward the "impure" poetry of politics. The Vietnam War, of course, provided his occasion, though he notes that even before the war, he had begun writing a series of poems about business figures, poems "of judgment rather than

[6]George Steiner, *On Difficulty and Other Essays* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978) 79.

of affinity" (*Selected Poems* 62). It was the "psychic urgency" of the war, however, that impelled him to write a full-voiced poetry of protest. In an essay on political poetry, Bly speaks of the need of a poet, once he has fully grasped his own concerns, to leap up to the "psyche" of the nation: "the life of the nation can be imagined...as a psyche larger than the psyche of anyone living, a larger sphere, floating above everyone. In order for the poet to write a true political poem, he has to be able to have such a grasp of his own concerns that he can leave them for a while, and then leap up into this other psyche."[7] This statement acts both as an apology for the poems of *Snowy Fields* and as a program for the poems of *The Light Around the Body* (1967) and *The Teeth Mother Naked at Last* (1970). Whether and how Bly was able to make such a "leap" remains, as we shall see, in question. It is certain, however, that he tried the leap and found it exhilarating. Bly comments interestingly on the effect of reciting political poetry aloud at protest gatherings:

> I experienced for the first time in my life the power of spoken or oral poetry. A briefly lasting community springs to life in front of the voice, like a flower opening....The community flowers when the poem is spoken in the ancient way—that is, with full sound, with conviction, and with the knowledge that the emotions are not private to the person speaking them. (*Selected Poems* 62)

Bly's last sentence is particularly interesting in its suggestion that political poetry offered him an escape from the solipsism of *Snowy Fields.*

It did not deflect him from his devotion to the "deep image," however, nor did it suggest a radically new technique other than his adoption of what he calls the "Smart-Blake-Whitman line" (*Selected Poems* 194). Rather, the surreal technique of personal consciousness attempts to absorb, at whatever risk, the new political subject matter. As William V. Davis aptly remarks, "the private individual dream of many of the poems in *Silence* is extended and elaborated...until it becomes the public nightmare as the outer world impinges upon the inner individual consciousness."[8] We see this very clearly in poems like "War and Silence":

> The bombers spread out, temperature steady.
> A Negro's ear sleeping in an automobile tire.

[7]Robert Bly, *Talking All Morning* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 1980) 100-01.

[8]William V. Davis, "Defining the Age," *Moons and Lion Tailes* 2.3 (1977): 88.

Pieces of timber float by, saying nothing.
* *
Bishops rush about crying, "There is no war,"
And bombs fall,
Leaving dust on the beech trees.
* *
One leg walks down the road and leaves
The other behind; the eyes part
And fly off in opposite directions.
* *
Filaments of death grow out.
The sheriff cuts off his black legs
And nails them to a tree.
(*Selected Poems* 72)

In spite of the new subject matter, the style here is of a piece with that in *Snowy Fields.* The language similarly estranges itself from everyday usage, presumably with the intent here of suggesting the chaos of modern war. The effect, however, is still of mystical, personal revelation. To see this more clearly, one has only to compare "War and Silence" with war poems by Wilfred Owen or Keith Douglass. Bly's surreal, alienated images, his "Negro's ear" and amputated leg evaporate like the images of a dream upon waking when one considers Owen's soldier "yelling out and stumbling / And flound'ring like a man in fire or lime" or Douglass's dead German, "mocked at by his own equipment / that's hard and good when he's decayed." The problem may lie in the nature of the "deep image" technique itself. In one of the *Cantos,* Pound jokes about Yeats pausing "to admire the symbol / with Notre Dame standing inside it." Commenting on these lines, Denis Donoghue notes that Yeats's "Symbolist imagination" tends "to dissolve the external object" in its own favor.[9] The symbolist can only achieve his desired effect by a certain "vacancy," taking his "eye off the object, or looking through it"(Donoghue, *We Irish* 49). The surrealist of Bly's stripe works with a similar disadvantage. His calculated dislocation of ordinary language and syntax tends to dissolve external objects or reduce them to fragmentary projections of the self. The poems of *Snowy Fields* openly disintegrate natural objects and reform them as objects of a mystical consciousness at one with nature. Such a strategy has obvious limitations, however, for political poetry, as it can only reluctantly allow

[9]Denis Donoghue, *We Irish: Essays on Irish Literature and Society* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1986) 49.

the external world—and it is here that political events take place—an independent existence.

One of Bly's answers to this problem derives from his new role models, Smart, Blake, and Whitman, and involves incorporating into his work certain syntactical devices of formal rhetoric, particularly anaphora, to articulate an external world resistant to the importunities of his imagination. Syntax, as it is allied with grammar, is by its nature rational and conventional in a way diction is not. In a poem like "Counting Small-Boned Bodies," (*Selected Poems* 73) it offers a quasi-logical structure for Bly's phantasmagorical imagery:

> Let's count the bodies over again.
>
> If we could only make the bodies smaller,
> the size of skulls,
> we could make a whole plain white with skulls in the
> moonlight.
>
> If we could only make the bodies smaller,
> maybe we could fit
> a whole year's kill in front of us on a desk.
>
> If we could only make the bodies smaller,
> we could fit
> a body into a finger ring, for a keepsake forever.

A good part of the effectiveness here derives from the disturbing clash of syntax and diction. The repeated syntax of conditional sentences suggests a kind of reasonableness very much at odds with the poem's flux of horrible images and taking no notice of these images. The effect is ironical, rather in the manner of Swift's "Modest Proposal." It touches on Bly's favorite protest theme, the insulating distance and insensitivity of the war's directors to the particular horrors of the war itself. This irony contributes a new note to the scale of Bly's effects, and it resists what might otherwise spoil the poem, the insistently private and sentimental nature of surreal imagery. As it stands, one of the most disturbing elements of the poem is the aesthetic quality of the isolated, "deep" images ("a whole plain white with skulls in the moonlight"). The dreamscape of *Snowy Fields* has indeed turned to nightmare in this poem, but the weightlessness of the unconscious still attaches to it. Even Molesworth recognizes the "crux" of writing political poetry in a language that "must be hushed or ecstatic":

> Part dream-vision, part diatribe, the [political] poems seem laughable to anyone who is unsettled by all-embracing pathos or all-damning bile. Satire and ecstasy make strange bedfellows and often produce a tonelessness, a cancelling out of effect, in the service of an ineffable wisdom. (118-19)

"Counting Small-Boned Bodies" resists such tonelessness largely because of its formal syntax and the balance of irony and pathos which it affords. Bly is not often able to achieve such a balance however.

"Hatred of Men with Black Hair" (*Selected Poems* 75) asserts a link of racial hatred between Americans' behavior toward the Vietnamese and their infamous treatment of the Indians. The effort is to render the presumed racist violence of Americans at once threatening and absurd:

> We fear every person on earth with black hair.
> We send teams to overthrow Chief Joseph's government.
> We train natives to kill the President with blowdarts.
> We have men loosening the nails on Noah's ark.
>
> State Department men float in the heavy jellies near the
> bottom Like exhausted crustaceans, like squids who are confused,
> Sending out beams of black to the open sea.
> Each fights his fraternal feeling for the great landlords.

In such lines (Bly would term them Smart-Blake-Whitman lines), anaphoric rhetoric reins in but cannot completely control the hysterical excess of the images. Bly would obviously like to enlarge his occasion by offering a historical dimension (the Indian connection) and by hinting at apocalyptic consequences (our tinkering with "the nails on Noah's ark"). Still there is something merely jejune about his suggestion that the State Department and by metonymic extension the government of the United States act with the energy and intelligence of squids. The poem has the force and the severe limitations of a paranoid fantasy. Its estrangement from the normal terms of discourse is not such that it renders its object more perceptible or compels us to view its object with heightened awareness. Rather the poem's fantastic nature limits its articulations to the fragmented consciousness of Bly himself. There is certainly a great deal of "Indian blood" that Americans cannot forget or wash away, but it is definitely not, as Bly asserts, "underneath all the cement of the Pentagon / ...preserved in snow." Lines like these seem merely bizarre in a way that does no justice to the Indian cause. In effect, "Hatred of Men

with Black Hair" is as personal a poem as anything in *Snowy Fields* and cannot but fail as propaganda. But even if we take it as a form of pure poetry, its success is questionable.

It may be that surrealism (the Spanish example notwithstanding) cannot offer Bly a fitting decorum for poetry about war. Surrealism is adept at exposing the absurdity or irrationality lurking beneath ordinary experience, the quiet life in Minnesota, for instance. The experience of war, however, is itself manifestly absurd, as Paul Fussell notes on more than one occasion (See especially "My War," *The Boy Scout Handbook and Other Observations* and *Wartime).* In dealing with war, the irrationality suggested by surreal techniques is distractingly superfluous. Out of touch with the real absurdity of war, Bly often appears merely inebriated with protest, as in these lines from "Asian Peace Offers Rejected Without Publication" (*Selected Poems* 68):

> These suggestions by Asians are not taken seriously.
> We know Rusk smiles as he passes them to someone.
> Men like Rusk are not men only—
> They are bombs waiting to be loaded in a darkened hangar.

The title is meant to suggest a newspaper headline, and thus the poem wishes to invoke something of the public nature and objectivity of American journalism, but it succeeds neither as journalism nor as poetry. "Men like Rusk," whether one agrees with them or not, are precisely "men only;" this is the essence of their humanly tragic fallibility. Denying them humanity in such a glib manner, Bly makes no valid contribution to our understanding of the war in Vietnam. Even his "Asians" are not granted a *realized* existence. Bly takes them no more "seriously" than as props in his unconscious. The second part of the poem, which succeeds better than the first, does so by forgetting the "politics" of the opening lines altogether and returning to the safe, interior landscape of "deep imagery":

> Lost angels huddled on a night branch!
> The waves crossing
> And recrossing beneath—
> The sound of the rampaging Missouri—
> Bending the reeds again and again—something inside us
> Like a ghost train in the Rockies
> About to be buried in snow!
> Its long hoot
> Making the owl in the Douglas fir turn his head...

Bly's "lost angels" are more real than his "Asians," and the owl turning its head in the last line is the most vividly realized image in the poem. The ending of the poem could have been written for *Snowy Fields.* But isolated images do not make for effective discourse in a political poem; simple contrast does not necessarily create coherence.

Occasionally, however, Bly's contrasts of American peacefulness and Asian violence are effective, as in "Driving Through Minnesota During the Hanoi Bombings" (*Selected Poems* 74). Here the surreal juxtapositions reflect something less arbitrary than the jumble of Bly's unconscious: the jarring and uniquely modern experience of war reported electronically in a peaceful environment.

> We drive between lakes just turning green;
> Late June. The white turkeys have been moved
> A second time to new grass.
> How long the seconds are in great pain!
> Terror just before death,
> Shoulders torn, shot
> From helicopters. "I saw the boy
> being tortured with a telephone generator,"
> The sergeant said.
> "I felt sorry for him
> And blew his head off with a shotgun."
> These instants become crystals,
> Particles
> The grass cannot dissolve. Our own gaiety
> Will end up
> In Asia, and you will look down your cup
> And see
> Black Starfighters.

These lines are chilling in the way certain televised reports of the war were chilling. A horrible act of war is depicted simply, in this case through the sergeant's reported speech. Bly does not insist on its absurdity, but it seems absurd because it intrudes on the peaceful sanctuary of life in America, where people go about their ordinary lives, farming, enjoying a spring day, drinking coffee. Both events are real but appear surreal precisely because they do not belong together. The estrangement of our perception does not seem so much a contrived linguistic event as a natural outcome of our bombardment with electronic information, and it prepares quite naturally the hallucination of looking down a coffee cup and seeing

war planes. As in the television reports, Bly brings the war home to us and makes us uneasy at its intrusion. But even this approach is not without its problems. As Phillip Knightley suggests in *The First Casualty*, the bizarre phenomenon of war scenes broadcast continually on television, far from hastening the end of the war through a change in national consciousness, had the effect of numbing us and making the war seem less real.[10] Paradoxically, it is this kind of numbness that a reader senses in Bly's poem, rather than horror or the righteous indignation of protest. The poems where Bly is righteously indignant tend to slip over the line into bathetic propaganda. A poem like "Driving Through Minnesota," on the other hand, leaves us helpless, numb, and hallucinant before events.

Paul Fussell has argued that it is extraordinarily difficult, though not impossible, to describe modern warfare with real adequacy.[11] It is perhaps even more difficult for Bly. The Vietnam war is not, after all, his personal experience, except as he may experience it second-hand. As we have seen also, his allegiance to the traditions of international surrealism, an approach deeply rooted in personal consciousness, makes it problematic for him to achieve a level of universal as opposed to personal significance. This question, of course, is not as simple as it seems, for in a sense nothing is free from history. Terry Eagleton would point out that all writers, whether they wish to do or not, represent certain "*ideologies*—the ideas, values and feelings by which men experience their societies at various times."[12] Thus in one sense Bly's poetry is politically suggestive even when it is most personal and perhaps in ways contrary to his overt intentions. On a common sense level, however, Bly's poetry wrestles with the problem of achieving public significance. Bly himself is scornful of poets who "do not bother to penetrate the husk around their own personalities, and therefore cannot penetrate the husk that has grown around the psyche of the country either"(Quoted by Davis 78). As we have seen, however, such penetration is not really so easy. It is very risky and involves struggling with one's surrounding language, culture, and society to strike a balance between local, political objectives and the provisionally universal objectives of literature. As we shall see, Heaney achieves such a balance more often than Bly. Bly's effort, increasingly, is to find mythical, or pseudo-mythical, analogies for his essentially personal consciousness, ritual enactment for his mystical

[10]Phillip Knightley, *The First Casualty: From the Crimea to Vietnam: The War Correspondent as Hero, Propagandist, and Myth Maker* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1975).

[11]Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975) Chap V.

[12]Terry Eagleton, *Marxism and Literary Criticism* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1976) viii.

intuitions. His glibly "Jungian" references to a supposed national "psyche" are telling in this respect. His attempt to propound an apocalyptic myth based on the opposition of masculine and feminine consciousness, fitful though it is, reflects this need.

The long poetic sequence known as "The Teeth Mother Naked at Last" (*Selected Poems* 76) reprises and to an extent sums up Bly's various approaches to political poetry. As such it often seems a jumble of "deep images," anaphora, "television" news clips, and protest hysterias:

> B-52s come from Guam. Teachers
> die in flames. The hopes of Tolstoy fall asleep in the ant heap.
> Do not ask for mercy.
> * * * * *
> The room explodes. The children explode.
> Blood leaps on the vegetable walls.
> * * * * *
> Marines kill ducks with three-hundred-dollar shotguns
> and lift cigarette lighters to light the thatched roofs of huts.
> They watch the old women warily.
> * * * * *
> As soon as the President finishes his press conference,
> black wings carry off the words,
> bits of flesh still clinging to them.
> * * * * *
> It is a desire to eat death,
> to gobble it down,
> to rush on it like a cobra with mouth open.
> It is a desire to take death inside,
> to feel it burning inside, pushing out velvety hairs,
> like a clothesbrush in the intestines—
>
> That is the thrill that leads the President on to lie.

Lines like these show Bly risking all the weaknesses we have discussed, and they suggest various reasons why the poem as a whole cannot succeed. But the breadth of a poetic sequence offers Bly the opportunity to succeed quite powerfully, if provisionally, in individual passages:

> If one of those children came toward me with both hands

in the air, fire rising along both elbows,
I would suddenly go back to my animal brain,
I would drop on all fours screaming;
my vocal cords would turn blue; so would yours.
It would be two days before I could play with one of my own children
again.

These lines were suggested obviously by the famous photograph of a child running down a road covered with burning napalm. They record an objective scene along with Bly's outraged response, a guttural response that for once he shared with the majority of his countrymen. And here at last he rises to the role of the political poet at his best: that of the private man impelled to be a public spokesman, hurt into poetry of more than private significance. Still the best moments in "The Teeth Mother" are such isolated passages. The "mythology" Bly would use to knit his sequence together is of a rather puerile sort and will not bear comparison with the more rigorous mythologizing of Robert Graves. It is really in passages like the one about the burning child, rather than any pseudo-mythological reference to the "Teeth Mother," a matriarchal goddess who devours "hairy and ecstatic men," that Bly succeeds as a political poet, but as we have seen his success is at best troublesome and provisional.

Unlike Bly, Seamus Heaney seems hardly to have worked at becoming a political poet. The role was virtually thrust on him as a resident of Northern Ireland, and with it a remarkably early fame that some critics have begrudged him. But like Bly's, Heaney's first books, *Death of a Naturalist* (1966) and *Door into the Dark* (1969), were essentially personal. The poems in *Death of a Naturalist* are absorbed in concrete imagery without being particularly surreal. Perhaps in reaction to Yeats, Heaney easily accepts the existence of an external world with its plurality of independent objects. Many of these poems deal specifically with farming, though farming has never held the central position in Heaney's poetry that it does, say, in the poetry of R.S. Thomas or Wendell Berry. Farm culture provided the furnishings of Heaney's youth, and it is as such that farm imagery pervades his first book. As Helen Vendler perceptively remarks, "at first, Heaney aggrandized and consecrated his infant world."[13] Heaney's effort seems to be to come to terms with this world before attempting to explore its wider resonances. A number of the early poems deal with his father's activities as a farmer. These poems are at once caressing and distancing; they register the child's awe before his father and

[13]Helen Vendler, *The Music of What Happens: Poems, Poets, Critics* (Cambridge, Massachussetts: Harvard University Press, 1988) 150.

the young man's stock-taking and separation. In "Follower", Heaney pictures his father at work behind a "horse-plough":

> I stumbled in his hob-nailed wake,
> Fell sometimes on the polished sod;
> Sometimes he rode me on his back
> Dipping and rising to his plod.
>
> I wanted to grow up and plough,
> To close one eye, stiffen my arm.
> All I ever did was follow
> In his broad shadow round the farm.
>
> I was a nuisance, tripping, falling,
> Yapping always. But today
> It is my father who keeps stumbling
> Behind me, and will not go away.[14]

These are lines that would have pleased the New Critics with their craft, the balance of the sound system, as well as the carefully controlled paradox that forms the center of the poem's essentially internal discourse. Like most of Heaney's farm poems, it is retrospective, pitting the speaker's present state of awareness against his innocent consciousness as a child. Something quite similar is at work in the famous "Digging" *Selected Poems* 10-11), where Heaney quite explicitly compares his own work as a writer with the traditional labor of his father and grandfather.

> Under my window, a clean rasping sound
> When the spade sinks into gravelly ground:
> My father, digging. I look down
>
> Till his straining rump among the flowerbeds
> Bends low, comes up twenty years away
> Stooping in rhythm through potato drills
> Where he was digging.
> * * * * *
> By God, the old man could handle a spade.

[14]Seamus Heaney, *Selected Poems 1965-1975* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1980) 18-19.

Just like his old man.
* * * * *
The cold smell of potato mould, the squelch and slap
Of soggy peat, the curt cuts of an edge
Through living roots awaken in my head.
But I've no spade to follow men like them.

Between my finger and my thumb
The squat pen rests.
I'll dig with it.

Though its perspective is interior (it is clearly what Steiner would call "inner speech"), this is a beautifully *realized* lyric. Heaney's language, which can be seen as literary and "estranging" in its own way (the pen is described earlier as being "snug as a gun"), is nonetheless on easy terms with the external world, trusting to the concrete otherness of things to which it may refer. Having established this relation, it is free to luxuriate in others: internal, linguistic, "musical" relations, which do not have the effect of isolating the experience in Heaney's consciousness. Instead, we are given free access as readers to the experience that consciousness manipulates.

As we shall see, Heaney accomplishes this in part by submitting to a number of traditions which are compatible with the decorum of personal poetry. Like "Digging," many of the early poems place the child's point of view, which the speaker assumes, in opposition to the point of view of adults, the "I" against the "they".

As a child, they could not keep me from wells
And old pumps with buckets and windlasses.
I loved the dark drop, the trapped sky, the smells
Of waterweed, fungus and dank moss.

One, in a brickyard, with a rotted board top.
I savoured the rich crash when a bucket
Plummeted down at the end of a rope.
So deep you saw no reflection in it.
* * * * *
Now, to pry into roots, to finger slime,
To stare, big-eyed Narcissus, into some spring
Is beneath all adult dignity. I rhyme

> To see myself, to set the darkness echoing.
> ("Personal Helicon," *Selected Poems* 27)

Here the child is explicitly solipsistic, a Narcissus essentially alone in nature and alive to its invitations. But unlike Bly, Heaney is not tempted to tinker with the constituents of nature. A poem like this establishes Heaney's relation to a number of strains in British and European Romanticism. The perspective of the child, "big-eyed" and "beneath all adult dignity," is reminiscent of the Rilke of *Das Buch der Bilder*. On the other hand, the rather luxurious diction (Consider the wealth of association, as well as the alliterative and assonant sound structure in "I savoured the rich crash when the bucket / Plummeted") suggests Keats and Hopkins. If Heaney has not yet set out to define himself as part of a specifically Irish linguistic tradition, there is, perhaps, something of Patrick Kavanagh's parochialism in the early poems.

The problem for Heaney is how to assimilate these influences and convert his "big-eyed" childhood and "big-eared" youth into a maturity capable of exploring the deeper and wider resonances of his experience. Not all critics would agree that he has done so. The English critics in particular have their reservations. A. Alverez, who considers Heaney "an intensely literary writer," argues that his work never escapes the traditional British discomfort with modernism.[15] Because of this, it "challenges no presuppositions, does not upset or scare, is mellifluous, craftsmanly, and often perfect within its chosen limits. In other words, it is beautiful minor poetry"(17). Calvin Bedient takes a similar position, asserting that "Heaney scarcely projects a point of view. Most of what he writes is no more, if no less, than potato deep—earth-bound if earth-enriched, placidly rooted in top soil, far from unfathomable."[16]

I would argue, on the other hand, that when Heaney does turn to political poems, his rootedness acts as a check on the tendency of political poetry to drift toward propaganda. It offers a balance of craft and discourse that is so often lacking in Robert Bly's work. One reason may be that Heaney has never given himself over as completely as Bly to the dictates of the "cause". Though he lived for years in the midst of terrorist violence, the poet in Heaney stubbornly refused the notion that his role be identified wholly with the public cause. The poet's

[15]A. Alverez, "A Fine Way with the Language," *The New York Review of Books* 27.3 (March 6, 1980): 16.

[16]Calvin Bedient, "The Music of What Happens," *Parnassus: Poetry in Review* 8.1 (Fall-Winter 1979): 110.

"raison d'être," as Heaney puts it, is primarily "involved with marks on paper."[17] It is also essentially a matter of private consciousness. The violence of the public world may force itself at times on such a consciousness, though not necessarily to predictable effect. In an essay entitled "Belfast," Heaney tries to put his finger on the poet's ambivalent relation to public events:

> On the one hand, poetry is secret and natural, on the other hand it must make its way in a world that is public and brutal. Here the explosions literally rattle your window day and night, lives are shattered blandly or terribly, innocent men have been officially beaten and humiliated in internment camps—destructive elements of all kinds, which are even perhaps deeply exhilarating, are in the air. (*Preoccupations* 34)

What is perhaps most interesting here is Heaney's confession that in some paradoxical sense the poet may find such events "deeply exhilarating." The poet is, first, a fallible human being, and only second, if at all, the proponent of a political cause. (Of course, in Terry Eagleton's sense, this attitude can be said simply to reflect a particular "ideology.")

Heaney has never embraced political poetry with the single-minded enthusiasm of Bly. Political poetry is only one of a number of strategies Heaney uses to deepen and broaden his personal experience. Heaney's political poems take several distinct forms, of which we may isolate the three most important: poems that directly refer to the political situation in Northern Ireland, poems that refer to the situation by implication, and poems about linguistic imperialism, the problem of the Irish writer forced to use the English language as his vehicle of expression.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the first group of poems (which most nearly approximates Bly's sense of the political poem) has been considered by critics the most questionable of success. Even such sympathetic readers as Denis Donoghue and Donald Hall have openly expressed their preference for the "long perspective"[18] of the so-called "bog poems," which in Hall's phrase, tease Heaney "into the truest poetry."[19] I would agree about the "bog poems," but I think it is arguable that even in the most overtly political of his poems about Belfast, where, as Donoghue notes, "the only vantage points are held by soldiers"("Poets Who Have Learned

[17]Seamus Heaney, *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1979) 34.

[18]Denis Donoghue, "Poets Who Have Learned Their Trades: 'Field Work'," *The New York Times Book Review* (December 2, 1979): 45.

[19]Donald Hall, "The Nation of Poets," *Parnassus: Poetry in Review* 6.1 (Fall-Winter 1977): 158.

Their Trade" 45), Heaney never slips as precipitously as Bly into rancorous propaganda. Perhaps this is because he is never willing to risk as much as Bly on the occasion. A poem like "Casualty"[20] lacks the hard edge of Bly's politics; when Heaney does not succeed, he is likely to fall into sentimentality:

> Sometimes, on his high stool,
> Too busy with his knife
> At a tobacco plug
> And not meeting my eye,
> In the pause after a slug
> He mentioned poetry.

This story of a pub-crawling friend, "blown to bits / Out drinking in a curfew / Others obeyed," while it verges on being maudlin, is still full of what Heaney calls elsewhere "the music of what happens"("Song," *Field Work* 56). It is this "music", in all its dense particularity, to which Heaney is ultimately loyal. Because of this, Heaney is more sure of his personal perspective than Bly, even as this makes him more ambivalent in his discourse.

The poem, "Stump," for instance (*Selected Poems* 75), seems to present quite plainly a tragic, northern Irish scene, and yet it keeps much of its mystery, especially in its ambiguous suggestions of the speaker's consciousness:

> I am riding to plague again.
> Sometimes under a sooty wash
> From the grate in the burnt-out gable
> I see the needy in a small pow-wow.
> What do I say if they wheel out their dead?
> I'm cauterized, a black stump of home.

The perspective, interestingly, is the same as that in "Digging": the speaker looks down from a window, suggestive perhaps of his "literary" viewpoint, privileged at once and confined. What he sees below is the "real" world of people who labor and suffer and whose relation to himself he would, however difficultly, construe. The first line is quite ambiguous. Is the speaker "riding to plague" in the sense that he is venturing imaginatively to encounter the plague of sectarian violence, or is he somehow, in his literary role, plaguing the "needy" sufferers, who may not need the words he has to offer? The speaker's hesitance in the penultimate line to present himself as their spokesman might suggest the latter interpretation. In

[20] Seamus Heaney, *Field Work* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1979) 21-24.

either case, however, the experience is one of searing, cauterizing sympathy for their plight. It transfigures the speaker (a neatly surreal touch) into "a black stump of home," gravely wounded and alienated from his own surroundings and certainties. Even this image involves the amiguities of a possible pun. Is the speaker, perhaps, "stumping" in a *political* sense, and if so, does the context suggest his awareness of its ineffectiveness? Both senses exercise claims on our attention. Clearly, the poet is troubled into his protest, and there is nothing of Bly's rather smug satisfaction in it.

In *The Renewal of Literature,* Richard Poirier makes a valuable distinction between literature of "difficulty" and literature of "density". The first suggests the modernist propensity for difficult surfaces, a literature of puzzles that would "perpetuate the power of literature as a privileged and exclusive form of discourse."[21] According to Poirier, the second kind of writing "gives, or so it likes to pretend, a fairly direct access to pleasure, but which becomes, on longer acquaintance, rather strange and imponderable"(130). Pound and the Joyce of *Ulysses* are paradigms of difficulty; Stevens, Frost, and George Eliot are paradigms of density. I would suggest also that Bly and Heaney are distinguishable according to these terms. Bly, as a surrealist self-consciously posing in the modernist tradition, is difficult. Heaney, writing such deceptively accessible political poems as "Stump," is dense.

The "bog poems" have an exquisite density. This series of poems from *Wintering Out* (1972) and *North* (1975) was suggested by the discovery of a number of ancient bodies preserved in the peat bogs of Denmark. At the time scientists speculated that the bodies, some of which had their throats slashed, were those of sacrificial victims. The "bog people" offer Heaney various possibilities for poetic treatment. In one sense, they are art objects, presented like Keats's Grecian Urn or Rilke's Torso for imaginative contemplation. As such, their objective presence acts as a tease and a check on the poet's subjective imagination. At the same time they function as symbols of the deep racial experience of the north, to which Heaney, as an Irishman, feels himself allied. They allow him, as it were, a further digging, more than "potato deep," into his own consciousness, conceived here as a product of continuous history. As Gregory Schirmer notes, "Heaney has developed the image of the bog into a powerful symbol of the continuity of human experience."[22] The bog people, tangible products of this continuity, appear as virtual message carriers of the unconscious. In fact, they *suggest* a mythology closer

[21]Richard Poirier, *The Renewal of Literature: Emersonian Reflections* (New York: Random House, Inc., 1987) 98.

[22]Gregory A. Schirmer, "Seamus Heaney's 'Salvation in Surrender'," *Eire-Ireland* 15.4 (Winter 1980): 143.

in spirit to Jung's than the one Bly insists upon. At the same time, they offer, as ancient "victims," telling parallels to the situation in Northern Ireland. "The Tollund Man" (*Selected Poems* 78-79), one of the earliest of the "bog poems," is typical of Heaney's indirect approach to political writing. Heaney contemplates the body first as an object, at once fascinating and horrible:

> In the flat country nearby
> Where they dug him out,
> His last gruel of winter seeds
> Caked in his stomach,
>
> Naked except for
> The cap, noose and girdle,
> I will stand for a long time.

Adroitly mixing Christian and pagan traditions, Heaney now teases out what one might call the Tollund Man's mythological features. He is a "bridegroom to the goddess" of the bog, who "tightened her torc on him / And opened her fen, / Those dark juices working / Him to a saint's body." Only at this point does Heaney "risk blasphemy" by considering the Tollund Man's political implications. He will "consecrate" the bog and "pray" to the Tollund Man to "germinate / The scattered, ambushed / Flesh of labourers, / Stockinged corpses / Laid out in the farmyards." The Tollund Man becomes, for Heaney, a "saint" of political victims. The political effect Heaney seeks here is not obvious, nor is it especially hopeful. One important aspect of the "continuity of human experience" is its violence, which leaves the poet mournful and ironic: "in the old man-killing parishes / I will feel lost, / Unhappy and at home." Yet as Helen Vendler points out, these poems "lift [Heaney] free from a superficial piety that would put either sectarian or national names to the Ulster killings"155-56).

Perhaps the poet's gift, if not "to set a statesman right," is to register a human grief, complex and indirect, at his excess. This is what Bly does too on the rare occasions of his best political poetry, such as the passage on the burning child. That Heaney succeeds more often and more richly is attributable to a number of factors. Unlike Bly, he has not allied himself to a tradition which is essentially inhospitable to public utterance. Heaney's writing has always displayed a becoming humility before the external world. The depth of the bog establishes a continuity between the personal and the cultural which enables Heaney to speak at once personally and as a representative of his culture; it is an external depth, not a personal abyss. At the same time, Heaney has never allowed public utterance to become

the *raison d'être* of his work. When he addresses public issues, it is because they have hurt him into a poetry which seeks always a return, even if only provisionally, to sanity, the strange benignity of living. (Indeed, one hopes that Heaney's recent comments envying the eastern European poets their stressed political situation do not signal a significant shift in his own poetic practice.) Speaking of Yeats's later poems, Heaney notes that "they ask, indirectly, about the purpose of art in the midst of life and by their movements, their images, their musics they make palpable a truth which Yeats was at first only able to affirm abstractly, in those words which he borrowed from Coventry Patmore: 'The end of art is peace' " (*Preoccupations* 112). Like Yeats, Heaney has been a poet first, with a poet's interest in the tangle of language, and aware always of a poet's decorum. This may seem like an old New Critical judgment; it may suggest simply a necessary prejudice of the liberal-humanist ideology. But we need to take stock of our recent poets, claiming what may be lasting or valuable in their additions to our culture and discarding what is misguided or inept.

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Chapter 16

Lost in Translation: Reading and Misreading Contemporary British and American Poetry

A number of years ago, *Contemporary Literature* devoted a special issue to the problem of "The Two Poetries: The Postwar Lyric in Britain and America." The essays ranged from a rather charming and ingratiating memoir of American poets by Charles Tomlinson to considerations of "Little Englandism" and the affects of American expatriation on such English poets as Jon Silkin and Thom Gunn. One comes away from this issue with the feeling, not altogether sanguine, that the "two poetries" are very much isolated, when not actually hostile to each other's aims. With a few exceptions—Tomlinson for one—poets on either side of the Atlantic have little to say to each other or learn from each other. Indeed, this much may be gathered unofficially by glancing at the poetry shelves in English and American bookstores; there is very little wooing both ways.

Perhaps this is natural to some extent, considering the divergent cultural matrices of these poets, but it is also puzzling, for the same British and American poets have little trouble drawing sustenance from what one might call the "international canon" of poets in translation: Rilke, Milosz, Brodsky, Tranströmer, Seferis, or Neruda, to name just a few. And it would be too easy, I think, to argue that these poets are "major" while contemporary poets of the English language are not. A better explanation might be that foreign poets, because they must be translated, are translatable into familiar and therefore acceptable dialects. Rilke, for instance, may be read in Leishman's English, or MacIntyre's, Bly's, and more recently Mitchell's American. Larkin, on the other hand, must be read in Larkin's

English, Ted Hughes in his own very different English. The more subtle "language barrier" involved here is a serious impediment both to informal and critical reading.

In his essay, "Leavis on Eliot," Denis Donoghue argues that "critical discourse gives the poem a life other than its own but cognate to its own. The power we ascribe to the poem is answered by another power, that of a reading adequate to it in principle and by intention, if inadequate in the event" (332-33). But just as critical discourse may confer a different though cognate life on the poem, a reading which is inadequate in principle or intention may build an insulating barrier around the poem, forbidding it such a second life. My purpose here will be to take issue with one of the essays in the *Contemporary Literature* number, Lawrence Kramer's "The Wodwo Watches the Water Clock: Language in Postmodern British and American Poetry," and to argue that Kramer's readings of British poetry in particular are inadequate in principle and intention. Far from elucidating the British poems he considers, Kramer creates unnecessary obstacles to their appreciation by Americans and in effect perpetuates the self-satisfied, nationalist myth (admittedly abetted by certain disgruntled British critics) that everything truly vital in poetry has been happening on this side of the Atlantic. If it were simply inept, such an essay could be safely ignored. But Kramer's essay is dangerously proficient, urbanely written, and suavely misleading.

Kramer's argument is that "American poets have by and large kept up the passionate belief in language as mediation—in the ability of language to confront, interpret, and even to reenact experience," while "recent British poets...seem deeply distrustful of the intersection between language and reality, and appear to see the process of using language as a hard struggle against what seems its futility or vulnerability" (319-20). To support this thesis, he considers individual poems by Larkin, Hill, Hughes, Robert Lowell, Ammons, and Ashbery. In conclusion, he posits the opposition of a "postmodern American poetics of meaning without meaningfulness" and a British "poetics—or antipoetics—of meaningfulness without meaning" (342). Such an argument is very neat at first glance. It seems to sum up distinct national differences without any messy resort to causes or historical context. Kramer sticks nicely to the texts at hand, covering the language of the poems with his own discourse, or metalanguage. When we examine this metalanguage more closely, however, the cracks begin to show.

It is instructive to consider the different emotive vocabularies Kramer employs to deal with American and British poets. Where American poets are said to be "passionate" in their "belief" in the mediatory power of language, the British poets are described as "deeply distrustful" of language, convinced of its "futility" and

"vulnerability." (Kramer makes no more than a passing attempt to explain this difference in faith, citing the Americans' inheritance from the modernists, among others Yeats and Auden. As we shall see, this view even of the modernists is problematic.) American poets, so we gather, are a "passionate," open, unanxious lot, whose language makes "its own way against reality, no matter how many zigs and zags it takes" (319). British poets, on the other hand, are "craftsmen out of love with their material," who "either chasten their language" or "churn it into a thrumming intensity" (320).

Seemingly confident in his own language's "mediatory" power over "reality" (one might do well to keep in mind the naturalized American, Nabokov's admonitions about this word), Kramer continues his emotive power play in discussions of individual poets. Larkin, for instance, has created in "Dockery and Son" not a "traditional" but "a strict *nonfunctional* form....The form is not a discipline but a *constraint,* not a means of heightening language but a means of *repressing* it" (Kramer 322). Similarly, Geoffrey Hill's work is marked by "meaningfulness without meaning," though in this case the problem "arises not from the repression of language but from *aggression* against it" (Kramer 323). Hill's poem, "Picture of a Nativity," makes use of a language that "is *twisted,* concentrated, and *misshapen* in order to signify with its *deformity* what its integrity could not master" (Kramer 324) (emphasis added). Such language, in Kramer's phrase, "has the eloquence of a gargoyle" (325).

When Kramer turns to the American poets, however, we learn that "their hallmark" is "a *transcendental* discontinuity: a *free, self-determined* movement of language from idiom to idiom, standpoint to standpoint, time to time, place to place," resulting in "a poetry whose movement can resemble anything from *easy* meditation to not quite free association to *amiable* chaos" (325) (emphasis added). When he discusses Robert Lowell's interestingly patchworked poem, "Ezra Pound," Kramer is lovingly patient with its "discontinuities." The poem "is a dense farrago of idioms and *perceptions"* whose "*range* is enormous" (327). The poem's "shifting voices" are "packed together paratactically to create a *vivid sense,* half-visual, half-visceral, of a verbal space crammed to the seams with scraps of consciousness" (327). Its "*tense* containment" of these scraps "intends to *invest* them, even to *irradiate* them, with *commensurate* meaning" (327). Lowell's words, unlike Hill's, "are *lucid* at every point, even where they are fragmentary" (327) (emphasis added). Whereas Hill's language is described as "heaping itself up in word-spoils" (Kramer 324), Lowell's is a language of "laconic phrases" (327), or perhaps simply an "amiable chaos." Whatever such an *amiable* chaos may be said to be, it affords Lowell, according to Kramer, enormous

privileges: "as the poem's language contains reality, the poem, containing the language, transfigures the reality, even where reality protests" (328). (Why and how "reality protests" is of course not made explicit here.)

There are a number of points to be made against such readings. As my added emphases will suggest, Kramer's diction is clearly loaded in favor of the American poets. Kramer expends on Lowell's technique, which a less congenial reader might term haphazard, all the intuitive empathy and appreciative understanding of an impressionist critic. And this is a good thing, as far as it goes. It is useful in guiding us to an understanding of the strategies and techniques inherent in Lowell's poem. The empathy and understanding are withheld, however, when the British poets are in question. "Dockery and Son," to take up one of Kramer's examples, is subjected to a willfully unreciprocal response. Indeed, one is reminded of Leavis's willful refusal to read Shelley on acceptable terms. Kramer remarks, for instance, that "traditionally...poetic language heightens itself by working against the discipline of rhyme and meter" (321), claiming that Larkin's language fails to heed this tradition. This certainly exaggerates both points. Some poetry indeed *heightens* itself by working against rhyme and meter, but by no means all poetry does so. Yeats's practice is much different from Tennyson's in this respect, though both were masters of "traditional" form. Spenser's verse is equally different from Donne's, and equally masterful. Kramer does not specify *which* tradition he is accusing Larkin of traducing. One cannot help wondering, when Kramer speaks of Larkin's "strong midline pauses, muted strong stresses, and persistent enjambment at points where the syntax overrides the instinct to pause" (321), if he is not deliberately missing Larkin's play with the established meter. It could be argued, equally glibly, that Donne and Yeats "conspire" similarly "to blur the metrical integrity of the verse" (321). To speak of Larkin "repressing" language rather than "heightening" it is simply to damn with emotive language, the opposite of euphemizing what some might consider awkward effects in Lowell's poem. It is worth noting, by the way, that Lowell himself found much to admire in Larkin's poetry, commenting that a poem by Larkin "says something" (See Pritchard 63-64, 75). Kramer, however, studiously misses Larkin's rather quiet and characteristic effects. Like Larkin, many American poets have made use of "weak or unemphatic" (Kramer 321) rhymes, though one imagines that Kramer would say the Americans simply do not wish to call attention to their rhymes. Larkin's final lines are singled out for special condemnation:

> Life is first boredom, then fear.
> Whether or not we use it, it goes,

> And leaves what something hidden from us chose,
> Then age, and then the only end of age.
> (*The Whitsun Weddings* 38)

Kramer comments that "we really know nothing about [Dockery and his son] at all, except that they lead us to a nihilistic conclusion: that 'Life is first boredom, then fear' " (322). He asserts that the poem is simply recapitulating "its mystifications about the process of 'choice' (which it has not, of course, presented as a process of choice at all)" (323). About the last line, Kramer notes: "All that the poem's last words do is diminish the assertive power of the potent, lucid word 'fear,' by drawing back from naming its object, death....Larkin reduces a recognition to a periphrasis, a mere riddle... whose answer is self-evident" (323).

There are several problems with this reading. For one thing, Kramer is clearly being disingenuous in failing to note the irony in Larkin's use of the word "choice". The diminished sort of life Larkin describes obviously is not a matter of choice; it is determined, a matter of "innate assumptions," which decline into "habit" and suddenly "harden into all we've got." The frustrated aims of Larkin's characters ("what / We think truest, or most want to do"), like his strict form, reflect his openly class-bound society, and of course "warp tight-shut, like doors." It is hardly a mystification that to such people life can seem "what something hidden from us chose." Nor is this strictly a "little English" problem. Kramer is naive, if he means to assume that Americans are so "classless" that Larkin's situation must seem mystifying to them. The proposition that Larkin's poem is merely "nihilistic" is surely something more than naive in the latter half of the Twentieth Century. More than a few recent American poets could be tarred with this brush. It is also worth taking issue with Kramer's assessment of the lovely rhetorical figure in Larkin's last line. Here the insistent rhythm and the beautiful balance of open vowels, far from diminishing the power of the word "fear", are chillingly effective. "Then...and then" suggests the merciless and determinant machinery of time, the ultimate cognate of Dockery's determinant society. It is a line worthy of the mellifluous English tradition; Tennyson is there, and Keats, and Carew, and Jonson; there are centuries in its making. Substituting "death" for "the only end of age" would be merely blunt. To argue that Larkin presents "a riddle whose answer is self-evident" calls the practice of a great deal of English poetry too easily into question. It seems almost willfully Philistine.

It is also worth commenting on Kramer's confident assertion that the language of American poetry "contains reality," while the language of British poetry is distrustful of it. All language is essentially metaphorical, a system of tropes and

figures whose mediatory relation to meanings or things is arbitrary and at best problematic. As recent linguistic critics have been eager to point out, there is no inevitable symmetry, in the Saussurian sense, between a signifier and a signified. Meaning does not inhere stably or purely in a signifier but disseminates itself in an intricate and elusive web of tracings, promiscuous connections with other signifiers, against which the signifier struggles to assert its identity. An intended meaning is therefore never fully present in a signifier and in a sense language may be said to undermine constantly its own meaning.

All this might be adduced, of course, as adequate grounds for the British poets' mistrusting language, but whether the American poets are really any more trustful is also questionable. Kramer claims, at one point, that John Ashbery's language, "trusted to go its own way...manages to slip luminosities of meaning right past our consciousness, so that we have the meaning without knowing it" (338-39). I do not find this lovely statement convincing, however, as it relies on a kind of critical mysticism, if not mystification. Ashbery himself has been quoted as saying something rather different about his own practice: "It seems to me that my poetry sometimes proceeds as though an argument were suddenly derailed and something that started out clearly suddenly became opaque....What I am probably trying to do is illustrate opacity and how it can suddenly descend over us" (See Kalstone 174). Donoghue, who prefers "serpentine" to "opaque" as an adjective for Ashbery's poetry, argues that Ashbery "doesn't mind producing [congruent messages], so long as the reader knows that they do not make the truth visible....In Ashbery's poems, what we feel is the hum of thoughts evaded in the mind, great generalities pressing to be heard and, in the event, being eluded" (*Reading America* 304-05). What this suggests to me is that Ashbery is not nearly so confident in the power of his language to mediate reality as Kramer would like to make out. He is aware of the arbitrariness of meaning and is intensely mistrustful of formulation. If anything, such scepticism about language is his theme, as in this passage from *As We Know:*

> We must first trick the idea
> Into being, then dismantle it,
> Scattering the pieces on the wind.

It is perhaps this decreationary scepticism, rather than any confidence in language's ability "to confront, interpret, and even reenact experience," that Ashbery inherits from the modernists. The legacy of modernism is anything but an easy relation with language.

If we are to believe Richard Poirier, the modernists themselves, comprised mainly of American and Irish writers, represent a tradition of mistrust in language. In *The Renewal of Literature,* he argues that "the feelings associated with modernism" are "a mosaic compounded of nostalgia, belatedness, cultural burden, and a distrust of language" (96). Such feelings are attributable "to an unprecedented break in cultural continuity and to a remission of some of the authorizing principles behind language" (Poirier 97). When we read modernist works, according to Poirier, we are engaged in "an activity by which with great difficulty we can become conscious that any structure, technique, code, or system of signs is likely to prove no more than extemporized and transient" (113). In a similar vein, George Steiner argues that modernist works "embody a revolt of literature against language...For the writer after Mallarmé language does violence to meaning, flattening, destroying it, as a living thing from the deeps is destroyed when drawn to the daylight and low pressures of the sea surface" (*After Babel* 183). According to Steiner, the program of modernist literature has been "to break its public linguistic mould and become ideolect" (*After Babel* 183). At the same time, Poirier contends forcefully that even the "other" American tradition, what he calls the "Emersonian," views language "not as a transparency but as an obstruction, language not as inherently mobile but as static and resistant, unless made momentarily otherwise" (30). We are a long way here from Kramer's view of American poets' "faith in the mediatory power of the language," its "transcendental discontinuity" and "free, self-determined movement." If anything, one might argue that the English poets, relatively unmarked by modernist or Emersonian anxiety, evince an easier relation to the language, at least on certain occasions. There is certainly nothing in their work of the "colonial protest" (99) Poirier finds in much modernist writing.

At this point I would like to consider particularly Kramer's misreading of Ted Hughes, whom he cites as standing at the extreme of the British "antipoetics" of "meaningfulness without meaning." Kramer begins with the observation that for Hughes violence is "the source of poetic identity" (331). This is nothing new, of course. As early as 1959, A.E. Dyson noted that in Hughes's work "violence...is the occasion not for reflection, but for *being*" (220). More recently, Helen Vendler has distinguished "violence and victimization" as perhaps the most "typical" tonality in Hughes's poetry (207). These critics, however, have always pointed out redeeming features. For Dyson, Hughes's essential violence "is a guarantee of energy, of life" (220). Vendler argues that in Hughes's more recent work the tonality of violence is opposed and mitigated by a rival "tonality of 'epic poise'," whereby "the obsessive rituals of the poetry" may be "harmonized

with aesthetic as well as therapeutic ends" (207-08). Kramer, on the other hand, believes that violence leads Hughes directly to "the necessity of writing against, rather than with, language," and that whatever "explosive quality" we may find in "Hughes's poetry derives primarily from his violence against its language" (331-32). Among the examples Kramer cites are these lines from "November", an early poem in *Lupercal*:

> the rains' dragging grey columns
>
> Smudged the farms. In a moment
> The fields were jumping and smoking; the thorns
> Quivered, riddled with the glassy verticals.
> I stayed on under the welding cold
>
> Watching the tramp's face glisten and the drops of his coat
> Flash and darken. (*Selected Poems* 51-52).

Kramer's comment is that the lines

> betray a restless, anxious effort to turn the rainy landscape into a revelation of nature as an antagonistic spirit, an indwelling will to annihilation. To do that, Hughes weighs down his lines with verbs and participles variously signifying force, movement, suffering, piercing, so that the signification of objects is altogether obscured....It is a savage play of meaningfulness that fights its way toward full mediation and never quite reaches it. (333)

Leaving aside for a moment the issue of whether any language (including Kramer's own) is capable of "full mediation", I think the poem is neither as "anxious" nor as "savage" as Kramer makes out. Nor do the verbs and participals weigh the poem down especially. If anything, Hughes's evocation of the "rainy landscape" and the hostile nature it suggests is confidently energetic, as telling and no more strained than Baudelaire's "Quand le ciel bas et lourd pèse comme un couvercle". Kramer's hostility comes close, in the case of Hughes, to opposing figurative language itself, which can always be pressed on some level as obscuring "the signification of objects." One shouldn't need Derrida to realize that all language's "signification of objects" is problematic, and that "full mediation", whatever that is meant to signify, is a practical fiction of language. Hughes's poem, if we care

to consult the parts Kramer has left out, might be faulted rather as somewhat sentimental than as savage. It sets up a psychological relationship (admirably suggested by the surreal touches of the rain's smudging the farms and "the welding cold") between the speaker, the tramp, and various animals, all of whom must endure the same nature in their own ways. A good part of the poem is concerned with the tramp, who is depicted as animal-like in certain respects, his existence mediating between that of the speaker, who is fully conscious, and those of the animals, who endure nature with a brute stoicism. The poem suggests subtly that the tramp's sleep is a kind of willed hibernation, and thus an oblivion denied the speaker himself:

> In a let of the ditch a tramp was bundled asleep;
> Face tucked down into beard, drawn in
> Under his hair like a hedgehog's. I took him for dead,
>
> But his stillness separated from the death
> Of the rotting grass and the ground. A wind chilled,
> And a fresh comfort tightened through him,
> Each hand stuffed deeper into the other sleeve.

It is hard for me to see how lines like these commit any violence against the language. The intransitive and non-reflexive use of "separated" is somewhat odd, but it is nicely estranging in a way that heightens our awareness. This is exactly what the Formalist critics predicate of "literary" as opposed to "normal" language. The surreal touch of "a fresh comfort" tightening through him, allied metonymically with the image of the gloveless hands stuffing themselves deeper into their opposing sleeves, is similarly effective, freshly and delicately observed. Far from savaging their language or their subject, Hughes's lines *realize* their subject with considerable empathy. Hughes's vision is indeed bleak (the poem ends with the speaker encountering a game-keeper's gibbet hung with "patient" animals, and suggesting perhaps a broader context in which we are all kept hanging in the weather), but this is nothing new in either British or American poetry. An adequate reading of his poem would find it on quite comfortable terms with its language and with the English tradition in poetry.

Another Hughes poem that comes in for Kramer's censure is "Snowdrop", also from *Lupercal*, which he cites as a "risky gamboling with common bombast" (335):

> Now is the globe shrunk tight

> Round the mouse's dulled wintering heart.
> Weasel and crow, as if moulded in brass,
> Move through an outer darkness
> Not in their right minds,
> With the other deaths. She, too, pursues her ends,
> Brutal as the stars of this month,
> Her pale head heavy as metal. (*Selected Poems* 58)

What Kramer objects to here is Hughes's "hyperbolic demand that the object...be imagined in a way that is perceptually absurd" (335). Surely, this is a kind of realist fallacy. Shall we say that Keats is making a perceptually absurd, hyperbolic demand when he addresses a Grecian urn as a "bride of quietness?" Many effective metaphors, including Hamlet's spoken daggers and Homer's "rosy-fingered" dawns are "perceptually absurd"—if we are numb enough as readers not to notice what they are about. Kramer is really objecting to Hughes's surreal estrangements of everyday language, though modern literature certainly offers precedents for them, modern theory encourages them, and the decorum of a lyric like "Snowdrop" allows them. "Snowdrop" is more "difficult" than a poem like "November", but not in any sense unfamiliar to readers of modern literature. I do not agree with Kramer that "Snowdrop" is "one of Hughes's best poems" (335), but I believe he is being more than disingenuous in condemning these lines because "they punish their language ruthlessly" (335).

Steiner has usefully distinguished four kinds of "difficulty" in western poetry: contingent, modal, tactical, and ontological (See *On Difficulty and Other Essays* 18-47). The first three "classes of difficulty," according to Steiner, suggest a "contract of ultimate or preponderant intelligibility between poet and reader, between text and meaning" (*On Difficulty* 40). The fourth, on the other hand, "occurs where this contract is itself wholly or in part broken" (*On Difficulty* 40). Such "*Ontological* difficulties confront us with blank questions about the nature of human speech, about the status of significance, about the necessity and purpose of the construct which we have, with more or less rough and ready consensus, come to perceive as a poem" (Steiner, *On Difficulty* 41). For Steiner, the difficulties of those works that have followed in the vein of Mallarmé and Hölderlin, are ontological, involving a radical critique of language and the somewhat paradoxical attempt "to break the chain of exemplary inheritance" while at the same time returning "to an archaic past in which language and thought had, somehow, been open to the truth of being, to the hidden sources of all meaning" (*On Difficulty* 42-43). Such works "express their sense of the inauthentic situation of man in an

environment of eroded speech" (Steiner, *On Difficulty* 44).

"Snowdrop" is clearly a difficult poem in this ontological sense. It forbids us ready and logical access to the dynamic structure of its language, whose goal is not ordinary mediation; the poem's hermeticism involves no necessary unity of signifyers and signifieds. The image of the first two lines is deceptively simple. It suggests the mouse's hibernation in terms at once minutely particular and cosmic. Kramer, of course, feels that they are unacceptably "hyperbolic," and notes that Hughes's image "flirts with sentimentality for the mouse, bathos for the globe" (336). I find these lines no more hyperbolic or bathetic than Wordsworth's image of a dead girl "Rolled round in earth's diurnal course, / With rocks, and stones, and trees." The difference is that Hughes wants to suggest such a cosmic viewpoint in energetically modern, estranging terms. The "shrinking" of the winter globe is at the same time physically commonplace and rather shockingly imaginative. This much is easy. The difficulty begins in the lines about "Weasal and crow." We are left not with definite answers but with teasing questions. One can see how from the point of view of the hibernating mouse the other creatures, as well as the speaker, "Move through an outer darkness," but in what sense can they seem "moulded in brass" or "Not in their right minds?" And what are those "other deaths" among which they move? Is there some sense, perhaps Rilkean in conception, in which all living things may be seen metonymically in terms of the deaths growing within them? Are they out of their right minds in the colloquial sense that they, and with them Hughes, do not have the good sense or fortune to seek the oblivion of hibernation? Do they seem molded in brass because they are on some level insensible, or because the mouse is insensible of them? There are bewildering possibilities here, and I think Hughes wants them all potentially operative. They all accord with his dark notion of our place in the universe, where, like the mouse's, the ends we must pursue may be "Brutal as the stars of this month" which determine them. Still, many of these lines maintain an air of hermetic mystery resistant to definitive interpretation, and intentionally so. The universe, after all, is difficult and mysterious. As Steiner says about certain passages of similar difficulty by Paul Celan, "at certain levels, we are not meant to understand *at all*, and our interpretation, indeed our reading itself, is an intrusion" (*On Difficulty* 45). Hughes demonstrates not so much unwarranted suspicion of language as perceptive awareness of its condition in the modern world. As I suggested above, "Snowdrop" is not a completely successful poem, but I believe its very difficulty is interesting and perhaps typical of modern poetry in ways Kramer either chooses to ignore or cannot see from the perspective of what he claims is American poetic practice.

I would like to end by considering a more recent poem by Hughes which, it is only fair to admit, Kramer could not have known at the time he wrote his essay. I believe, however, that the poem stands in itself as a refutation of Kramer's judgment and as a prime example of the excellence Americans may find in contemporary British poetry—if they allow themselves to overcome the linguistic and cultural barriers that have separated the "two poetries." The poem is "October Salmon" (*Selected Poems* 165-67), first published in *The River* in 1982. Compared with "Snowdrop" it is not a difficult poem, maintaining itself on quite comfortable terms with language, one might almost say terms of transcendental ease. In many ways, however, "October Salmon" is typical of Hughes's poetry. Its subject is animal life, particularly the completion of the life cycle, the ontological tilt towards death in a violent cosmic order. But there is also a relatively new note of affirmation in the poem, a willingness to be in place and gracefully to accept the fate of being alive:

> After his two thousand miles, he rests,
> Breathing in that lap of easy current
> In his graveyard pool.
>
> About six pounds in weight,
> Four years old at most, and a bare winter at sea—
> But already a veteran,
> Already a death-patched hero. So quickly it's over!
>
> So briefly he roamed the gallery of marvels!
> * * * * * *
> An autumnal pod of his flower,
> The mere hull of his prime, shrunk at shoulder and flank,
>
> With the sea-going Aurora Borealis of his April power—
> The primrose and violet of that first upfling in the estuary—
> Ripened to muddy dregs,
> The river reclaiming his sea-metals.
>
> In the October light
> He hangs there, patched with leper-cloths
>
> Death has already dressed him
> In her clownish regimentals, her badges and decorations,

> Mapping the completion of his service,
> His face a ghoul-mask, a dinosaur of senility, and his whole body
> A fungoid anemone of canker—
>
> Can the caress of water ease him?

The elements of Hughes's poetics are all here: the inexplicable violence of nature as conceived from the modern perspective, the close observation joined with surreal and, I would say, enhancing metaphors (consider "the sea-going Aurora Borealis of his April power" and the beautiful image of the fish "patched with leper-cloths"), the rich inheritance of the British tradition in poetry ("The primrose and violet of that first upfling in the estuary" is a line of Shakespearean resonance as well as sheer loveliness of sound), even the touch of sentimentality. The subject of the poem, the remarkably intense and intended life cycle of the salmon, seems made for Hughes, carrying, as it does, a kind of modern morality in itself. And Hughes, not inclined here to elude the generalities that are pressing to be heard, deftly draws out what one might cautiously term the meaning of the experience:

> Yet this was always with him. This was inscribed in his egg.
> This chamber of horrors is also home.
> He was probably hatched in this very pool.
> * * * * * *
> All this, too, is stitched into the torn richness,
> The epic poise
> That holds him so steady in his wounds, so loyal to his doom, so patient
> In the machinery of heaven.

For Hughes, the scientific marvel, "the epic poise" of the salmon "loyal to his doom" maps out a stoic response for his own less poised and patient species more affirmative of the determined condition of mortal life than the hibernation model of earlier poems. And perhaps because of this, it does so in a language more at ease with circumstances, though recognizably English and Hughes's own. I consider "October Salmon" one of the most beautiful and beautifully realized poems written in English in the latter half of the century. I feel it marks Hughes as a major modern poet of our language, one who should command enduring interest on both sides of the Atlantic.

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Chapter 17

Christina Rossetti's Sonnet of Sonnets: *Monna Innominata*

Like the poets of our day who maintain difficult relations with their great, modernist forebears, the Victorians were the troubled and sometimes unwilling inheritors of certain assumptions about poetry that grew out of the romantic period. Perhaps the most important of these is the notion of poetry as expressive form. According to this view, the primary virtue of poetry is the sincere expression of personal feeling, rather than the more traditional aims of mimesis or instruction. Under this dispensation, all poetry aspires to the condition of lyric poetry, for the lyric accepts the attributes of expressive form most happily. Wary as the Victorian critics often were of the emotional excesses of romanticism, they still accepted as a starting point the essentially romantic notion of poetry as a form of personal expression, and this colored their practice of the various poetic genres.

The sonnet sequence is a case in point. The romantics may be said to have recovered the sonnet from the oblivion into which it had fallen in the eighteenth century, but they changed the form in significant ways. Unlike the Elizabethans who conceived of the sonnet as a strophic constituent of long, loosely organized sequences, which were themselves structured by "plots" of highly conventional situations and attitudes, the romantics treated the sonnet as an individual lyric poem, characterized to a remarkable degree by unity of conception and intensity of expression. The Victorians inherited this point of view, and even when they recusitated the Elizabethan form of the sonnet sequence, the romantic notion of the lyric sonnet continued to affect their practice in important ways. Where the

romantics had exalted Milton as a sonneteer, the Victorians found their worthiest model in Shakespeare (see George Sanderlin, "The Repute of Shakespeare's Sonnets in the Early Nineteenth Century"). The Shakespeare who claimed the idolotry of the Victorians, however, was not the historical Elizabethan sonneteer we now see him to have been, but very much an autobiographical poet along romantic lines, one who in Wordsworth's phrase, "unlocked his heart" with the sonnet form as his "key." Indeed, the wariness with which nineteenth century critics such as Henry Hallam approached Shakespeare's *Sonnets* suggests the pervasive force of this misapprehension. Poetry, as John Stuart Mill put it, "is of the nature of soliloquy ... feeling confessing itself to itself, in moments of solitude and bodying itself forth in symbols which are the nearest possible representations of the feeling in the exact shape in which it exists in the poet's mind" (391). The allusion here to Thesius' speech in *Midsummer Night's Dream* is a significant indicator of Shakespeare's position as a model poet for the nineteenth century, whose practice, taken out of its historical context, was reinterpreted according to romantic standards.

It is not surprising, therefore, that Victorian poets like the Rossettis and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, when they took up the form of the sonnet sequence from its long obscurity, should turn to a romanticized Shakespeare as a model, and reconceive the sonnet sequence according to romantic notions of expressive, even autobiographical poetry. The chief problem facing them was how to give adequate structural integrity to their sequences without sacrificing the intensity of personal expression which they took as central to the poetic enterprise. The Elizabethans had frankly written their sonnets as conventional poems (sometimes indeed as conventional exercises), and had contented themselves with loose overall structures. Their notion of poetic expression lay in the play with and sometimes against the conventional expectations of their audience. The romantics, of course, did not have such public conventions available to them, nor did they deem the exercise of conventions a worthy poetic aim. Instead, they concentrated on the individual sonnet as a peculiarly intense form of lyric poem. The Victorians had to find new ways to integrate the poetic aims of the romantics with the large sequential form taken from the Elizabethans. While there were different solutions to this problem, I believe Christina Rossetti's was particularly elegant and unique, and in the balance of this essay I will attempt to demonstrate this with reference to her sequence entitled *Monna Innominata*.

In order to write sonnet sequences for the nineteenth century, the Victorians needed first of all, something to replace the conventional thematic structure of the Elizabethan sequences. The resource most readily at their disposal, which they inherited from the romantics, was the presiding and unifying consciousness of the

speaker, a natural manifestation of Mill's sense of poetry as soliloquy. Such a consciousness was able to gather up and give shape to heterogeneous moments of experience, and the development of such consciousness became indeed the main action of the poetry. Joan Rees has aptly described *The House of Life* as "Rossetti's journey through his own soul" (138). The transfigured form of the sonnet sequence offered Rossetti what a similarly transfigured form of the epic provided Wordsworth: a more or less structured means of investigating and giving shape to his life's experiences. The individual sonnets are epiphanic, registering the spots of meaningful time that go to make up the consciousness of the poet. Though this is not a "tight" structure, certainly not as logical and controlled as the structure of *Monna Innominata,* it is still something completely different from the structure of an Elizabethan sequence. Structuring a long poem with a series of autobiographical epiphanies is a typical romantic innovation.

Christina Rossetti, in *Monna Innominata,* may be attempting something short of a grand tour through her own soul, but her approach is as confessional as her brother's. Instead of summing up her life's experiences, she records with psychological intensity and sincere feeling the narrower experience of one unhappy love affair. In her preface she claims with charming modesty to be recording mere fanciful experiences, but her real conception of the proper approach to sonnet writing comes in a sly comparison of her own work with the flagrantly autobiographical *Sonnets From The Portuguese.*

> Had the Great Poetess of our own day and nation only been unhappy instead of happy, her circumstances would have invited her to bequeath to us, in lieu of the "Portuguese Sonnets," an inimitable "donna innominata" drawn not from fancy but from feeling, and worthy to occupy a niche beside Beatrice and Laura. (*Works* 58)

This comment has several different functions. It offers, under the guise of a hyperbolic compliment, what is in fact a cogent criticism of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's flouting of the convention of unhappy love. At the same time, however, it suggests a notion of poetry quite Victorian and not at all Elizabethan: that the way for a modern poet to find a place with the immortals was to write sonnets "drawn not from fancy but from feeling." Thus Mrs. Browning was fated by her life to write, as she did and however unhappily, sonnets of happy love. There is also the suggestion, however subliminal, that Christina Rossetti herself was not so fated, and that any such serious effort as hers would indeed be drawn from feeling.

Unlike her brother, Christina Rossetti seems anxious to protect herself from the spotlight invited by overt autobiography. Indeed, this may reflect in some

measure her painful shyness in an age which demanded poetry of confessional intensity, an age which led other poets, notably Tennyson and Browning, to the development of the dramatic monologue.[1] Thus, her sequence, *Monna Innominata* is presented as the fancifully imagined reflections of one of the many "donne innominate" whose charms were sung by the medieval poets. It is an effort to give finally the woman's side, to redress the unfairness of a strictly male viewpoint, which has given us ladies "resplendent with charms, but...scant of attractiveness" (*Works* 58). Each of the fourteen sonnets is preceded by an epigraph from Dante and one from Petrarch, as if to reaffirm some sort of relation with the great traditional sequences of the past.

In spite of this effort at concealment, early critics had no hesitation taking a biographical approach to the work. In fact, until quite recently most discussions of *Monna Innominata,* much in the manner of nineteenth century criticism of Shakespeare's sonnets, centered around the identity of the "other" to whom the poems are addressed.[2] The overabundance of strictly biographical treatments has led a critic like Joan Rees, however, to commit the opposite fallacy by treating the poems in terms of their handling of conventions and ignoring their autobiographical mode of presentation. The simple fact that Christina Rossetti's themes are "the common stock of love poetry in all ages (Rees 159) does not preclude their being suggested by, drawn from, and expressive of personal experience. Love itself is "the common stock of love poetry in all ages." What is of more point, is that the approach to writing poetry does in fact change from age to age. We should keep in mind the suggestion in Christina's comment on Mrs. Browning that she herself was writing poetry "drawn not from fancy but from feeling." In this she was

[1]Robert Langbaum has argued that the dramatic monologue was in fact conceived "as a reaction against the romantic confessional style" (79).

[2]Most writers, notably Marya Zaturenska, Dorothy Margaret Stuart, and more recently Georgina Battiscombe, have followed William Rossetti's suggestion that in *Monna Innominata* Christina was in fact "giving expression to her love for Charles Cayley," whose offer of marriage she refused on religious grounds. Lona Mark Packer's 1963 biography created something of a stir by claiming that William was in fact shielding Christina in making this assertion (225). Packer's own candidate is William Bell Scott, whose marriage to Alice Boyd at the time of Christina Rossetti's first Penkill visit presented in her opinion a more formidable, more traditional, and less respectable obstacle than any opposition to Cayley's religious views (226). It should be noted however that more recent critics such as Battiscombe have refused to take Packer's argument quite seriously. Like the controversy about Shakespeare's sonnets, it appears that the mysterious identity of Christina's "suitor" is not easily solvable. The fact that even William considered such an identification necessary, however, is itself an indication of the age's preoccupation with autobiographical poetry.

nothing if not typical of her age.

It is true that a writer like Lona Mosk Packer, searching the sonnets for actual biographical evidence, comes up with much sheer silliness, without any real bearing on our final valuation of the poems as works of art. The sixth sonnet is a good example.

> Trust me, I have not earned your dear rebuke,
> I love, as you would have me, God the most;
> Would lose not Him, but you, must one be lost,
> Nor with Lot's wife cast back a faithless look
> Unready to forego what I forsook;
> This say I, having counted up the cost,
> This, though I be the feeblest of God's host,
> The sorriest sheep Christ shepherds with His crook.
> Yet while I love my God the most, I deem
> That I can never love you overmuch;
> I love Him more, so let me love you too;
> Yea, as I apprehend it, love is such
> I cannot love you, if I love not Him,
> I cannot love Him if I love not you.

Packer comments that this sonnet may reflect an earlier conversation between Christina and William Bell Scott (her candidate for the role of suitor) about their relationship, which she had broken up in 1858. He may have brought up this fact, and "to this she could have replied that if so, it was not from lack of love" (230). This is surely reductionist, based as it is on a dubious theory about Christina's private life. On the other hand, Rees goes too far in the other direction when she considers the same poem only in terms of philosophical play with the theme of "the relation of human love to claims of a higher order [which] has worried love poets in ages of faith at least from Petrarch onwards" (157). Indeed, her approach leads her very readily to one of those "daring paradoxes" such critics love to find: "Love of God does not exclude love of the lover but includes it" (157). But Christina Rossetti cannot so easily be turned into an Elizabethan. This is taking the poem too much in abstraction to recognize all the effort she has gone to so that it will seem like deeply felt personal expression. What else is the subtle psychological "back-sliding" of the sestet which Rees has noted (157)? The important thing here, the "poetry," as it were, is not the philosophy but the confrontation of philosophy with personality. This is what pulsates so interestingly through the sequence. To ignore Christina's "Victorianism," which we do if we treat her as

if she had a twentieth century awareness of the Elizabethan uses of conventions, is to miss her own unique solution to the problem of writing an autobiographical sonnet sequence.

And clearly the tone of the poems is autobiographical. In spite of the frequent fig leaves plucked from Dante and Petrarch and the archetypal situations which the love affair Christina describes sometimes seems to fit, the situation and feelings in *Monna Innominata* are quite alien to those of any Elizabethan or Italian sequence. The subtle observations and psychology which Christina's sequence records are as particular and private as anything in *The House of Life.* Unlike the Elizabethans' and even Dante Rossetti's sonnets, the sonnets of *Monna Innominata* are not heterogeneous but suggest a definite, tightly constructed plot. Indeed the defined and particular quality of the plot precludes any Elizabethan-style structuring according to conventional situations. And since Christina's sonnets deal with a more narrow situation than a "journey through the soul," the broad structuring categories of *The House of Life* will not do either. Christina's solution, which has all the beauty of a tightly, logically conceived form, is to order her experiences according to the dictates of the sonnet form itself.

It is surprising that critics have not made more of the important subtitle of *Monna Innominata: A Sonnet of Sonnets.* Like the later sequence of twenty-eight sonnets entitled *Later Life: A Double Sonnet of Sonnets,* the full title of *Monna Innominata* suggests that Christina Rossetti consciously structured her sequence as a macro-sonnet, each individual poem fulfilling the logical function of an individual line in a sonnet. As we shall see in going through the poems, this allows for the two broad movements of feeling marked by a "turn" which we expect in a sonnet, while maintaining a sonnet's general impression of unity. The first eight sonnets (the "octave") are characterized by a basically optimistic celebration of the speaker's love. The first three rather naively celebrate the powers of secular love. The next three attempt to reconcile this love with the claims of religious faith. The seventh and eighth sonnets suggest desperate attempts to hold on to love. The "turn" occurs in the ninth sonnet where an insurmountable obstacle to that love is mentioned for the first time. The last six sonnets (the "sestet") are all concerned in various ways with renunciation and acceptance of the fate of unhappy love. It is into this taut mold that Christina's alter-ego "donna" has poured the expression of her feelings.

The first sonnet is a breathless celebration of the newly awakened feeling of love and the lover's blithe dependence on the presence of the beloved:

> Come back to me, who wait and watch for you: —

Or come not yet, for it is over then,
And long it is before you come again,
So far between my pleasures are and few.

The speaker displays all the innocent egoism of a youthful lover obsessed completely in the object of her affection:

For one man is my world of all the men
This wide world holds; O love, my world is you.

The sestet of the sonnet, however, suggests already something of "the pang" that may attend such earthly passion, dependent as it is on requital. John Donne, with the distance of wit, might have written that "Dull sublunary lover's love / Whose soul is sense / Cannot admit absence," but Christina, with a more tender feeling, presents the speaker's subjective mood:

My hope hangs waning, waxing like a moon
Between the heavenly days on which we meet:
Ah me, but where are now the songs I sang
When life was sweet because you called them sweet?

The second sonnet, in what is perhaps a less ambiguous mood of hopeful love, is given over to consideration of the "unrecorded," unnoticed "first moment of your meeting me." It would seem that the speaker knew her beloved long before she knew that she was in love with him. She now chides herself for being "so dull to mark the budding of my tree / That would not blossom yet for many a May." Now she vainly searches her memory to recollect that "day of days. . . that touch, / First touch of hand in hand." It is worth noting here the private use of seasonal imagery. The use of budding and blossoming as metaphors of youthful love is certainly "the common stock of love poetry," the familiar vocabulary of many an Elizabethan poet. But unlike Elizabethan poetry, Shakespeare's sonnets included, the blossoms do not have a generalized, public significance. The budding is "*of my tree*:" its significance is privately perceived and personally expressed. We are not common shareholders of the meaning, but overhear, as it were, the speaker's own apprehension of it.

Private seasonal images are found also in the third sonnet, which might make an interesting comparison with the "Care-charmer sleep" group of Elizabethan sonnets:

I dream of you, to wake: would that I might

Dream of you and not wake but slumber on;
Nor find with dreams the dear companion gone,
As, Summer ended, Summer birds take flight.
In happy dreams I hold you full in night.
I blush again who waking look so wan;
Brighter than sunniest day that ever shone,
In happy dreams your smile makes day of night.
Thus only in a dream we are at one,
Thus only in a dream we give and take
The faith that maketh rich who take or give;
If thus to sleep is sweeter than to wake,
To die were surely sweeter than to live,
Though there be nothing new beneath the sun.

Here, one might think at first, is the old convention of courting sleep so that one might achieve fulfilling love in dreams. Like Astrophil, the speaker is calling on "The baiting place of wit, the balm of woe / The poor man's wealth, the prisoner's release," so that she might, if not Stella's, at least her own beloved's "image see." But Sidney's jaunty catalogue of Elizabethan paradoxes suggests a very different approach, a very different tone from Christina's quietly expressed wish to see more of her lover in her dreams. There is nothing of the "brilliant exercise" in the imagery of *Monna Innominata.* A conventional theme is picked up, but it is so personalized as to be almost unrecognizable as a convention. There is "nothing new beneath the sun," as Christina, following *Ecclesiastes,* assures us, but the concerns of lovers are made new by being newly, personally felt and expressed. Indeed she is not far here from the Rilke of *Duineser Elegien* whose lovers renew by reenactment the experiences of all the lovers of the past. This is different, however, from the exercise of a public convention. No Elizabethan working in the "care-charmers" tradition would have taken the "sleep wish," as Christina does, to its logical conclusion: the "death wish." This is the extravagant psychological result of her contemplation, and she draws back from it with typical humility in her somewhat playful allusion to *Ecclesiastes.* Her conscience is not lulled.

Indeed the next three sonnets work at creating a more ennobling conception of love capable of being reconciled with her religious faith. The fourth sonnet begins with a playful comparison of their different "loves":

I loved you first: but afterwards your love,
Outsoaring mine, sang such a loftier song
As drowned the friendly cooings of my dove.

Which owes the other most? My love was long,
And yours one moment seemed to wax more strong.

But with deeply felt love such comparisons prove ultimately to be odious: "Nay, weights and measures do us both wrong. / For verily love knows not 'mine' or 'thine'. . . / For one is both and both are one in love." Confident in such love, she addresses him in the fifth sonnet as "my heart's heart. . . you who are to me / More than myself myself," and asks that God be with him and keep him "in strong obedience leal and true / To Him whose noble service setteth free." The reader should note this first, surprisingly late, entrance of God in the sequence. It is an effort, completely alien to the Elizabethan temperament, to elevate the almost embarrassingly secular love in the first three sonnets to an acceptable level of piety. For herself, the speaker maps out in typically Victorian fashion a domestic role:

To love you without stint and all I can,
To-day, to-morrow, world without end;
* * * * * * * * * * * * *
Since woman is the helpmeat made for man.

We have already considered, among other things, the confrontation of philosophy with personality in the sixth sonnet. The nature of this confrontation, its intimate connection with Christina's private concerns should be more clear by now. Rees' paradox, that "love of God does not exclude love of the lover but includes it," is a hard-worn plateau of feeling which the speaker achieves out of *psychological* necessity. It is the culmination of Christina's effort to spiritualize a love first perceived and expressed in secular terms.

The seventh and eighth sonnets bring the movement of the octave to a climax with a somewhat desperate attempt to maintain the equilibrium of the sixth sonnet. In the seventh, Christina proclaims herself and her beloved "happy equals in the flowering land / Of love" that "builds the house on rock and not on sand." In the sestet of the sonnet, however, she recognizes the bravado of this language: "My heart's a coward though my words are brave — / We meet so seldom, yet we surely part / So often." Her only comfort now, a feeble hope perhaps, flapping its tinsel wing, is drawn from her reading of the Bible: "Though jealousy be cruel as the grave, / And death be strong, yet love is strong as death." In the eighth sonnet Christina makes a last, rather desperate stand for requited love. Interestingly, her inspiration is Esther, who used her feminine wiles to gain the favor of King Ahasuerus and thus to save her people. Esther, a modest virgin devoted to her

stepfather, trusts herself to the mysterious working of God's will, and summons the courage to act desperately and uncharacteristically in behalf of that will. It is this courage Christina calls upon:

> If I might take my life so in hand,
> And for my love to Love put up my prayer,
> And for love's sake by Love be granted it!

The love that she is granted is not a requited love, however. The ninth sonnet marks the "turn" from happy to unhappy, or better, to unrequited love which will be the principal concern of the final sestet of sonnets.

> Thinking of you, and all that was, and all
> That might have been and now can never be,
> I feel your honoured excellence, and see
> Myself unworthy of the happier call:
> For woe is me who walk so apt to fall,
> So apt to shrink afraid, so apt to flee,
> Apt to lie down and die (ah woe is me!)
> Faithless and hopeless turning to the wall.

If she has lost "the happier call" of requited love, she is still "not hopeless quite nor faithless quite, / Because not loveless." As Plato was so fond of saying, honor is due not so much to the beloved as to the lover, for the lover has *within himself* the beneficent powers of love. Such a love may indeed "toil all night, / But take at morning." The allusion in the sestet to Jacob wrestling with the angel is suggestive of the epiphanic quality of the insight gained in the sonnet. Jacob [whatever it is he really wrestled with] faced the depths and came through them: "for I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved" (Genesis 32.30). Christina too has faced what she thought unfaceable and, not unmarked, not unwounded, has come out with her life preserved.

The last five sonnets chart, as it were, the psychology of loss and renunciation. The tenth sonnet, following hard on the "wrestling" of the ninth and suggestive of a natural psychological backsliding, expresses the speaker's world weariness after her loss:

> Time flies, hope flags, life plies a wearied wing;
> Death following hard on life gains ground apace.

Though "faith runs with each" and indeed "outruns the rest," the speaker no longer looks for happiness in earthly love but in an afterlife:

Let us go fall asleep, dear friend, in peace:
A little while, and age and sorrow cease;
A little while, and life reborn annuls
Loss and decay and death, and all is love.

The speaker is "all air and fire," leaving as it were her body to the baser elements. This mood is heightened in the beautiful eleventh sonnet.

Many in aftertimes will say of you
'He loved her' — while of me what will they say?
Not that I loved you more than just in play,
For fashion's sake as idle women do.
Even let them prate; who knows not what we knew
Of love and parting in exceeding pain,
Of parting hopeless here to meet again,
Hopeless on earth, and heaven is out of view.
But by my heart of love laid bare to you,
My love that you can make not void nor vain,
Love that foregoes you but to claim anew
Beyond this passage of the gate of death,
I charge you at the Judgment make it plain
My love of you was life and not a breath.

Here the notion of Platonic love, already suggested earlier, is given full expression. On the strength of a philosophy grounded in personal faith, Christina makes claims for her love, defeated in earthly terms, which yet exceeds the narrow boundaries of mortal life. From the perspective of eternity, her love surely will be justified.[3] In this confident frame of mind, she is able to accept (in the twelfth sonnet) without grudging it someone who might take her place in her lover's eyes:

If there be any one can take my place
And make you happy whom I grieve to grieve,
Think not that I can grudge it, but believe
I do commend you to that nobler grace,

[3]On some other occasion it might be amusing to compare closely this subtle poem with Elizabeth Barrett Browning's often anthologized "How do I love thee? Let me count the ways." One is of sad love, the other of happy; one is the product of a woman of deep faith, the other of a woman whose saints are all "lost"; one is written in a quietly meditative style, the other in a burst of rhetoric. Yet what they have both in common is the conviction that the best poetry springs from the sincere expression of personal feeling, that the way to poetry lies through the self.

That readier wit than mine, that sweeter face.

One might reasonably look for irony in this, but if there is any it is subsumed in the overriding power of Christina's unrequited love: "since your riches make me rich, conceive / I too am crowned, while bridal crowns I weave." Her love is selfless, and in this lies her power to overcome adversity:

since the heart is yours that was mine own,
Your pleasure is my pleasure, right my right,
Your honourable freedom makes me free,
And you companioned I am not alone.[4]

The last two sonnets bring the macro-sonnet to its logical conclusion, the thirteenth concerned primarily with the fate of the beloved, the fourteenth with Christina herself. In the thirteenth sonnet, she trusts herself finally to God: "If I could trust mine own self with your fate, / Shall I not rather trust it in God's hand?" After a Job-like catalogue of His qualities, she still finds herself seeing through a glass darkly, with

only love and love's goodwill
Helpless to help and impotent to do,
Of understanding dull, of sight most dim.

All she can do now is commend her beloved "back to Him / Whose love your love's capacity can fill." With this she dismisses the beloved, and in the fourteenth sonnet she turns at last to consider her own fate:

Youth gone, and beauty gone if ever there
Dwelt beauty in so poor a face as this;

[4]The language here might bear comparison with that of the Elizabethans, particularly Donne in *The Holy Sonnets.* Indeed, paradoxes seem a basic religious mode of expression, and Christina's mood here, like Donne's, is steeped in religious feeling. One might note, however, that the personal form of address Donne reserved for his conversations with God is here applied to Christina's beloved. This brings into question whether the sonnets are conceived as actual addresses to the beloved or interior meditations. We remember that according to the notion of the "two audiences," Elizabethan sonnets supposely addressed to a "lady" were in fact aimed at the same time at a public audience of courtly readers. This double motive may be detected through close observance of the many ironies, poses, and public conventions that inform the Elizabethan texts. Christina's sonnets pose a more difficult problem. The beloved is clearly not a paper figure, and there is no evidence that she is winking at a wider audience at the same time. If they are fancifully addressed to him, then they have the quality of a private meditation, like Donne perhaps, but most unlike Sidney.

Youth gone and beauty, what remains of bliss?
I will not bind fresh roses in my hair,
To shame a cheek at best but little fair,—
Leave youth his roses, who can bear a thorn,—
I will not seek for blossoms anywhere,
Except such common flowers as blow with corn.
Youth gone and beauty gone, what doth remain?
The longing of a heart pent up forlorn,
A silent heart whose silence loves and longs;
The silence of a heart which sang its songs
While youth and beauty made a summer morn,
Silence of love that cannot sing again.

In another age this beautiful poem might have been called "A Farewell to Cupid." But unlike the sonnets of renunciation by Fulke-Greville or Drayton, it does not vanquish its mistress with a conceit or a convention. After the mood of philosophical exultation, she is left finally, her youth and beauty gone the way of all youth and beauty, with her private sorrow: "The longing of a heart pent up forlorn, / A silent heart whose silence loves and longs; . . . Silence of love that cannot sing again."

The reader should note here the effect Christina Rossetti gains through one of her favorite devices in *Monna Innominata,* the repetition of key words and phrases. Apart from lending a feeling of unity to the individual sonnets and the sequence as a whole, this repetition suggests the hypnotic murmur of a mind talking to itself, which we as readers, taking our cue from Mill, must overhear. The substance of the poetry, its characteristic mode of expression is thus confessional. Its characteristic tone is that of a private diary or letter. In this, as we have seen, it is fairly typical of its age. What is not typical is Christina's way of structuring her sonnet sequence in an age which had effectively lost touch with the conventions of the Elizabethans. The "sonnet of sonnets" or macro-sonnet furnishes her with a tighter, more logical structure than either the loose conventional sequences of the Elizabethans or her own brother's loosely epiphanic "journey through his own soul." Indeed, the macro-sonnet solves the problem of whether the sonnet should be conceived as an intense individual lyric (the form favored by romantic idolaters of Milton) or the strophic constituent of a much longer work (the form suggested by Elizabethan practice). The individual sonnets of *Monna Innominata,* unlike the romantic sonnets of Wordsworth and Keats or even the individual poems of *The House of Life,* do not stand on their own as individual lyric poems; but neither are

they episodic constituents of a long, rambling sequence in the manner of the Elizabethans. Taken together as constituents of a larger sonnet, they form an intensely unified lyric whole. And they must be so taken.

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Part III

Essays on Film

Chapter 18

The Wild Bunch: Scourges or Ministers?

When *The Wild Bunch* first appeared in the summer of 1969, it created something of a scandal with its raw, unleavened violence and hyper-realistic treatment of the western subject matter.[1] This treatment seemed to scorn deliberately the usual dictates of the western genre, a traditional repository of American values which called for idealized if not mythological handling. Americans used to finding genteel gunfights and unambiguous morality in their westerns were shocked by Peckinpah's depiction of the west as a squalid, messily bloody place, marked not by the confrontation of good and evil but by layers of badness. Where the traditional western offered, at the safe distance of legend, a morality corresponding to the perceived moral clarity of the Second World War, Peckinpah's western reflected the moral ambiguity and discomfort of the war in Vietnam.[2]

[1]Copyright ©1991 by Jeffery A. Triggs. All rights reserved. This essay first appeared in *The New Orleans Review* 18.3 (Fall 1991): 64-69.

[2]The nature of this moral ambiguity was much debated at the time, and not always in the most helpful terms. A number of critics noted with some discomfort the aesthetic beauty of Peckinpah's violence. Comparisons were often made with *Bonnie and Clyde*, which made similar use of slow motion. Paul Schrader went so far as to argue that "in *The Wild Bunch* Sam Peckinpah stares into the heart of his own fascism....The Westerners of *The Wild Bunch* have lost their code—only the fascism remains. The power of *The Wild Bunch* lies in the fact that this fascism is not peculiar to Peckinpah, but is American at heart." See Paul Schrader, "Sam Peckinpah Going to Mexico," *Cinema* 5.3 (1969): 22. This seems much too glib an argument, however. One is reminded of the reasons George Orwell tried to kick terms like "fascism" into the dustbin of "meaningless words." Paul Seydor is certainly right when he notes that such critics commit the rather naive fallacy of "drawing a one-to-one relationship between the ideas that characters express and the

Setting his film in the early twentieth century rather than the idealized post-Civil War period common in earlier westerns, Peckinpah suggested an incipient but recognizably modern world that is still very much with us.

All this, of course, along with the Vietnam War, is no longer news. Since then a flood of such "modern" westerns has made graphic violence, moral ambiguity, and the twentieth century setting the virtual coordinates of a new genre, if not the cliches of our time. Certainly, *The Wild Bunch* no longer shocks us as it once did, and if anything its flaws reveal themselves in a sentimentality not unlike that of the traditional western. Much more apparent today than any revolutionary breaking with the past is the film's evident nostalgia for the world of the nineteenth century, which as historians are quick to point out, ended not with the turn of the century but the beginning of the First World War.[3] The modern world depicted in the film is indeed brutal and seemingly Godless, with the appropriate ethical trappings, but it is counterpoised by the simulacrum of an earlier, morally simpler world.

One of the rather odd things about *The Wild Bunch* is its distinctly theological cast, permeating the film in spite of its realistic presentation. The society it depicts is obviously a modern Sodom and Gomorrah, whose ultimate destruction is made to feel at least divinely ordained. The famous violence takes on indeed an aura of ritual destruction or vastation, which is dramatically satisfying if morally ambiguous. The film suggests the paradox of a Godless world in which the divine nonetheless threatens to intercede. The form of this intercession, however, is not obvious—it is certainly not what the hapless fundamentalists at the beginning of the film expect.

It is worth considering the story in the light of Fredson Bowers' discussion of the roles of "scourge" and "minister" as they obtain in *Hamlet*.[4] One might object that a constituent of Elizabethan cosmology is inappropriately brought to bear upon a modern story, but we should remember that the traditional western ethic, which Peckinpah ranges to some extent against the modern world, suggests a cosmology as elaborate in its way as that of the Elizabethans, and in certain respects remarkably similar. Like the Elizabethans, nineteenth century adherents of a "fire and brimstone" theology expected and looked for divine intervention in human affairs. Clint Eastwood's film *Pale Rider* is a more recent and more

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artist's personal beliefs." See Paul Seydor, *Peckinpah: The Western Films* (Chicago: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1980) 102.

[3]It would not be surprising if future historians argue that the "bad century" ended spiritually during the past year.

[4]Fredson Bowers, "Hamlet as Minister and Scourge," *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Hamlet*, ed. David Bevington (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentiss-Hall Inc., 1968).

obvious dramatization of such thinking. That this intervention should make use of an ironic instrument is more typical of the Elizabethans perhaps than western Americans, but it sorts well with Peckinpah's twentieth century perspective. Peckinpah's film at once satirizes western American religious belief in the form of the fundamentalist teetotallers and fulfills ironically its expectations with the fiery destruction of a clearly sinful society, brought on by the wild bunch as God's scourges and ministers. (We will consider later which of these terms is most appropriately applied here.)

Bowers points out that both scourges and ministers are agents of God's external, as opposed to internal intervention in human affairs (85). Whereas internal intervention was appropriate for someone capable of being moved by conscience "to a state of grief and remorse" (85), external intervention, in the form of natural or human revenge, was appropriate for those so deeply dyed in their sins that no inner redemption was possible. According to Bowers, Elizabethan belief held that when God did choose to punish crime with human agents, He

> chose for his instruments those who were already so steeped in crime as to be past salvation. This was not only a principle of economy, but a means of freeing God from the impossible assumption that He would deliberately corrupt innocence....only a man already damned for his sins was selected, and he was called a scourge. (85)

The position of the scourge, as Bowers notes, "was not an enviable one" (85); whether he realized his function or not—and as Hamlet's case suggests, this was not always possible—he was already condemned. The minister differs from the scourge in that he "is an agent who directly performs some good" which may indeed involve "a direct retribution for evil by overthrowing it and setting up a positive good in its place" (Bowers 86). According to Bowers, "a retributive minister may visit God's wrath on sin but only as the necessary final act to the overthrow of evil, whereas a scourge visits wrath alone, the delayed good to rest in another's hands" (86). Bowers' paradigms are Richard III as the scourge of an England corrupted by the overthrow and murder of Richard II and Henry Richmond as the minister "exacting public justice in battle on the tyrant Richard" (86). Hamlet's case, of course, is more difficult to determine, but we will recur to it later in determining the status of the wild bunch themselves.

The first scene of the film leaves us in no doubt that the "bunch" are damned, and also that they are living in a world of the damned. We see them initially entering a small western town in Texas dressed as trail-worn soldiers. On their way to the bank, they pass a group of children seemingly engaged in innocent

play, as well as a local temperance group holding a meeting, and their leader, in gentlemanly fashion, even offers assistance to a local woman. A sort of banal orderliness seems to reign in the town. Once inside the bank, however, they brandish their weapons with shocking suddenness. The seeming order breaks down into a vicious chaos. We realize also that the bandits have been led into a trap; bounty hunters lurk in readiness on the rooftops. The scene erupts now into one of incredible violence (balanced in the film only by the apocalyptic scene at the end) as the bandits try to shoot their way out of town. One bystander is shown being shot in the street from several directions at once. A bandit and his horse crash through a plate glass window. Ruthlessly, the bandits take women hostages, shoot innocent people, and escape with their "loot," which as it will turn out consists of washers planted by the bounty hunters. The lawmen, however, are shown to be equally vicious and destructive. And beyond this, they are possessed by *Schadenfreude,* gushing effusively at the evident sufferings of their victims. Even the children at the edge of town are seen now as vicious: they have been horribly enjoying themselves watching scorpions being overwhelmed and destroyed by red ants, and then burning them for sport. Indeed, women and children, the traditional innocents of westerns, do not fare well in this film. The chaos lingering beneath the surface of order touches everyone here.

The sense of a violent and corrupt world, which this scene so vividly evokes with its striking realism, is what seems to break with the tradition of the idealized western, but in cunning ways the film comments on this tradition and actually carries it on. Certainly, the protagonists of most traditional westerns are not villains, but as the subtle allusion to *Jesse James* (the horse and rider crashing through a plate glass window) suggests, this was not invariably the case, even in the days of the Hollywood studios. A certain anarchic freedom from bourgeois constraints was always part of the tradition of the western, though rarely displayed in such a violent form. Actually, the wild bunch are likeable enough if we consider them personally and apart from their vocation. This paradox is also an inheritance from films like *Jesse James* and *The Treasure of Sierra Madre.* The first scene of *The Wild Bunch* does not allow us, however, to sympathize completely with anyone. We must see the personal and likeable traits of the protagonists against the background of viciousness, and indeed only as they grow in contrast to the irredeemable viciousness and greed of many of those supposedly on the side of the law. Peckinpah intentionally muddies the moral waters, and in doing so he is able to disguise his continuance of the idealistic tradition. As failed bandits—the yardstick of the Puritan ethic is appropriate here—the wild bunch incur damnation; as *scourges,* they will ultimately effect God's will, the only way justice may

prevail in a society that is thoroughly corrupt.

Enclosed by the apocalyptic violence of the first and last scenes, the middle scenes of the film, in their relatively peaceful way, introduce us to the protagonists, suggest a human dimension, and set up the more precise moral distinctions that come into play at the climax. The "bunch" embraces really two generations: the aging bandits Pike, Dutch, and Sykes, and a younger group composed of the Gorch brothers (Lyle and Tector) and the Mexican Indian Angel. A fourth younger bandit, the grandson of Sykes, received the death many of them might have envied holding hostages in town to let the others escape, while a fourth older bandit, Deke Thornton, has been forced by an unscrupulous railroad man Harrigan (perhaps a play on the notorious railroad financier, E.H. Harriman) to lead a scrofulous band of bounty hunters. The older characters appear to have lived too long, while the youngers ones have been born too late. For all of them, however, the American frontier, on which their way of life depended, has closed. Their one alternative, as Richard Schickel puts it, is to "attempt to ride right out of our history and into Mexico's, where they are not yet anachronisms."[5]

That Mexico will offer a real solution to their predicament, however, is open to doubt. As they cross the border into Mexico, Angel reverently exclaims: "Mexico lindo!" He is immediately countered by the Gorches: "I don't see nothin' so lindo about it. It just looks like more of Texas." To this Angel retorts: "Ah, you have no eyes." As the product of a different culture, Angel is the only one with open possibilities. Where the others are politically indifferent, a condition of their situation as well as the anarchic western tradition, one part of Angel at least is politically committed to the still unsettled cause of his people. For Pike, loyalty does not go outside the family circle of the "bunch." As he puts it trying to quell a rebellion of the younger men, "When you side with a man, you stay with him. And if you can't do that, you're like some animal—you're finished...we're finished." His goal is "to make one good score and back off," and he will not allow political or moral considerations to affect him. To Mapache's German advisor, Commander Mohr, who would like to know "some Americans who did not share their government's naive sentiments," Pike comments: "We share very few sentiments with our government." To Pike, Mexico is a last frontier with the anarchic freedom where he may attempt his "score."

To Angel, who leads the bunch to the safety of his village, it is a homeland repressed by General Huerta and filled with political tensions he cannot resist. He

[5]Richard Schickel, "Mastery of the 'Dirty Western,"' *Film 69/70*, eds. Joseph Morgenstern and Stefan Kanfer (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1970) 151.

insists that the bunch treat the villagers with respect, indicating a loyalty outside the group. Later, in Aqua Verde, the headquarters of the ruthless General Mapache, Angel refuses to help steal guns for the tyrant. When challenged by Sykes, who points out that there were no tears in his eyes for the ravaged American townsmen, he answers: "Ah, they were not my people. I care about my people, my village, Mexico." To Sykes' comment that when "you ride with us, your own business don't count," he responds: "Then I don't ride with you." The others do not understand the positive force of Angel's political attitudes. Pike, for instance, considers him "a pain in the ass." When Angel challenges him ("Would you give guns to someone who kills your father? your mother?"), Pike answers simply: "Ten thousand cuts an awful lot of family ties." And yet Pike protects him (as a gang member) from the general, and Dutch even sympathizes as far as possible (that is, up to the point of risking his own skin) with Angel's cause. Indeed, it is Angel's inability to accept the anarchic "brotherhood among thieves" ethic in a Mexican context that propels the "bunch" into their final conflict. He cannot resist shooting his former girlfriend who has become the mistress of Mapache, an act which introduces a deadly disequilibrium into the relations of the "bunch" and the Mexicans. After this, a confrontation can be postponed but not avoided.

The society composed of the Mexican soldiers and their camp-followers, like that suggested by the bounty hunters and the railroad representative, is perhaps best described as loathsome. We first see Mapache, a Huerta lieutenant who is trying to set up an independent fiefdom in northern Mexico, riding in a bright red convertible, the color suggesting immediately the salaciousness that accompanies and characterizes him. We know already that he has seduced Angel's girlfriend after killing his parents. He is lecherous, murderous, and apparently in a constant state of drunkenness. Occupying himself with the whores and champagne, Mapache evidently leaves the details of command to such obsequious advisors as his aide-de-camp, his "accountant" (a snake-like fellow who orders one of his own men shot in cold blood to impress the "gringos"), and two German army officers who are testing the possibility of extending German influence (this several years before the infamous Zimmermann telegram). Thus, the American bandits have moved from a corrupt "western" situation into what is clearly a colonial one, even more corrupt and marked by modern political tensions. When the "bunch" first see Mapache, Dutch comments: "Generalisimo hell—he's just another bandit grabbing all he can for himself." Pike chips in cynically: "Like some others I could mention?" But Dutch refuses the comparison: "We ain't nothin' like him. We don't hang nobody." Mapache represents in an early form a type of petty tyrant all too familiar in the twentieth century, who may or may not be, as Roosevelt

once characterized Somoza, "our bastard." It is one of Peckinpah's most brilliant strokes to bring a typical modern devil into conflict with the outlaws of a vanishing era. Before seeing Mapache, the "bunch" have never seen an automobile. They are looking over the fence into our world. Later, the car will be used to drag the body of the tortured Angel around the village square. Indeed, Mapache's automobile is only one suggestion of the modern, industrial world which has closed the frontier and threatens violence on an industrial scale. The Maxim machine gun, which becomes the chief instrument of the apocalyptic finale, is another. The setting of *The Wild Bunch* touches the era of world wars, of mass torture, and of violent death as a commonplace.

As we mentioned before, women and children do not fare well in this film. In Starbuck, the scene of the first robbery attempt, the children delight in torturing scorpions and ants, while others imitate in their play the deadly violence of the adults. The Mexican children of Aqua Verde are also squalid and vicious. When the Americans first enter the town, Peckinpah has a close-up of a woman in military outfit suckling her baby under her bandolier. Virtually all the women, with children and without, are whores. Indeed, there is much joking about whores (the Gorches are comic boasters in this respect) throughout the film, but as the case of Angel's girlfriend suggests, the theme is also dealt with seriously. When Angel sees her making her way all gussied up to the general's table, he accosts her, but she rebuffs him, claiming that she is "very happy" with Mapache and laughing in Angel's face. Seeing her with Mapache, Angel screams "*puta*" (whore) and shoots her through the heart. It is clear that she represents the rule and not an exception in Aqua Verde. Mapache relaces her effortlessly with one of many look-alike prostitutes. At first, the Americans try to avail themselves of the services of these girls (of course, Mapache gives them the leftovers from the group), but eventually the prostitutes ignite their disgust. Forced to hide from Thornton and the bounty hunters, the "bunch" returns to Aqua Verde and despite the fact that Angel has been captured and tortured, Pike and the Gorches seek oblivion with some of the prostitutes. But the sight of a young whore with her baby crying in the next room turns Pike's stomach and confirms his decision to challenge Mapache. Even the Gorches are horrified by a girl who has apparently killed a small bird as part of her "act," and they assent to Pike's "Let's go" with "why not?" In the end, Pike is killed by shots fired by a prostitute and a small boy.

Peckinpah goes to great lengths to present Aqua Verde in terms of Sodom and Gomorah, a society so drenched in sin as to require violent retribution. The wild bunch, implicated in sin themselves, and with the exception of Angel uncommitted to any political cause, become ironically the instruments of retribution. As

such, they clearly take on the roles of scourges. Not all the characters in the film are damned, however. The people of Angel's village, anxious to throw off the yoke of Mapache, are treated by Peckinpah with a reverence that many commentators have found overly sentimental. John Simon, for instance, calls the scene in Angel's village, where "everyone is singing a schmalzy Mexican song,...pure treacle."[6] In his way Simon is right, of course, for Peckinpah does actually carry on the sentimentality of the traditional western, not only in this scene, but in the characters of Thornton, Sykes, Dutch, and even Pike himself to a degree.

Thornton, for instance, is the only one of the bounty hunters who can shoot straight, and we are left in no doubt that this is because, like his compatriots on the other side, he is of the old school and a real man. When Thornton and the bounty hunters find the bodies of the "bunch" after the slaughter, Thornton thoughtfully removes Pike's familiar old Colt 45, ironically still in its holster and unused in the modern, technological battle. Sensing the futility and corruption around him, Thornton finally quits the company of the ravenous bounty hunters and lets them ride off to their deaths at the hands of the revolutionaries from Angel's village. Sykes, who was left watching the horses during the Starbuck robbery because of his advanced age, quarrels frequently with the Gorches, but has the obvious respect of Pike and Thornton. "Dry gulched" by the bounty hunters, he does not participate in the bloody finale in Aqua Verde, but instead joins forces with the Mexican villagers, now in armed revolt because of the guns procured by Angel. The scene where they approach him with machetes drawn and Indian drums in the background is an obvious allusion to a similar scene in *The Treasure of Sierra Madre.* Like Walter Huston in that film, he finds unexpectedly a new life by attaching himself to a foreign cause. As he tells Thornton at the end of the film, inviting him to join also, "Me and the boys here got some work to do. It ain't like it used to be, but it'll do." Thornton's world weary laughter answers, in effect, "Why not?" As in *The Treasure of Sierra Madre,* a wind storm blows up dustily over the efforts and illusions of the dead.

The revolutionary villagers, Sykes, and Thornton are the inheritors of the vastated society left behind by the wild bunch, and in so far as they too deliver retribution (to the bounty hunters, for instance) may be counted as the ministers of the story. Attached to the cause of revolution, their means of retribution "lie in some act of public justice, rather than in criminal private revenge" (Bowers 86). Whether or not the rest of the "bunch" may be similarly redeemed as ministers

[6]John Simon, "Violent Idyll," *Film 69/70,* eds. Joseph Morgenstern and Stefan Kanfer (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1970) 154.

is open to question. As we have pointed out, their actions in the first scene, as well as their continued assertions of amoral values, seem clearly to have damned them to the role of scourges. The manner of their deaths, however, may offer some expiation of these sins. Leaving the whores, they go to Mapache and demand Angel's freedom. He responds by slitting Angel's throat before their eyes. At this point they finally act selflessly, turning their guns first on Mapache himself, and then interestingly on Commander Mohr, before beginning the general carnage. In the final gunfight, brilliant, beautiful, and devastating in its kind, the wild bunch and their enemies, the bad and the thoroughly evil, destroy each other. Stephen Farber, noting how this conclusion leaves us emotionally "drained" and arguing that Peckinpah "twists our response and forces us to pay a final tribute to [the wild bunch's] irreverence and their resilience," wonders what Peckinpah is saying here: "If he means to repel us by the life of violence, why that strangely sentimental finale?"[7]

Again, Bowers' discussion is illuminating. He points out that Hamlet, that ever difficult case, may be seen as both a scourge and a minister:

> By stage doctrine [Hamlet] must die for the slaying of Polonius, and...for that of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern perhaps, the first in which he was inadvertently and the second consciously a scourge; and the penalty is being exacted. Since he cannot now ascend the throne over Claudius' body, all self-interest is removed. He has not plotted Claudius' death in cold blood, but seized an opportunity which under no circumstances he could have contrived by blood-revenge, to kill as a dying act of public justice a manifest and open murderer....The restitution of right lies only in him. (91)

Hamlet, through the final manner of his revenge and death, becomes, in Bowers' words, "a minister of providence who ... like Samson, was never wholly cast off for his tragic fault and in the end was honored by fulfilling divine plan in expiatory death" (92). Taking all relevant differences into consideration, we may still say something similar about the wild bunch. Their manifest faults condemn them as scourges, but they are at once redeemed by the selfless manner of their deaths and attain a tragic status. Indeed, the justice Peckinpah lets reign at the end of his film, bitter as it is in the best modern fashion, looks backward to a purposeful world where tragic sacrifice was possible rather than forward to the meaninglessness of a century where God has been little in evidence and everything has been permitted.

[7]Stephen Farber, "Peckinpah's Return," *Film Quarterly* 23.1 (Fall 1969): 6.

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Chapter 19

Allegory and Naturalism in Ingmar Bergman's Medieval Films

When Ingmar Bergman's film *Fanny and Alexander* came out a few years ago, it was an event of remarkable excitement, the testament of a great director's career, the epic summation of his earlier work. And like many of Bergman's earlier films, it was disturbing in its success. On the one hand, it is grandly, even starkly naturalistic, the cinematic equivalent of Tolstoyan or Strindbergian realism. At the same time, however, it can be seen as a vast, allegorical fairy tale; its basic plot structure suggests this, along with its incorporation of important phantasmagoric elements. Indeed, Bergman emphasizes the phantasmagoric constituent of his story when his characters speak, near the end of the film, of producing Strindberg's *A Dream Play*. *Fanny and Alexander* is also to be seen as a kind of dream play superimposed, as it were, on a realistic drama. That the two do not readily mix is what disturbs and intrigues us about the film, and it suggests an important dichotomy of impulse throughout Bergman's career, a dichotomy he may be said to have inherited from such Scandinavian precursors as Strindberg himself. At different points in his career, Bergman has followed this impulse in its different directions, toward the allegorical phantasy of *Wild Strawberries,* for instance, or toward the naturalism of *Scenes From a Marriage.*

The two medieval films, *The Seventh Seal* and *The Virgin Spring,* though superficially similar in terms of settings and costumes, represent Bergman's dichotomy of impulse in a peculiarly clear and apprehensible form. *The Seventh Seal*, which Jorn Donner has termed Bergman's "least immediate" and "most rhetorical" film (135), is a modern vision (and interpretation) of medieval allegory and must be considered in terms of its allegorical suggestiveness. *The Virgin*

Spring, on the other hand, though it makes important use of ritual action, is actually a naturalistic drama with a medieval setting. Vernon Young calls it "the most selfless of [Bergman's] films" (188), while Birgitta Steene has argued that "in crucial scenes the camera suggests no symbolic level of response" (95). We are to interpret it according to the naturalistic function of its imagery.

It may be useful at this point to distinguish between "ritual" and "allegorical" as these terms obtain in Bergman's films. The word "ritual" suggests a prescribed performance of certain acts, usually of a religious nature and typically to be seen as the mystical reenactment of some primal myth in which the meaning of the event resides. The Mass, for instance, is the ritual reenactment of the Last Supper. Not all rituals are as closely associated with their primal significance, however, for a ritual may become detached from its original meaning, and thus subsist as a perfectly inscrutable cultural survival. Indeed, the study of folkways abounds in examples of such deracinated rituals and customs. The important point, however, is that meaning, while it may be visible through ritual, remains distinct from it. The ritual in itself is not symbolic, but realistic. One might point out that according to many interpretations, the body and blood of Christ are literally consumed at every Mass. *The Virgin Spring* is bracketed, as it were, with two ritual actions: the bringing of candles to Mass, a task Tore imposes on his reluctant daughter Karin, and the preparation to kill the three goatherds, which Tore imposes on himself. Interestingly, both these actions go astray. Karin never arrives at the church, and thus does not connect with the meaning of her ritual action. The ritual functions to set the plot in motion. Tore's ritual preparation for murder, surely a more inscrutable and perhaps a pagan custom, quickly degenerates into a desperate death struggle, whose significance is psychological rather than symbolic.

Allegory, on the other hand, is essentially symbolic. It suggests a series of images or emblems *in which* the meaning is symbolically represented. However realistically an allegory is presented, therefore, it can never be detached from its symbolic meaning, as ritual very often is. Dante's Virgil may be a very convincing human character, but he is always at once the figure of reason. Steene is probably right that Bergman's allegory is more "general" than strictly "medieval" (what modern author's allegory isn't?), on the grounds that *The Seventh Seal* "has little in common with the *a priori* assumption of an orderly universe, which underlies original [read Dantean? Spenserian?] allegory" (63). But her description of Bergman's allegory might just as easily serve for Dante's: "a story in which the spiritual content is set forth in a concrete action and with characters whose movements are realistic but whose basic function is that of abstract symbols" (62-63).

In *The Seventh Seal*, the characters function as abstract symbols of a society

that is clearly intended to seem, in Barbara Tuchman's phrase, "a distant mirror" of our own. Bergman's film is remarkable for the range of its characters, all of whom must confront death in the cataclysmic form of the Black Plague. Bergman himself has drawn a connection between the cataclysm of the Black Plague and the potential cataclysm of atomic war in our own day: "In the Middle Ages, men lived in terror of the plague. Today they live in fear of the atomic bomb. *The Seventh Seal* is an allegory with a theme that is quite simple: man, his eternal search for God, with death as his only certainty" (Program note to *The Seventh Seal).* Chief among the film's characters is Antonius Block, a knight, who returns to Sweden with his squire, Jons, and engages the figure of Death in a game of chess with his life as the stake. The chess game, which has precedents in medieval allegory (see Steene 63), suggests symbolically the rational, idealistic nature of Block's search for meaning in his life, a need his squire does not share. But Block and his squire are not the only major characters. Their fates are played out in counterpoint with those of Jof and Mia, a pair of peripatetic actors and the parents of a young child, Skat, an actor, Raval, a doctor at a theological seminary (who once inspired Block to go on the crusade and is now a grave robber), Plog, a cuckolded smith, a group of Flagellants, a young girl burned as a witch, and Block's wife, Karin, a sort of Swedish Penelope. All of these characters represent different levels of society and different possible responses to the impending catastrophe.

Interestingly, many of these characters seem to be drawn from the stock of comic types. Jof and Mia are the young lovers and significantly the only ones to escape death. Jof, who has visions of the Virgin Mary, is a comic lunatic, lover, and poet, literally playing his fate out as an observer of the larger tragic actions. The fate of Jof and Mia provides a rival comic tonality at the film's conclusion, competing ambiguously with the tragic tonality of Block's fate, rather the way major and minor keys compete at the end of Richard Strauss' tone poem, *Also Sprach Zarathustra.* Plog is a figure out of medieval comedy, sinister indeed when in league with Raval at the tavern, but ultimately more pathetic than threatening. Skat too is essentially a comic figure, a cowardly boaster of the Falstaff variety. Even Skat's death is comic: he climbs a tree to escape death, only to have Death saw off the limb onto which he has climbed. The hypocritical Raval is a figure out of comedy also, a sort of Malvolio whose threats are easily deflected by Jons. Raval's gruesome death, however, is comic only the way some of the less savory scenes of medieval jest books are comic, in that it is well deserved. He approaches the others in the night, visibly afflicted with the plague and crying out for water, but is left to die miserably and alone. Raval's death departs from the jest book tradition, however, in that it is warranted only by chance, not as a reasonable

retribution for his evil. Bergman's modern insight is that the plague afflicts the innocent and guilty alike and without reason. Skat's death, for instance, is not justified by his petty sins, nor is the death of Block's long suffering and innocent wife.

We see the film's ambiguity about punishment clearly in the scene with Tyan, the "witch" who is burned as a scapegoat. In his excellent study of the Black Death, Philip Ziegler notes that such scapegoats fulfilled a basic medieval need to seek evidence of God's will on earth: "few doubted that the Black Death was God's will but, by a curious quirk of reasoning, medieval man also concluded that His instruments were to be found on earth and that, if only they could be identified, it was legitimate to destroy them" (97). Tyan is being burned because she claims to be able to see the devil, and thus she attracts the attention of Block, who believes that the devil, if anybody, must know God. When Block questions her, however, he finds a terrified young girl who sees nothing: like God, the devil is inscrutable. Tyan seems indeed nothing more than a confused innocent, her death as meaningless as Block fears his own dedicated life has been. This theme is underscored by the presence of the Flagellants, who try to live with death as futilely as Block tries to escape it.

Block and Jons are the main questers in the story, and although they are accorded a more than comic dignity, even they may have comic antecedents in Don Quixote and Sancho Panza. Block has Quixote's idealism, if not at this point his innocence, while Jons has something of Panza'a stolid realism. This point is worth making to place Block and Jons as allegorical types, rather than rounded tragic characters. An inscrutable or meaningless world is not fertile ground for tragedy in any event, and placed in such a world, Block and Jons do not recommend themselves as fully perceived, tragic personalities as much as they suggest different responses to relentless fate. Steene makes the useful point that "the Knight and his squire complement each other, and depict the skeptic personality facing a world where God is silent: one in futile introspection, the other in gallant action" (66). Jons is in some ways the more sympathetic of the two, a modern-minded skeptic in the Existentialist tradition Bergman admires. In spite of his evident lack of belief, Jons is not enervated, but dedicates himself to helping others in practical ways, as in his rescue of Jof at the tavern. And he remains sarcastic even in the conquering presence of Death, allowing himself to be quieted at the end only "under protest."

Perhaps the most mysterious character is Block's wife, Karin, the "Penelope" to whose house the others repair in their extremity. Presumably, she and Block were once as innocent as Jof and Mia, but in her domestic way (she is the only

character who is not somehow a wanderer) she is now as careworn as Block. Reading aloud from the Book of Revelation, she expects and submits to the inevitable while her husband struggles futilely against it. Where he would speak even to the devil in his desperation to learn the truth about God, she is comfortable with the mystery of the Apocalypse. When Death comes for her in her home, she responds with domestic civility.

But even Karin is not a rounded, psychological character. All the characters in *The Seventh Seal* function together as a whole society facing a universal fate, part of an overriding metaphor of man's struggle to understand and come to terms with the necessity of his death. This is part of their allegorical nature. As in comedy, the meaning in allegory finds its expression not in individual characters, but in the constellation of figures making up the society of the story. This is as true of Dante or Spenser as it is of Bergman. *The Virgin Spring,* however, functions on a very different level.

Its plot, for one thing, is much tighter than the plot of *The Seventh Seal,* which moves through symbolic episodes suggested by moves on the chessboard. Compressed into a twenty four hour period, the plot of *The Virgin Spring* is propelled moment by moment by the psychological impulses of its characters. Bergman's "unsymbolic" camera watches as the yearnings and jealousies of Tore's family group reveal themselves. (William S. Pechter is certainly right that in this film "it is only by a difficult effort that one realizes that the camera is there at all.") The various relationships Bergman suggests—the obsessive love of Tore's wife for her last remaining daughter, Karin, or the equally obsessive jealousy of Karin evinced by the bastard servant girl, Ingeri—are naturalistic and personal. Even the religious feelings of the characters are personal. Tore is characterized by his stern prayers and concern with official form, the duty Karin must perform, for instance, in bringing candles to the Virgin Mary. His wife Mareta's religion expresses itself rather in her tendency to mortify her own flesh and a relative disregard for form. Ingeri, who is unmarried and pregnant, a creature on the periphery of acceptable society, prays to the pagan god, Odin, for revenge. The three murderous goatherds, who constitute the other family group in the film, are depicted with similar psychological particularity. The mute goatherd is a libidinous brute, lacking in his brother's sly, ingratiating ways. The young boy is as innocent in his way as Karin, but clearly brutalized and stupid. Their rape murder of the girl, a horribly naturalistic scene performed in front of a camera as helplessly voyeuristic as Ingeri who looks on from the woods, seems the natural outcome of their psychological impulses. Donner has commented on Bergman's chilling use of realistic sound effects in this scene (199). In terms of stark realism, Karin's murder is in-

deed quite remarkable, comparable in its way to Zampano's murder of the fool in Fellini's *La Strada.*

Tore's ritualistic revenge, which balances Karin's murder in violence, is equally stark and psychologically verisimilar. As pointed out above, the ritual of his bath, mortification with birch switches, and dressing for the slaughter (a parallel with Karin's elaborate dressing for her journey), does not yield easily to symbolic interpretation. While clearly stylized, it is at the same time a psychologically appropriate action for a man whose orderliness and self-control have been insisted upon, and whose driving impulse to the anarchy of violence must be unbottled. Once this has happened, Tore's rage spends itself in excess. He cannot control himself when his wife pleads for the life of the boy, but smashes him against the wall. Unlike *The Seventh Seal,* where death is personified in an allegorical figure whose actions are symbolic and who *represents* the cataclysmic fate of a whole society—as Vernon Young points out, "for all its talk of plague, desolation, and the fumes of burning flesh [the film] does not draw blood" (191)—death in *The Virgin Spring* is presented in grimly personal and naturalistic terms. Where the characters in *The Seventh Seal* contend with death (as much as anything a philosophical idea), in *The Virgin Spring,* the characters, both killers and victims, must simply suffer it.

Naturalism distinguishes *The Virgin Spring* also on the level of metaphor. There is no overriding symbol comparable to Block's game of chess. The symbols in *The Virgin Spring* function psychologically in the context of the story. The most obvious of these is perhaps the frog that Ingeri places in the loaf of bread Karin is to carry to church. While Karin is doted upon, innocent of the ways of the world, and virginal (though not beyond what she perceives as harmless flirting), Ingeri is unloved and embarrassingly pregnant. The world is obviously too much with her. It is psychologically apt that she cannot help hating Karin and feels compelled to some covert action against her, such as hiding the frog in the bread and thus defiling an important constituent of the ritual in which Karin is supposed to participate. The symbol thus takes shape as a reflection of Ingeri's state of mind. On a psychological level, the frog is appropriate as an emblem of sexual jealousy and revenge. Bruno Bettelheim has pointed out that frogs are almost always sexual symbols, primitive creatures associated in the unconscious with the primitive drives of the id (101). The frog suggests Ingeri's unstated wish that something of her own sexual fate will befall Karin, as indeed it does in excess of her conscious desire. When the frog jumps out of the bread at the climactic moment of Karin's confrontation with the goatherds, it is, as Donner suggests, "a release for Karin's mounting fright" (193), and triggers the violence of the rape

and murder. Bergman's psychological symbol resonates even further when the boy at Tore's table, recognizing Tore's prayer as the same one Karin had spoken, vomits the bread he has eaten. Donner has noted that the breakfast scene at Tore's is composed in the manner of "an altar painting" (198). This is true also of the dinner scene, which seems quite intentionally and perhaps ironically patterned after the Last Supper, with the goatherds seated across the table in the position of Judas. Thus Karin's interrupted ritual of life is connected metaphorically with the ritual of death Tore is about to enact.

Another psychological symbol is Tore's uprooting of the birch tree when he learns of his daughter's murder. This scene has had much commentary. Donner speaks of it as suggesting an "interplay of natural forces, far from both Christianity and paganism" (200). Steene considers the scene "almost a parody of rape" (93), while Bengt Idestam-Almquist implies that Tore is exorcizing his own lust for his daughter (see Steene's note 144). Certainly, the tree suggests a young life, like Karin's, being destroyed. And the scene does propose an interplay of natural forces: the violence of Tore's human nature asserting itself against the stark natural world in which the tree is set. The fact that branches from the tree will be used to prepare Tore for his revenge suggests also that he is calling upon the forces of nature in his struggle, forces that his stark and formal Christianity may have set hitherto in abeyance. I think the scene represents also the destruction of the orderly world Tore had built around himself and his family, circumscribed and made safe by the family compound, and violated by the wandering goatherds. The ordered, everyday life of the people in Tore's family group has been insisted upon throughout the film, and stands in marked contrast to the wandering existence of the goatherds (and, one might add, the wandering characters of *The Seventh Seal).* Tore's insight is the precariousness of this earthly stability in nature. Indeed, there is something of the bourgeois in Tore, which is detectable even in his decision to build a stone church on the spot where his daughter was murdered. To the very end, and with good reason, he does not trust in yielding to natural forces, the wilderness that surrounds him, swallows his daughter, and moves him to evil acts himself.

The most ambiguous and complex symbol is that of the water which manifests itself variously throughout the story. Karin's troubles begin when she and Ingeri have to cross a stream by a mill and meet the pagan, ogre-like miller. When Karen has been killed and the goatherds leave the boy to watch her body, it begins to snow, a suggestion of the remorselessness of nature. And, of course, when her body is discovered, a miracle occurs when a spring gurgles from the spot where her head lay. Ingeri bathes herself in it, as if to cleanse herself of sin and take on

herself some of the spring's life-giving force. But for the most part, the images of water have been threatening, and the miracle itself, expressed as water, reminds us of the ambiguity of nature, at once idyllic and threatening, in this film. The sea, toward which Jof and Mia travel in *The Seventh Seal*, is much less ambiguous: it suggests their comic fulfillment and survival. The water in *The Virgin Spring* is inland water, suggesting the more personal terrain of the inner mind, man's nature reflecting his surroundings. And whether it redeems personal tragedy remains questionable.

Bergman's medieval films demonstrate what are really two modes of expression that have competed with each other throughout his career. *The Seventh Seal* functions on an essentially allegorical level, while *The Virgin Spring* is naturalistic. As we have seen, both films employ symbols, but they do so in basically different ways that may reflect two sides of Bergman's nature. The allegorical, of course, seems grander and more philosophical, for it takes aim publicly at a larger theme: mankind's conflict with death. Yet a film like *The Seventh Seal* stands always in danger of seeming overblown or forced. Indeed, Bergman's use of comic elements may argue an awareness of this danger. *The Virgin Spring*, on the other hand, has sometimes been criticized for being too stark, but it succeeds, I think, in a private and mysterious suggestiveness, the unsaid glowing through the starkness of its images. It is subtler, more tragic, and in the best sense a more disturbing film.

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Chapter 20

Film as Translation: The Case of Hardy

In his fine study of modern verse drama, Denis Donoghue points out that the "poetry" in modern drama is to be found not so much on the single level of language, but in the concurrence in time of all the constituents of a particular scene, "the internal relationships ... acting together"(9). According to Donoghue, "a play is 'poetic,' then, when its concrete elements (plot, agency, scene, speech, gesture) continuously exhibit in their internal relationships those qualities of mutual coherence and illumination required of the words of a poem"(10). In semiological terms, these "concrete elements" may be seen as a network of different "languages", different systems of signification functioning interactively to produce the total effect of a drama. Thus the metalanguage required to treat such a work is of necessity more complex, its forms of attentiveness more diverse (and perhaps uneasier) than in ordinary literary criticism. Much the same is true of film. In a film, the scenery, the gesture of an actor, even the background music may be considered as contrapuntal languages contributing to the "poetic" effect of the whole and requiring in the observer what one might call a cinematic rather than a purely literary consciousness.

We may posit, therefore, an essential difference or opposition between cinematic consciousness and literary consciousness, which can be brought into focus most clearly perhaps in a consideration of films based on novels. For one thing, films based on novels suggest a discrete instance of literary consciousness, representing the single language of the novels in their own plural language. Such films are in effect translations of the novels, and as such might be said to take a necessarily subordinate position *vis-à-vis* the original; where the film differs, ac-

cording to this view, it may be faulted on principle. And yet this question, even with regard to literary translation, is not really simple. As Walter Benjamin has argued, "translations that are more than transmissions of subject matter ... do not so much serve the work as owe their existence to it. The life of the originals attains in them to its ever-renewed latest and most abundant flowering"(72). Benjamin goes on to state that "no translation would be possible if in its ultimate essence it strove for likeness to the original. For in its afterlife—which could not be called that if it were not a transformation and a renewal of something living—the original undergoes a change"(73). Benjamin is suggesting that a translation comments critically on our changing perception of the original work in its "afterlife," and indeed may be said to effect such a changing perception in permanent ways. As such, translation may be seen as one form of metalanguage.

Film as translation participates in this function with yet a further advantage: being a different medium altogether, it asserts its own claims to unique artistic life and independence from its source. In this respect, it corresponds to the last of Roman Jakobson's three types of translation, "intersemiotic translation or *transmutation"* (233). According to George Steiner, such transmutation enforces the metalinguistic sense of translation as interpretation and becomes "a model of understanding and of the entire potential of statement"(261). Steiner is interested particularly in the musical settings of poetic texts, where each composition "is an act of interpretive restatement in which the verbal sign system is critically illuminated or, as the case may be, miscontrued by a non-verbal sign system with its own highly formal syntax"(419). He argues that such a musical setting "generates a construct in which the original and its 'translation'...coexist in active simultaneity"(419). When the musical setting is genuinely illuminative, "word and music perform an action of reciprocal clarification and enrichment in a structure whose centre is neither that of the verbal sign system nor that of the musical notation. As in great translation, so in a great musical setting, something is added to the original text. But that which is added 'was already there' "(Steiner 423). I would suggest that an analogous process is at work in a successful film translation.

Like any translation, however, a film asserts such claims on the original only in proportion to its power and success in terms of its own medium. It must first of all be more than a mere transmission of subject matter, for if it does not reconceive the work in its own terms, its claims on our attention must surely fade with time. Then indeed it suffers the embarrassment, like less ambitious literary translations, of being outmoded in a way the original work can never be. If a film's quality is permanent, however, it takes on a life of its own and alters our perception of the original subject. A parallel analogy might be to certain permanently

enduring dramatizations of myths, which change our perception of older forms of the stories. Æschylus, for instance, altered forever the way we read certain parts of Homer, Chaucer altered our view of Virgil, and Shakespeare our views of both Virgil and Chaucer. One may wonder whether or not Gide, Anouilh, and Joyce have created similarly enduring changes in their own classical subjects. Of course, these myths have long been, so to speak, in the public domain, but it is conceivable that even our view of Hamlet has been altered significantly by our encounters with Coleridge, Earnest Jones, and Tom Stoppard. Significant metalinguistic comment, whether in criticism or translation, may force the original in its afterlife to undergo such a sea-change.

On the other hand, the subjects of most novels, products of a romantic and consciously historical age that stressed originality, are generally assumed to be a kind of personal intellectual property—modern theories of the death of the author and the relative importance of the critic as reader notwithstanding. The case of Hardy may be a good test of whether film versions of modern novels attain to the more exalted sense of intersemiotic translation discussed above. We may ask if James Schlesinger's *Far from the Madding Crowd* and Roman Polanski's *Tess* have permanently affected our views of these stories, rendering them effectively into myth-like narratives of the public domain.

Both films are luxuriantly naturalistic in setting and as faithful as possible to Hardy's texts. As such, they fulfill the requirements of a conscientious translation in serving their originals. As they excel in their own terms, however, they may fulfill the even higher requirements of artistic translation, creating an enduring space for themselves. Perhaps Hardy's well known pictorialism particularly lends itself to this sort of treatment. It would be much harder, for instance, to imagine a good film of *Ulysses,* or even *USA,* though we can think of such experimental, modernist equivalents as *Citizen Kane.* The Hardy novels seem made to be filmed on realistic locations.

When we look more closely, however, the seeming ease of translation into film disappears. The collaborative nature of a film makes it of necessity less controlled than the effort of one artist might be. The layering of metaphor, which one expects to find upon close reading of a novel, is necessarily reduced, or at least made less exclusively linguistic. It would be interesting, I think, to imagine a meter of some sort counting the words of the original as the images on the screen flash by. We would see that the meter runs quite slowly in passages of dialogue, where Hardy's own language is for the most part employed, but the settings and other visual images would dissolve hundreds of Hardy's words at a stroke. The pages of description that go to describe the different valleys of the Great and Little Dairies,

for instance, are accounted for by a few careful camera shots. Obviously, much of Hardy's linguistic subtlety may be lost here, unless it can be suggested somehow in purely pictorial terms. When we meet Tess' father in the novel, he is described as follows:

> The pair of legs that carried him were rickety, and there was a bias in his gait which inclined him somewhat to the left of a straight line. He occasionally gave a smart nod, as if in conformation of some opinion, though he was not thinking of anything in particular. An empty egg-basket was slung on his arm, the nap of his hat was ruffled, a patch being quite worn away at its brim where his thumb came in taking it off. (5)

The narrative language of this passage wonderfully places Durbeyfield for us. We are made aware by these few strokes of language of his business, his infirmity, his absurd posturing, and his lowly social class (why, after all, is he walking and habitually obliged to take off his cap?). The narrator informs us that although Durbeyfield may seem to outward appearance to be contemplating matters of some import, he is really thinking of nothing in particular. This is exactly the sort of narrative richness that is necessarily lost on film. But the film may compensate by lavishing its attention on pictorial details, as well as stressing such advantages as an actor's authentic sounding dialect. The attentive viewer will note as readily as the attentive reader that Durbeyfield is of the "walking" class, and that he is returning, presumably with some money to squander, from market. And whereas Hardy must go to considerable pains to reproduce the dialect he wants on the written page, the film does this almost effortlessly.

Another example of this trade-off of effects occurs in the sheepwashing scene of *Far from the Madding Crowd.* The scene takes place at the end of May, and is the setting of Boldwood's first proposal of marriage to Bathsheba. The camera, of course, reproduces the details of the sheepwashing quite readily and easily creates the *ambiance* of pleasant and warm weather. But it cannot easily replace Hardy's mixture of symbolic imagery and psychology. Boldwood, we are told, has "by this time grown used to being in love"(122), so much so that he is emboldened to ask for Bathsheba's hand, feeling "himself adequate to the situation"(122). Hardy's describes the setting as follows:

> The outskirts of this level water-meadow were diversified by rounded and hollow pastures, where just now every flower that was not a buttercup was a daisy.... To the north of the mead were trees, the leaves

> of which were new, soft, and moist, not yet being stiffened and darkened under summer sun and drought, their color being yellow beside a green—green beside a yellow. From the recesses of this knot of foliage the loud notes of three cuckoos were resounding through the still air. Boldwood went meditating down the slopes with his eyes on his boots, which the yellow pollen from the buttercups had bronzed in artistic gradations. (122)

Apart from simply setting the scene, the description here functions on a richly symbolic level. Boldwood's unaccustomed discovery of the possibility of love is reflected in nature and suggested by the profusion of flowers as well as the softness and moistness of the leaves. And indeed something of the absurdity of his situation is suggested by the notes of the cuckoos, whose song, we remember from long tradition, is "unpleasing to a married ear." A wonderful stroke is Hardy's description of the pollen on Boldwood's boots, implying the fertility in which he would like, for the first time in his life, to participate. This kind of multi-leveled suggestiveness, common in Hardy's novels, simply cannot be put on film. What the camera must do in compensation is encourage us to search for signs of this emotion in the actor's features. In other words, our search for significance here uses not so much the methods of the literary critic as those of the art historian. The film calls us to that sort of subtle visual observation.

It can be argued, I think, that in certain cases this necessary difference in the film's approach improves on the effect of the original. The scene where Gabriel Oak's dog drives the sheep to their deaths is one example. In the novel, it is the occasion of one of Hardy's frequent and sometimes inept excursions into irony:

> George's son [the young dog] had done his work so thoroughly that he was considered too good a workman to live, and was, in fact, taken and tragically shot at twelve o'clock that same day—another instance of the untoward fate which so often attends dogs and other philosophers who follow out a train of reasoning to its logical conclusion, and attempt perfectly consistent conduct in a world made up so largely of compromise. (38)

The film accomplishes the dog's execution with stark realism and without comment, and the scene achieves an eerie, quiet effectiveness lacking in the novel. Where Hardy retreats uncertainly to an authorial perspective, Schlesinger lets his images make their point. The scene in the film suggests in purely visual terms

that nature has somehow gone cruelly and tragically awry, and creates a disturbing mood that persists throughout the film.

In the gurgoyle scene, where rain from a water spout washes out the flowers Sergeant Troy has planted on Fanny's grave, Schlesinger's camera and Hardy's prose perform differently but equally well. The novel makes the motives of Troy's subsequent departure perfectly clear:

> Sanguine by nature, Troy had a power of eluding grief by simply adjourning it.... The planting of flowers on Fanny's grave had been perhaps but a species of elusion of the primary grief, and now it was as if his intention had been known and circumvented. Almost for the first time in his life, Troy, as he stood by this dismantled grave, wished himself another man. (315)

In the film, we are left to imagine this, but the gruesome image of the water pouring from the spout onto the grave and the image of Troy's anguish do not leave us in doubt about his feelings. As in the scene with the dog, the camera in purely visual terms creates an image that resonates with effective symbolism.

Indeed, in some scenes the films eliminate clumsiness or outworn conventions that mar our appreciation of the originals. Hardy's works often employ conventions of Victorian melodrama that prove obstacles for modern readers. One of the problems with *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, for instance, is a series of rather contrived coincidences that we tend to overlook in our effort to delight in the novel's many virtues. Hardy probably considered it a taut structuring device to have Car Dutch and her sister, the two brutish women who threaten Tess in her most vulnerable moments at Trantridge, reappear as fieldworkers at Flintcombe Ash. Similarly, the man from Trantridge who insults Tess at an inn in town shortly before her marriage and is punched by Angel for his trouble is the very same man who later accosts her in her helpless circumstances on the road, and then turns out to be the field boss at Flintcombe Ash. Polanski mitigates the crude effects of this last coincidence by ignoring the scene of the confrontation at the inn. The second coincidence is made more plausible and chilling. The man accosting Tess on the road is given a spontaneous, menacing quality that he lacks in the novel; the extended coincidence there renders him almost unintentionally comic to a modern reader. Polanski is particularly subtle in dealing with the two rough girls. To avoid an artificial coincidence, he does not have them reappear in the film, but he does show various country girls with similar features, as if to suggest the reappearance of the type.

The real independence of the films, however, is to be judged by whether or not they change our conception of the characters themselves. And perhaps they do. Both Schlesinger and Polanski interpret their sources from a modern perspective, and are able to present certain things that Hardy, constantly constrained by Victorian censors, could at best merely hint at. The realistic rape or seduction scene in *Tess* (Polanski may have had his own troubles in mind here as much as Hardy's text) is an obvious example. Hardy was very nearly forced to leave the scene out of his novel altogether and his prose surely throws a delicate veil over the event: "Why it was that upon this beautiful feminine tissue, sensative as gossamer, and practically blank as snow as yet, there should have been traced such a coarse pattern as it was doomed to receive..."(62-63). In the tradition of Clarissa, Tess is not even allowed, presumably for modesty's sake, to be conscious during the rape. Polanski, on the other hand, is free not only to restore realism to the rape, but to complicate the issue in his own way by suggesting a role for Tess' innocent, confused, and budding sexuality.

All this touches on what may be the most significant contribution of both these films: the reimagining of Hardy's heroines as essentially modern women before their time. Bathsheba, as Schlesinger perceives her, is clearly a type of modern woman struggling to pursue her independence in a society reserved for and dominated by men. This is implicit, perhaps, in Hardy, but it is subsumed in other concerns. Bathsheba's tragedy in the novel results to a considerable degree from the womanly vanity in her nature, which urges her to toy with the affections of Farmer Boldwood. But Schlesinger plays this motive down by ignoring an important aspect of the early scene in the Forum. Hardy notes that the "*début* in the forum, whatever it may have been to Bathsheba as the buying and selling farmer, was unquestionably a triumph to her as a maiden"(90). The one flaw in this triumph of flirtation is her seeming inability to attract the attention of Boldwood:

> The numerous evidences of her power to attract were only thrown into greater relief by a marked exception [i.e.,Boldwood]. Women seem to have eyes in their ribbons for such matters as these. Bathsheba, without looking within a right angle of him, was conscious of a black sheep among the flock. (90)

This vanity is the real origin of her momentous prank of sending Boldwood the valentine card. While Schlesinger has Bathsheba's servants discuss the matter of Boldwood's indifference to women, as if to suggest something of the challenge it offered her, the personal element of the slight to her vanity is ignored. The result is to emphasize her more modern, feminist motives. Polanski's Tess too is a more

modern woman than in Hardy. Her actions seem rather the result of independence of mind than innocent submission to the crass expectations of her society. "Did it never strike your mind," she defiantly retorts to Alec in a line from the novel which the film emphasizes, "that what every woman says some women may feel"(65)? When she does behave submissively to Angel later in the film, Polanski gives the scene a feminist edge that a Victorian reader would not have recognized.

This reconceiving of the characters in the films creates certain problems however. Whereas Alec d'Urburville is something of a stock Victorian cad in the novel and thus quite clearly villainous to its intended audience (Hardy's insistence on his association with the devil seems completely natural in this context), Polanski's d'Urburville, seen in what is in effect a modern psychological setting, is a much more ambiguous figure. To a modern audience, he has a pleasant side that will not be overwhelmed (even with the help of slicked hair and side-whiskers) by his conventional Victorian role as the devil of the story. The danger of Alec remaining too sympathetic may be one reason Polanski left out the rather artificial scenes of his religious conversion. In any event, Tess' adamant refusals of his continuing romantic suit—her ultimate allegiance must be, after all, to the outlines of the well-known plot—strike us, as they do Alec himself, as more perverse than natural. Similarly, Angel Clair's virtues, especially when united with what a modern audience perceives as priggish high-mindedness, fail to move us. Such ambiguities may be implicit in Hardy's novel—certainly Angel does not live up to the suggestions of his name in most respects—but as readers willing to be involved in the necessary archeology of feeling and imagination, we must accept Hardy's characters ultimately as they were aimed at a Victorian audience. Thus as readers we know that Bathsheba's independence is undone by her womanly vanity, and that for Tess there was really no question of preferring the villainous Alec to the morally virtuous Angel. Hardy's Tess, as he was careful to indicate, was an outraged "pure woman" before she was an outraged woman. The films, however, as independent modern reworkings of the stories, do not enforce these choices, and this creates new and modern tensions in the old plots.

I do not intend to suggest that such differences are necessarily undesirable, or without precedent. Any translation is to some degree a comment on the original work, an imaginative reassessment of its possibilities. When Æschylus took up and modernized the story of Agamemnon, he added psychological concerns, typical of his own day and alien to Homer's, which permanently changed man's view of the myth and of Æschylus' source in the *Odyssey*. The tradition of the myth, in T.S. Eliot's sense, was at once joined and irremediably altered. Its dynamic relations as part of the western imagination changed. As Steiner argues, following

Eliot, even our reading of Shakespeare and Chaucer involves a certain intralingual translation into an idiom of modern understanding (28). "Every generation," he reminds us, "retranslates the classics, out of a vital compulsion for immediacy and precise echo"(29-30). The intersemiotic translation of film operates out of a similar compulsion. Whether or not the film versions of Hardy will effect much of a change in our own view of his work is, of course, debatable—it is simply too early to tell—but I think in some ways they will, and if so, it will prove not so much a distortion of Hardy's intellectual property as testimony and tribute to the enduring quality of his imaginative genius.

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Chapter 21

Roughing It: The Role of Farce in the Little Rascals Comedies

Serious consideration of works like the Little Rascals comedies may seem merely an oddity, a critical curiosity piece, but until recently so has any criticism of farce and other low forms of comedy.[1] Theorizing about comedy is as old as Aristotle, but the lower forms of comedy were long considered beneath critical notice. When critics did discuss such comedy, it was often in disparaging if not hostile terms. John Dryden, for instance, complained that "as the Artist is often unsuccessful, while the Mountebank succeeds; so Farces more commonly take the people than comedies."[2] Two centuries later, George Bernard Shaw claimed that the public's interest in farce was akin to its interest in "the public flogging of a criminal," and that farce appealed to "the deliberate indulgence of that horrible, derisive joy in humiliation and suffering which is the beastliest element in human nature" (Quoted in Davis 22). According to Shaw, "to laugh without sympathy [which farce encourages] is a ruinous abuse of a noble function" (Quoted in Davis 22).

Shaw is right, of course, in pointing up farce's intimate connection with the darker, anarchic constituents of the human personality. Many critics have noted that farce is in close association with the irrational and that it typically celebrates unreason's revolt against the strictures of reason. Shaw's own reasonableness was bound to set him against this. What he neglects to consider is that in farce aggressiveness and festivity go hand in hand. According to Jessica Milner Davis,

[1]Copyright ©1989 by Jeffery A. Triggs. All rights reserved. This essay first appeared in *The New Orleans Review* 16.3 (Fall 1989): 31-38.

[2]Quoted in Jessica Milner Davis, *Farce* (London: Methuen 7 Co. Ltd., 1978) 17.

"at its heart is the eternal comic conflict between the forces of conventional authority and the forces of rebellion" (Davis 24). Davis believes that farce may be more prone to aggression than other forms of comedy simply because it depends more directly on the "dramatic enactment of its jokes and humiliations" (Davis 24). Farce is not so much different from other forms of comedy as more primitive in kind. It is important that we remember this primitive connection with more sophisticated forms of comedy. It seems, in fact, that the lower forms of comedy, and in particular farce, lie at the center of the comic experience and underlie the airier, more humanized forms. Maurice Charney argues that "farce may be the purest, quintessential comedy ... with energetic, dream-like characters pursuing their impulses and gratifications with amazing singleness of purpose."[3]

Thus, consideration even of unsophisticated works that partake of this quintessence may yield significant insights into the nature of the comic response. The contention of this essay is that the earlier and best of the Little Rascals comedies are animated by the conditions of farce, and that when these conditions are withdrawn or vitiated with elements of more sophisticated comic forms in later productions, the comedy suffers.

I shall be making use of at least two theoretical suppositions about farce. One is that farce, through its mechanical plots and stock situations, illustrates the Bergsonian notion of comedy as "something mechanical encrusted upon the living."[4] The other is that farce is governed by unreason, and is therefore characterized in varying degrees by aggression, anarchic subversion, wish-fulfilling spontaneity, and festivity. Underlying this supposition is Freud's sense of comedy as an unconscious activity venting hostility and circumventing social taboos.[5] This aspect of farce has a darker side and a lighter side, the first of which has irritated humanist critics like Shaw. Jessica Milner Davis distinguishes the two types of farce as "Humiliation-farces" and "Deception-farces," depending on the degree to which a victim is openly degraded (Davis 28). Farce, as it functions in the Little Rascals films, is mainly of the Deception type, though at least the suggestion of humiliation is present in any farcical situation.

The most farcical of the Little Rascals films are the early shorts directed by Robert McGowen. These date from the late nineteen twenties and early thirties,

[3]Maurice Charney, *Comedy High and Low: An Introduction to the Experience of Comedy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978) 97.

[4]Henri Bergson, "Laughter," *Comedy: Meaning and Form*, ed. Robert W. Corrigan (San Francisco: Chandler Publishing Company, 1965) 471.

[5]See Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. James Strachey (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1960).

and are characterized by their sparing use of scripted dialogue, a corresponding reliance on action shots, sight gags, and background music, and what seem to be loose and spontaneous plots. Indeed, there is a quality of improvisation throughout that quite disappears in the later films directed by Gus Meins and others. The spontaneity and improvisation, however, are actually the result of contrapuntal plotting. In the early films there is usually an official plot that reflects a more or less plausible, adult version of events. But set in play with this official plot is a second plot that reflects—with an anarchic freedom suitable to the childish imagination—the point of view of the children. Often this second plot subverts or functions against the more obvious adult purpose of the story. Interestingly, adults are either banished or made incidental to the children's plots. The wish-fulfilling, unreasoning world of the children is seen in revolt against the strictures and rational expectations of the adult world.

This is clearly evident in the early film, *Railroadin'*, produced in 1929. The official plot centers around a cautionary story told the children by a father who works for the railroad and is afraid that they could be hurt playing on the engines. He describes what might happen if a crazy man started a train while the children were playing on it. The "crazy man," whose appearance is gratuitous and soon forgotten, may be seen as a latter day version of the Vice figure used to set the farcical plot in motion. The main body of the film, which depicts the father's story, is actually a wild and wish-fulfilling fantasy. Under the guise of the cautionary tale format, the children are shown indulging their fantasy of operating the train free of adult supervision. The farcical law of the reversal of hierarchies applies here. The children, normally under the control of adults and forbidden access to such symbols of adult control as the train engine, take over control of the train and drive far out of the station. The train is a symbol of freedom offering them the possibility of escape to far-off places like New York and Chicago. Furthermore, the power of the engine suggests the adult world of responsibility and reason, which the fantasy subverts. The dangers inherent in such subversion, which form the substance of the adult cautionary plot, are rendered innocuous by the farcical presentation. For instance, one of the children gets his foot caught in a rail-split, and is forced repeatedly to lie down as the train moves back and forth over him. In the tradition of farce, the scene is at once threatening and painless. As the train roars through the countryside (the children all the while running about the engine delightedly afraid), it smashes through a vegetable wagon and is littered with its contents. The children comment—surely subversive of the "moral" content of the story—that they would like to hit an ice cream wagon next. On another occasion they call out: "Hey Joe, get up some speed. You're going too slow." This dialogue

is almost smothered in cacophonous background noises, including much tooting of the train whistle. Finally, after a number of comic "near misses," the train is stopped as it is about to have a head on collision with another train, though not before the camera has played eagerly and anarchicly with the possibility of the disaster. In effect, we witness the reasonable adult world turned upside down and threatened before the fantasy is brought harmlessly to an end. And the children enact their dangerous fantasy without punishment. They are offered a reward by the conductor of the other train for having tried to stop the train started by the madman. The cautionary frame story ends with the children swearing they will never go near trains again, but they have had their adventure, and the film blurs the line between fantasy and reality (subtlely suggested by an egg falling in both fantasy and reality on the head of one of the children).

A more typical form of the contrapuntal plot occurs in the film *A Lad An' A Lamp*, directed by McGowen in 1932. The story's premise is laid with unself-conscious ease. Over a shot of the book, a voice is heard reading the beginning of the story of Aladdin. The shot fades to the group of children eagerly rubbing various lamps they have collected. There are a number of farcical visual scenes. One boy is shown lugging an expensive pottery lamp which soon falls and is smashed to bits. He comments: "How far is it to Mexico?" Spanky is heard wishing that the little black boy, Cotten, would turn into a monkey, to which the latter's brother responds: "Be careful what you wishin' for."

Here begin a series of coincidences that will separate the children's plot from the adult plot that has governed so far. As usual with McGowen's shorts, the verbal effects are sparing, and the comic images are captured on camera. We see from a high camera vantage point that on the other side of a fence some workers are preparing to set off dynamite. The dynamite explodes just as the children are rubbing an old oil lamp of the "Alladin" type. This coincidence of the adult plot, however, sets off the counter-plot, for the children now assume and act on the assumption that they have discovered a magic lamp. The next scene shows them feverishly at work rubbing and wishing for various things. A second coincidence occurs when a kindly grocer overhears Stymie wishing for a watermelon and rolls one of his melons toward the children, who exclaim: "Hot dog! This is the lamp!" A third coincidence is now prepared. The scene cuts to a local vaudeville show, where a disgruntled magician is finishing his tired act. "People don't believe in magicians anymore— outside of kids," he complains to a fellow performer off stage. Outside the theater, the children are preparing to eat their watermelon when they are interrupted by a bully who demands that they give it to him. They respond by rubbing the lamp and calling: "Appear, genie!" It so happens that the magician

overhears them from a window, and decides, in his present mood, to do them the service of playing the genie and frightening off the bully. He advises them to rub their lamp if they have any wishes. Thoroughly convinced of the lamp's power, they are now prepared to accept a fourth coincidence. Spanky again wishes that Cotten were a monkey, and at the very moment he does so, a monkey escaped from the theater throws a smoke bomb that frightens Cotten away, and appears in his place. The children are now faced with the problem of what to do with "Cotten." When one suggests that they sell Cotten to the circus, the monkey runs away, and they chase after him.

The second plot is now off and running too (with a medley of background music to spur it), and the scene is set for a number of farcical sight gags, as when the monkey frightens off a hamburger stand operator and his girl-friend and proceeds to serve Spanky and demolish the stand. Again, the second plot allows a takeover of the precincts of the adult world, in which comic chaos reigns. Eventually, the monkey drinks a bottle of liquor, and escapes "drunk" into town. Pratfalls are taken, a quantity of plate-glass is broken, and the police (of a decidedly "Keystone" variety) get involved and threaten to shoot the monkey. The children desperately plead for the life of "Cotten" until the grocer finally steps in to resolve the misunderstanding. Cotten and Spanky reappear, grown fat from having gorged themselves at the food stand. As in *Railroadin'*, the double plot in *A Lad An' A Lamp* functions to overturn the usual strictures of society and allow unlicensed gratification of fantasy desires. Adults, such as the food stand operator and the police (who have a number of vases broken over their heads), are subjected to comic humiliation. But in the tradition of farce, festivity pardons the sins of humiliation and the circumvention of taboos. Indeed, a number of taboo situations and racial jokes, which touch on deep social anxieties, are allowed free play with a remarkable festive innocence.

The comic liberation of taboo subjects, one of the central features of farce, characterizes many of the comedies directed by McGowen. In *Bear Huntin'*, for instance, the children set out to go camping and bear hunting and happen upon the hideout of two gangsters. The gangsters discover them as they happily set up outdoor housekeeping in a parody of adult society. (The children's home-made machines parody the technology of adults.) To frighten them away, one of the men dresses as a gorilla and menaces the children. They have come armed with bows and arrows and a bear-trap, however, and soon turn the tables on him. Once again, the comedy hinges on a double plot: the adult plot of children accidentally straying into danger, and the children's plot of hunting bears. The children are allowed the anarchic delight of attacking and tormenting an adult, which, like

riding a runaway train, is not normally acceptable behavior. Among other things, they shoot arrows at a human being. But the counterplot of hunting a bear, a mechanism of their innocence, justifies their tasting such forbidden fruit. The fact that the men are gangsters reinforces this, but is not the main justification from the children's point of view; the two plots in this story never coalesce, and the children never discover that they have not been hunting a bear. As in all farce, the humiliation is really self-justifying. The danger and the blows are comic, but the anarchic sting is real.

Comic trespassing on the domain of adults is also the theme of *Forgotten Babies*, another McGowen feature. In this story, the children, rather improbably, are given responsibility for taking care of baby brothers and sisters on Saturdays. The opening shot, a scene that would surely chill the heart of any mother in a different context, shows the older children holding fishing rods with various pacifiers dangling from the lines over the heads of the babies. One particularly active baby is actually caught on his brother's line. As the older children would rather be swimming on their day off, they come up with a plan to leave the babies in Spanky's care. Spanky, little more than a baby himself, resists the plan but is blackmailed into accepting. The film shifts now to a house with no adults, another symbol of the children taking over the adult world in a comic reversal of hierarchies. Here Spanky attempts to control the babies. In an extended shot that is something of a *tour de force*, Spanky entertains the babies with an improvised story about Tarzan. The scene is a delightful parody of the adult world, with Spanky as a youthful paterfamilias in his living room holding the other babies, for the moment, spellbound. Soon, however, they begin to get out of control and crawl all over the house breaking dishes, turning on faucets, spilling flour in the kitchen, toppling expensive lamps—in short, all the things children are punished for, or things they contemplate in fantasy but never act out for fear of punishment. A primal comic anarchy is allowed to reign in the sanctum of the adult world, the house. Much of the comic energy derives from Spanky's frantic efforts, in his unwanted role as a parody adult, to impose order on the chaotic situation, an order he eventually achieves through such unusual expedients as gluing a baby to the floor. Contrapuntal plotting does not figure as prominently here as in other McGowen features, but there is a slight adult plot that helps to wrap up the story. One of the babies takes the phone off the hook next to a radio he has turned on. The operator overhears a murder story being threatened on the radio and calls the police, who respond, in their usual Keystone fashion, to the scene, just as the other children return. Together they find Spanky in triumphant quiet, having locked up or fastened down all the babies. Order has returned even before the intrusion of

adults.

The early Little Rascals comedies are all characterized by a certain roughness of style which accompanies and indeed makes possible their spontaneous exuberance. Roughness is a mark of low comedy's innocent freedom of expression. Like all forms of innocence, and perhaps paradoxically, such roughness is a delicate commodity. Many of the "peasant poets" of the nineteenth century who were taken up by the literati ruined themselves trying to become more "literary," and similarly, the Little Rascals comedies, as they became more sophisticated in the mid 'thirties, lost much of their comic edge, the primitive, farcical bite that animated the early features. For one thing, under the direction of Gus Meins and others, the Our Gang comedies, as they were now called, became heavily scripted, and the child actors, forced to recite lines at each other, lost much of their endearing spontaneity. (One might note that the anarchic freedom implied by "Little Rascals" is safely socialized by the title "Our Gang," suggesting the kind of group activity favored in the America of the New Deal.) The scripted plots, too, became basicly homophonic, with a single point of view of essentially adult character. Of course, the later plots have greater unity and make use of sophisticated literary devices like dramatic irony, but the unity is often stiff and the irony forced and unchildlike. Interestingly, many of the later stories separate themselves from raw farcical comedy altogether and make use of the revue formula. In these, the rather thin plot is simply a device to showcase the talents of performing children.

One of the more charming of these later features is *Beginner's Luck*, directed by Gus Meins in 1935. It begins with Spanky reading poetry to an audience of adults including his mother and grandmother. (The reader should note the increasing use and importance of adults in the later stories.) We notice quickly that Meins has picked up some sophisticated devices from romantic comedy. Spanky's "stage" mother is portrayed as a stock type of what Northrup Frye has called *alazons*, or blocking characters, while his grandmother is clearly of the "helping" *eiron* type.[6] The mother wants to force Spanky to become a stage actor ("What do Clark Gable or Barrymore have that Spanky hasn't?"), while the grandmother would as soon let the boy have a normal childhood. The grandmother can laugh at Spanky's reluctance to perform, while the mother, obsessed with her own ambition for him, does not "see what's so funny." The story hinges on Spanky's friends arranging to ruin his performance at a variety show and so free him from the drudgery of learning lines and acting. As one of his friends notes, "All actors are sissies." This line, coming from the mouth of a child actor, is typical of the

[6]Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957) 172.

inside theatrical jokes that permeate the later films, and it should be pointed out that it represents an essentially adult form of humor. In fact, the main action of *Beginner's Luck* is a stage revue highlighted by early bit appearances of such child performers as Alfalfa, Darla, and the Cabin Kids who were to become the prominent actors in many later productions of Hal Roach. The plot turns now on a fairly sophisticated and ironic reversal caused by Spanky's discovery of a love interest. He becomes attracted to Daisy Dimple, a young dancer *"par excellence"* who is desperate to win the contest in order to purchase a dress, but who fails through stage fright (suggested with sophisticated closeups of the faces in the audience). Spanky promises to win the dress for her, but he now faces the problem of whether his mother, who does not know of the earlier plan, can convince his friends, who are similarly ignorant of his change of heart, to let him perform without interruption. The expected misunderstanding takes place, followed by another ironic reversal: because the friends go through with their attack and disturb Spanky's planned reading from *Julius Caesar*, he succeeds as a *comic* act, and wins the prize money, love, and freedom. With the help of his grandmother, his mother is humiliatingly undressed before the audience and learns her lesson too. Aside from some farcical moments when the children tease the bald piano player, however, *Beginner's Luck* dispenses with the resources of farce in favor of elements drawn from "higher" romantic comedy. We see this in the emphasis on dialogue in place of sight gags and pratfalls, and in the dependence on a sentimental love interest to turn the story to a festive conclusion. If the children were older, one might almost speak of the promise of "fertility," along with the establishment of a "new society" at the end. In other words, we have left behind the unreasoning, farcical world of the childish imagination for the essentially adult, sneakily reasonable world of *As You Like It*, as interpreted, perhaps, by Northrup Frye. And in spite of the relative success of *Beginner's Luck*, one feels that the child actors are not quite comfortable with the new conditions.

In the features of the later 'thirties, the balance of high and low comedy in *Beginner's Luck* was less frequently struck, while the anarchic spontaneity of the early features was lost. The plots became increasingly stilted and the acting was often inexplicably bad. *The Big Premiere*, produced by MGM, and directed by Edward Cahn with a screenplay by Hal Law and Robert McGowen, is typical of the later revue-style features. It opens with big band music played over a stylized cityscape image. The scene cuts to the outside of a Hollywood movie theater where a premiere is about to take place. An adult announcer introduces the "stars" while the gang waits in awe outside the ropes. When they create a disturbance, they are sent away by a guard. Darla exclaims that she is disappointed at missing

the premiere, and Spanky, by this time grown older and rather more corpulent, suggests that they have their own "big premiere" with the help of Waldo and his movie camera. They proceed to enact a parody of the adult premiere, complete with cement for their footprints, introducing each other to an audience of children with great ceremony. Somehow, they have a movie projector in their clubhouse, on which they show a home movie they have made. The farce is limited to the little black boy Buckwheat getting his feet stuck in the cement, and a number of camera jokes. The image on the screen is frequently shown on its side or upside down. The children do voice-overs from off-stage which rarely coincide with the image on the screen. When Darla announces from the side of the stage, "Here comes my hero, isn't he handsome," a goat walks into the screen image in place of Alfalfa, and the children (if not the movie audience) laugh. Eventually, the film runs out in the middle of Alfalfa's song. The children complain, and Alfalfa steps in and offers to sing the rest of the song in person. While he is singing, a hen nesting on a rafter above him, accidentally kicks an egg into his mouth. He swallows it and continues his performance, but we begin to hear chicken sounds coming from his stomach. At last an animated chick flies out of his mouth during one of his long-held high notes.

The problems with this feature are typical of the problems of the later comedies. *The Big Premiere* rehearses a number of previously successful formulas, but they do not occur with comic inevitability or anything approaching the spontaneity of the early films. McGowen as co-writer is not up to McGowen as director. For one thing, written dialogue was never the strong point of the early films, which relied heavily on visual effects, background music, and improvisation—children horsing around like children. The reciting children of the later films do not act like normal kids; the inside jokes and interests of the "Hollywood brat" have taken over. Adult intention and control is everywhere at hand.

Even when McGowen tries to revive a form of the double plot, as in *Bubbling Troubles*, directed by Cahn in 1939, the film sinks under the weight of its script and the attendant lack of spontaneity. This film compares interestingly with *A Lad An' A Lamp* in its imagery and some of its situations. The plot hinges on a misunderstanding involving dynamite, there is a monkey, and there is the comic situation of a child growing suddenly fat (with an inflating device). But the similarities end there. The story begins with Alfalfa in the role of melancholy lover. He sits at the dinner table uninterested in his food, envisioning Darla's face in his bowl of soup (the superimposition of her face is another of the fairly sophisticated techniques we find in these later films). Alfalfa's father gives him "Settles-itt Powders," for his "ailment," and Alfalfa goes to join his fellows at play. It seems that Darla is

smitten with Butch, who claims that he can make dynamite in his "chemistry lab." The gang follows her to Butch's house to see him prove it. Alfalfa, as ever jealous of Butch, arrives in time to see Butch making "dynamite" with what he sees are really Settles-itt Powders. Calling Butch's bluff to impress Darla, he offers to drink the "dynamite," without realizing that Settles-itt Powders must be mixed together before being drunk. As soon as Alfalfa drinks the contents of a second glass of powders, he begins to expand. At this moment there is a coincidence meant to set off a second plot. Butch's father has been repairing a truck in the driveway and is attempting to start it. Just as Alfalfa throws a glass of the "dynamite" in disgust near the truck, the truck backfires, and the gang now believes that it was dynamite Alfalfa swallowed, and that he is liable to blow up at any moment. With pillows attached to his feet, he is led to a "safe" place in the woods. Along the way, the monkey, in a gratuitous appearance, attacks Alfalfa and frightens the children for the obvious reasons. It so happens that a workman has just planted real dynamite under the tree stump in the woods where they stop. While the gang goes for the fire department, the workman discovers Alfalfa, sends him away, and proceeds to blow up the stump. The Gang hears this, and believing Alfalfa to have been killed, proceeds weeping to Alfalfa's house to "tell his folks he won't be home for dinner." Alfalfa is already there, however, and has been given bicarbonate of soda for his problem. When he sees his friends, he falls on his stomach, and burps a hurricane-like wind that knocks the front wall out of his house.

Compared with such miserable later efforts as *Clown Princes, Don't Lie*, or *Farm Hands, Bubbling Troubles* makes some attempt to recapture the farcical energy of earlier films, but its effects are artificial and strained next to a film like *A Lad An' A Lamp*. The romantic love interest (a non-farcical import) is dropped as soon as the dynamite coincidence occurs. The motif of growing fat, used with a delicate touch in the earlier film, is over-played here (the giant and destructive burp with which the film ends is too heavy-handed to be accepted comfortably in a story adopting so many conventions of romantic comedy). And the stilted script overwhelms any attempt at spontaneity in the work. The false-mourning scene is as bad as the one in *Romeo and Juliet*, and less excusable in terms of its historical context. The film fairly lumbers to its conclusion, and marks the decadence of what one might call the Little Rascals genre.

The early Little Rascals comedies remain delightful in spite of and perhaps because of their relative crudity. They accomodate comfortably the traditions of low comedy, of raw farce, both in terms of mechanical plot function and anarchic energy. This is the mainspring of their comic effect, and it remains valid even in times grown sceptical of higher, smoother, more reasonable comic art.

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Figure 21.1: An early grouping of “Rascals”

Chapter 22

The Legacy of Babel: Language in Jean Renoir's *Grand Illusion*

It has become fairly commonplace to assert that film, like music, transcends the nationality of its audience.[1] Stanley Kauffmann has argued that film "is the only art involving language that can be enjoyed in a language of which one is ignorant."[2] This depends, of course, on the role language plays in a particular film, the extent to which it functions as an integral part of a film's meaning, and the way it functions with the film's other constituents. In some films a foreign language provides a real barrier to full appreciation, while in other films the language may play a relatively insignificant role (as in opera) and do little to hinder the viewer's appreciation beyond focusing his attention on other, perhaps more important, elements. In polyglot films the issue of language is seemingly most transparent. We are exposed to languages as we encounter them in life. Awash in such a Babel, we are frustrated not by an artistic barrier but by the conditions of life itself.

In fact, the polyglot text is a conscious artistic strategy feigning linguistic naturalism, and we should attend carefully to its motive and function. The polyglot text of Jean Renoir's *Grand Illusion*, for instance, is the central constituent of the film's meaning. While critics like James Kerans and Alexander Sesonske have noted the prominence of the film's various languages, the detailed functioning of language as the film's central metaphor is largely ignored. The issue of language

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[2]Kauffmann 418



Figure 22.1: Brueghel's *Tower of Babel*

constitutes the film's most important and tragic theme: the separation of nations and even the social classes within nations.

The setting of *Grand Illusion*, a series of prisoner of war camps, provides Renoir with the perfect opportunity to mix together all the major races and languages of Europe. The camps become a microcosm of Europe itself, which has exploded into war through mutual misunderstanding and suspicion. Treating incidents in the middle of the war, Renoir avoids dealing in detail with its notoriously ambiguous origins. Blame need not be assigned; everyone in the film is bound up in the same unhappy circumstance. Renoir's use of different languages impresses us forcefully with the frustrating breakdown of human understanding that the war has brought about. Besides French, the major tongue of the film, we hear snatches of German, English, Russian, and various patriotic, folk, or popular songs in these

languages (e.g. "Tipperary," "Die Heimat," "The Marseillaise," French music hall songs). Aside from the polyglot aristocrats, there is little communication between the ordinary men of different nations. An early scene shows a Russian soldier trying to teach a foreign soldier how to conjugate the verb "to be," but we are meant to see that this communication is still at a very tentative and rudimentary stage. More typical is the sarcastic mimicing of other languages. The Parisian actor pronounces "*auf Wiedersehen*" with a mocking French accent. The French soldiers parody the stolid guard who always repeats "*streng verboten*." Interestingly, it is especially forbidden ("*streng streng verboten*") to talk with the guards—that is, to attempt to communicate with foreigners.

Even attempts at friendliness are frustrated at the level of language. When Marechal is in solitary confinement and on the point of going "stir crazy," a kindly German guard tries to talk with him, but Marechal refuses any conversation not in the French language, the only one he knows. Finally, the German gives him a mouth organ on which he plays the popular song, "Frou-Frou," with which the film began. Outside the door and significantly unknown to Marachal, the guard begins to hum the same tune. Music, the so-called "universal language," offers some promise of communion here, perhaps even a premonition of the vision of harmony with which the film will end, but the comfort is small and the scene remains pathetic. One should note that only "pure" music without the taint of language can have even this effect. Once music is allied to language, as in "The Marseillaise" or "Die Heimat," its effect is quite the opposite. The singing of "The Marseillaise," with which the allied soldiers interrupt their revue (one of the few positive events embraced by both the Germans and the prisoners), has the effect of stirring up nationalist hatred.

What is in some respects the point of supreme frustration occurs when the French officers are being moved out after having just completed their tunnel, a work entailing much labor and considerable peril. While they are waiting to leave, a group of new prisoners is arriving. One of the new prisoners, an English officer, drops his suitcase, and under the pretext of helping, Marechal breaks ranks and tries desperately to explain to him about the existence of the tunnel. The Englishman cannot understand Marechal, however, and only answers him with "It's really too kind of you.... I'm sorry, I don't understand French." Thus, the new English prisoners lose the opportunity to use the tunnel. As in the story of the Tower of Babel, human endeavor is frustrated at the point of completion by the confusion of tongues. But the problem is more dangerous than mere frustration—lack of understanding leads to suspicion, hatred, and war. The Frenchmen cannot understand the human tragedy of the two old German women at the gate who watch the

youthful soldiers and murmur: "*Die armen Jungen*." Paul Fussell has suggested interestingly that

> What we can call gross dichotomizing is a persisting imaginative habit of modern times, traceable, it would seem, to the actualities of the Great War. "We" are all here on this side; "the enemy" is over there. "We" are individuals with names and personal identities; "he" is a mere collective entity. We are visible; he is invisible.[3]

What Renoir implies is that by not understanding the "enemy's" language, we deny him a name and make him invisible and therefore infinitely frightening.

As much as language underlies the separation of nations, it also underlies the separation of classes, which is the second major concern of the film. Indeed, the characters provide a microcosm of the European class system in the early twentieth century. It is interesting to note that not everyone in the film is limited by the barriers of his mother tongue. The two aristocratic officers, von Rauffenstein and de Boeldieu, as well as the scholar, Demolder, can speak or understand several languages other than their own. The Jewish officer, Rosenthal, who has relatives on both sides of the front, can speak German. With the possible exception of Rosenthal, however, the linguistic skills of these characters are ineffectual instruments of human understanding. The reasons are various and have mostly to do with class.

Demolder, the Greek professor, is the object of much ridicule. To the aristocrats he is never more than a subject of minor amusement. They ignore him, for instance, when he gawks like an undergraduate art history student at the Medieval fortress of Wintersborn, where they are being held prisoner. Even the middle class Marechal parodies him at one point, exclaiming that the castle is "Fourteenth century," to which Boeldieu replies wittily, "Pure Gothic." Ironically, the scene was actually shot in a chateau built by Wilhelm II.[4] Demolder's books, in which no one else is the least bit interested, disturb Boeldieu's cards. Boeldieu remarks "coldly" that Demolder's dictionaries are going to be in his way. Demolder is in the process of translating Pindar, whom he considers "the greatest of the Greek poets." We are left in no doubt, however, that the undertaking will not be as momentous as Demolder would like to think. Rauffenstein's contemptuous comment upon learning of Demolder's activity is: "Poor old Pindar!" Boeldieu says that Demolder has "the soul of a bird." Although Demolder has a sentimental worship of books (he

[3]Fussell 75

[4]Sesonske 286

is incensed when the Russians set their books on fire) and studies a foreign language, his interests are ineffectual. The student of a "dead language," he offers no help in bridging the language barrier between the French and Germans.

The aristocrats, Boeldieu and Rauffenstein, might effect such a bridge between the nationalities, but they are prevented from doing so by the duties and isolation of their class. They are separated from their fellow officers as much as anything by language. Boeldieu, for instance, is isolated by a certain class dialect as well as what one might call his ideolect. Throughout the film, he speaks in a witty, formal, epigrammatic style typical of the aristocracy. At Hallbach, noticing the young German soldiers drilling while the prisoners of war prepare their play, he comments: "On one side, children playing at soldiers. On the other, soldiers playing at children." The conversation at Wintersborn is distinguished by his witty banter with Rauffenstein. When the latter has finished showing his new prisoners around the fortress, Boeldieu remarks: "It was very pleasant of you, sir, to have shown us around your estate." The other French officers cannot or are not allowed thus to "pull off" their attempts at wit. Marechal's amusing joke about Maxim's does not go over with Rauffenstein. Boeldieu's formal style leaves his fellows cool to him and indeed suspicious of his motives. Marechal himself, who must "explain" Boeldieu to the others, notes at one point that "he's a good bloke, but you can't let yourself go with him, you can't feel free.... A different sort of education.... If ever you [Rosenthal] and I found ourselves in a bad spot, we'd just be a couple of poor down-and-outs, but him, he'd always be Monsieur de Boeldieu." Later in the film, when the bourgeois Marechal, aware of Boeldieu's impending sacrifice, attempts a deeper level of friendliness, Boeldieu puts him off: "I'm not doing anything for you personally. That excuses us from the danger of getting emotional." When Marechal questions Boeldieu's continued use of the formal "vous" after eighteen months together, Boeldieu responds: "I say vous to my mother and my wife."

Rauffenstein is similarly isolated from his fellow officers by class and language. His preferred languages seem to be French and English, and when he does speak German his voice takes on an unaccustomed and alien rasp. His junior officers are also of the middle class, and they consider him something of a lunatic for what is to them eccentric behavior. Rauffenstein's careful cultivation of the geranium, "the only flower in the castle," is ridiculed by his martinet of a junior officer, a former headmaster who claims to "know how to keep that gang of devils [the prisoners] in their place." Interestingly, in the moving scene of Boeldieu's death, Rauffenstein sacrifices this last "flower of the aristocracy."

Boeldieu and Rauffenstein, isolated from their fellow officers, have the most

in common with each other, but ultimately they are separated by something else they have in common: their patriotic duties as aristocratic career officers. Rauffenstein seems to regret this more than Boeldieu and is keener to maintain their priviledged intimacy. To effect this intimacy he makes continual use of the English language. A language common to the aristocracy of Europe, English allows Rauffenstein to distinguish himself and Boeldieu from the others, in effect to talk over their heads. It becomes their special language. In the early banquet scene, Rauffenstein, recognizing Boeldieu's name, presumes his knowledge of English. Sesonske has pointed out that "Rauffenstein switches from French to English without question or explanation, knowing that a 'de Boeldieu' will of course understand," whereas "Marechal is surprised to find his German neighbor speaking French and seeks an explanation."[5] In a later scene at Wintersborn, Rauffenstein shows off his twenty-five Maxim machine-guns to Boeldieu and the others. Marechal attempts to imitate Boeldieu's witty style: "Why, of course, sir. Personally, I prefer the restaurant..." The response of the two aristocrats to this infringement on their stylistic territory is interesting. Boeldieu, at whose expense the joke is made, accepts it with a benign resignation, as a master does a pupil's imitations: "Touché." Rauffenstein, on the other hand, will not condescend to the humor of an inferior. He shifts immediately to English, talking as he knows over the heads of the others: "I used to know a pretty girl at Maxim's... back in 1913. Her name was Fifi." Boeldieu responds also in English: "So did I." Rauffenstein's aristocratic snub recalls, as he likes to do, a nostalgic time before the war when aristocratic career officers did not have to accept middle class "officers" such as Marechal and Rosenthal as in any sense their equals.

Both Rauffenstein and Boeldieu know, however, that the old European aristocrats, along with the peculiar form of international understanding they possessed, are a dying breed, cut off from their own lower classes and no longer in control of events. In a private conversation in Rauffenstein's quarters, again punctuated with English phrases, they discuss this situation candidly. Rauffenstein admits his distaste for his present position as commandant. "I was a fighting man and, now, I am a bureaucrat, a policeman. It is the only way left for me to try and serve my country." When Boeldieu asks him why he made an exception in inviting him to his quarters, Rauffenstein responds disdainfully: "You call Marechal and Rosenthal... officers?" Whatever else the war brings, "it will be the end of the Rauffensteins and the Boeldieus." To Rauffenstein, such middle class soldiers are "the charming legacy of the French Revolution." Boeldieu comments that "per-

[5]Sesonske 320

haps there is no more need for us." Rauffenstein immediately asks: "And don't you find that is a pity?" Boeldieu responds, less certainly: "Perhaps." Boeldieu's scepticism suggests that if there is to be a solution to the problem of lack of international understanding, it will not come from an international aristocracy with an exclusive language.

Indeed, this point is dramatized in the final exchange of English between the two men. When Boeldieu devises a plan of escape for Marechal and Rosenthal, he reserves for himself the role of creating a diversion. While all the prisoners except Marechal and Rosenthal assemble for a general roll call, Boeldieu climbs the watch-tower and plays the tune, "Petit Navire," on a flute (an instrument he claimed earlier to have hated). He distracts the Germans long enough for his middle class comrades to effect their escape. When Rauffenstein learns of Boeldieu's dangerous escapade, he makes a final personal appeal to Boeldieu to surrender. Interestingly, the appeal is in English, unintelligible to his own men and the various prisoners.

> *Rauffenstein in English*: Boeldieu, have you really gone insane?
>
> *Boeldieu in English*: I'm perfectly sane.
>
> *Rauffenstein in English*: Boeldieu, you understand that if you do not obey at once and come down, I shall have to shoot.... I dread to do that. I beg you... man to man, come back.
>
> *Boeldieu in English*: It's damn nice of you, Rauffenstein, but it's impossible.

At this point, Rauffenstein is forced to shoot Boeldieu, and only afterward learns that Marechal and Rosenthal have escaped. To himself in English (in a language he can now use only with himself) he mutters, "so that is why," and suddenly shifting to a harsh German, orders the dogs called out to search for the escapees. In the end, the mutual intelligibility of the aristocrats is overcome by their intense sense of divergent duties. As Boeldieu comments on his deathbed when Rauffenstein begs his forgiveness, "I would have done the same thing. French or German... duty is duty." However moving the scenes with the two aristocrats may be, thay cannot offer a solution to the problem of human understanding that the film poses. They represent rather a dead end.

If there is to be such a solution, Renoir seems to tell us, it must come from the middle class, from the Marechals and Rosenthals and Elsas of Europe. Accordingly, these characters dominate the film's final scenes. As Marechal and Rosenthal, who has injured his foot attempt to make good their escape, they are

forced to seek shelter at a German farm house. It is here that they meet Elsa, a German widow with a five year old daughter. Her husband has been killed at Verdun, ironically the battle that wavered back and forth as background to the early scenes at Hallbach. When she first discovers them, the two French soldiers, particularly Marechal, are suspicious of her. Marechal, threatening her with a log, is frustrated in his attempt to explain to her that they are not bandits but French soldiers (a fact she already guesses and questions in German). Rosenthal, though in considerable pain, is able to speak to Elsa in German and explain their situation. Interestingly, this is the first we learn of Rosenthal's knowledge of German. As a Jew with relatives in Austria, his problem has been how to allay the suspicions of his fellows and to fit in with the ordinary French officers. Perhaps for reasons such as these, he has kept quiet about his German until an emergency requires him to use it. Now he becomes literally and symbolically the translator and mediator between the French Marechal and the German Elsa. His linguistic mediation allows the relationship between these two, with its hope for eventual international understanding, to deepen.

Marechal's and Elsa's growing love for each other is expressed symbolically by their attempts to learn each other's language. Elsa invites this with frankness and simplicity. Unlike Boeldieu, who addresses even the intimate members of his family as "*vous*," Elsa immediately addresses the two French soldiers in the familiar. She invites them in with "*kommt herein*," the first friendly German words they have heard. Her only reproach is that they might wake her sleeping child. With perfect naturalness, she sets about tending Rosenthal's foot, which is, as he puts it, "*kaput*." And she earns their trust when a group of passing German soldiers knock at her window by not giving them away. (Ironically, the German soldier echoes in his own language Boeldieu's fatal "duty is duty." Like Boeldieu and Rauffenstein, the soldier is trapped by the ethos of duty in the insanity of the war.) At Elsa's farmhouse, however, the war now seems a distant mirage, an illusion of which we are reminded only by the empty chairs at Elsa's table and the mute photographs of her fallen family on the wall. Marechal begins speaking French to the "German cow" he finds in Elsa's barn, a preparation for his understanding of the German woman. While Rosenthal entertains the little girl, Lotte, with German nursery rhymes, Marechal helps Elsa with her chores and begins with Rosenthal's help to understand her German requests. At one point Marechal remarks that while he never understood a word of German spoken to him by his guards, he can understand Elsa's German. On Christmas Eve, Marechal and Rosenthal decorate a Christmas tree for Elsa and Lotte and construct a manger scene complete with Mary, Joseph, and baby Jesus, "my blood brother," as Rosenthal jokingly

comments. They play a gramophone record (unadulterated music, the symbol of international understanding) and the delighted Lotte is treated to her Christmas celebration. This harmonious scene suggests the answer of the bourgeoisie to the failure of Boeldieu's and Rauffenstein's aristocratic internationalism. Marechal is eager to understand the culture of his hosts. When Lotte wants to eat the baby Jesus and her mother tells her that he is not to be eaten, Marechal chimes in with a transfigured version of the only German he had known: "*Streng verboten*." But unlike the sarcastic parodies of German at Hallbach, the irony here is gentle and reflexive. Before Lotte is put to bed, Marechal attempts tentatively his first friendly German sentence: "*Lotte hat bleu Augen*," and is gently corrected by Elsa. At Hallbach, language learning did not go beyond the verb "to be," but at the farm, incipient love carries understanding forward. The climax of the scene is wonderfully suggestive. Marechal and Rosenthal retire for the night. Marechal picks up an apple and begins to eat it, indicating perhaps his renewed acceptance of life. He notices Elsa still standing by the tree, however, and putting the apple down, goes out to her and takes her in his arms.

The "peace" at Elsa's farm continues for some time and the love of Marechal and Elsa is suggested by their language learning. Marechal learns to say in German that Lotte's eyes are blue, while Else learns to say in French that the coffee is ready. But the war outside continues, and the day comes when Marechal and Rosenthal must leave. Interestingly, it is up to Rosenthal to explain the situation to Elsa. He arranges one last conversation between the two lovers. Moving as the conversation is, it is curious that Marechal speaks in French while Elsa speaks in German. We can hope at least that somehow they understand each other, but our hope is a matter of faith that the language barriers have been transcended by love. This delicate, trembling faith is the hope of the film. Marechal and Rosenthal will indeed go back to the real world of the war, and perhaps they will survive, and perhaps Marechal will return afterwards for Elsa—and perhaps Frenchmen and Germans will learn to live together—but the ambiguity of the war surrounds this hope. Elsa, not yet fluent in French, can listen to Marechal's promises only with her tears.

Renoir ends his film with such an ambiguity. As Marechal comments, "German snow and Swiss snow look pretty much the same!" In fact, the protagonists have traversed the western front from Holland to Switzerland, and do escape, but the fate of modern Europe is still uncertain: like the two dark stragglers in their valley of Swiss snow.

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Chapter 23

The Faustian Theme in Fassbinder's *The Marriage of Maria Braun*

Goethe's Faust has bequeathed to following generations the tantalizing, romantic notion that vital living is constituted by continually deferred satisfaction, by a series of animating and enabling desires that pursue one another without contentment.[1] At the moment he was content to linger with his life, Faust was to have lost it. Indeed, in the romantic century and a half since Goethe's day, the very words "contentment" and "satisfaction" have taken on connotations of bourgeois smugness and materialism. Those easily contented are the living dead, the "bastards" Sartre brilliantly parodied in *Nausea*. Those readily satisfied are the middle-aged, middle-class uncommitted ones ambling in the limbo of Eliot's *Wasteland.* It is easy to forget the interesting terms by which Goethe forgave his Faust: salvation through a woman's love, or rather, *das ewig Weibliche,* the eternal feminine, something completely "other" which "pulls us on," standing in for our imperfectly scrupulous desire. Taken together, these two motifs, an inability or refusal to satisfy the basic desires by which we live and our hope of salvation through an eternal other, form a myth of our modern predicament. The lineaments of this myth can be traced in works as diverse as *Nadja* and *Lolita.* Film offers us further examples in *That Obscure Object of Desire* and *The Story of Adele H.*

In German culture, of course, where Goethe is still very much a living presence, the myth takes on particular significance. The duality of impulse it supposes sorts well with the bewildering, contradictory enthusiasms of what Luigi Barzini

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once called the "mutable Germans" (See *The Europeans,* Chapter Three). In fact, it is just this kind of contradictory impulse that Rainer Werner Fassbinder habitually diagnosed in the period of Adenauer's Germany, the era when exhausted Nazi energies were being subsumed and revitalized in the so called *Wirtschaftswunder,* or "economic miracle." As I shall argue, Faustian dualism suggests the compelling motivation in *The Marriage of Maria Braun,* a film in which Fassbinder grapples with the difficulties and contradictions inherent in Germany's post-war transformation.

Fassbinder's film, which takes place between 1945 and 1954, has as its background the *Zusammenbruch,* the military, political, and economic collapse of Hitler's Germany, and the subsequent *Wirtschaftswunder* of the early Adenauer years. At the end of the war, Germany was virtually covered with rubble, materially and psychologically devastated. According to one historian, "over 25 percent of all German housing lay in ruins, at a time when the vast influx of refugees and expellees [these constituted 20 percent of the post-war population] greatly augmented the need for shelter" (Rodes 307). The Germans themselves, victims of Goebbels's propaganda until the final days of the war, were as shocked as they were humiliated by these circumstances.

> Their accepted system of values was swept away by the bombs and the occupation armies. Sitting beside the rubble of their former dwellings, nibbling on a crust of bread, smoking a cigarette butt saved from the crushing heel of an allied soldier, many Germans faced the agonizing need for re-evaluating their lives. With their illusions dashed, some fell into self-effacing humility before the conquering occupants, some bolstered their ego with haughty self-exculpation. The bulk of the population, overwhelmed by the sheer exigencies of keeping alive, sank into a temporary stupor. (Rodes 307-08)

The "miracle" is that within ten years Germany was able to rise from these dire conditions to a position third among the industrialized nations of the world. Germany's rise had much to do, of course, with Allied aid, the currency reform of 1948, the political adroitness of Adenauer, and indeed the entrepreneurial skill of the Germans themselves, but the very swiftness of the recovery left the difficult moral questions unattended and unanswered. Was it really possible to pursue a fresh start with amnesic intensity, or even to return to pacific conditions like those that obtained at the beginning of the century? Could it be, as Barzini speculates, that a different, "Swisslike Germany" had really been there all along, "concealed

by the bellicose and truculent Second and Third Empires" (96)? If so, what was the relation of these Germanies, and where, after all, were all the Nazis now?

George Steiner believes the German language itself was irreversibly corrupted by the Nazi experience and argues that it has proved incapable of confronting such questions. According to Steiner, for a brief period "immediately following the end of the war, many Germans tried to arrive at a realistic insight into the events of the Hitler era," but "the establishment of the new Deutschmark" in 1948 and Germany's "miraculous ascent to renewed economic power" (106) put an end to such self-confrontations. "The country literally drugged itself with hard work....And with this upward leap of material energy came a new myth. Millions of Germans began saying to themselves and to any foreigner gullible enough to listen that the past had somehow not happened" (Steiner 106-07). Steiner's argument suggests that a wedge had been driven between the language of Goethe and the language of modern Germany, rendering them, at a profound level, mutually unintelligible, and preventing the modern language from even formulating the difficult questions of Nazi guilt. The case may not be so extreme, though Steiner's scenerio suggests intriguing insights into the motivation of Fassbinder's characters. Actually, Fassbinder's approach—and it has always been disturbing in its ambiguity—is to raise and imaginatively engage such questions. Maria Braun, as a representative of renascent Germany, is a Faust at once bargaining with her soul and struggling to hold on, by deferring satisfaction in favor of an ideal, to the possibility of salvation. In Steiner's terms, she avoids an unsatisfactory reality by resort to an earlier, and perhaps obsolete vocabulary of Faustian love and salvation.

A modern Faust, of course, is to some extent at least a satirical Faust. His romantic idealism must make itself felt in the inhospitable context of modern bourgeois life. Fassbinder immediately suggests a tone of parody by making his Faust a woman finding her way in a world dominated by men and seeking as her "eternal feminine" a man. Maria Braun negotiates in this world by means of a peculiarly intense obsession that cannot find satisfaction. She survives the post war period by clinging to an obviously fictional ideal of her husband. When the "myth" threatens to become merely real, she destroys herself. Satisfaction of desire equals destruction in the Faustian equation.

It is fitting that *The Marriage of Maria Braun* is framed with explosions. Its first image is a bomb exploding in the German town where Maria (Hanna Schygulla) and Hermann Braun (Klaus Löwitsch) are to be married. The background sounds are an absurd mixture of the adagio from Beethoven's Ninth Symphony and the sound of a baby crying, suggesting perhaps the new Germany springing from the ruins of the old. The credits bleed onto the screen in a red

gothic script like that of an old, official document. As Maria's marriage document is being signed, another bomb explodes and scatters the papers, sending her on a comic scramble to retrieve it while Hermann holds down the frightened pastor. She does clutch the paper, but in the mix-up (at least as suggested by the film) Hermann disappears. This is important, because as we will see she cherishes the idea of marriage, represented by the paper, rather than the physical presence of a husband.

Immediately after the credit scene, Maria is shown as one of many women in the period of *Zusammenbruch* who have lost their husbands. As she says to her mother, there are "too many brides, too few men." Unlike the others, however, Maria refuses to admit that her husband is dead; to a friend she denies not being married. Her reason is simply that she wants it to be that way. She refuses to sink into a stupor like her mother and grandfather and so many Germans of the time. Possibly, Fassbinder intends to parody the German predilection for idealist philosophies that scorn merely empirical evidence. All around, however, there is evidence that the romantic Germany of the past is dead. The background music fades into the sound of an official voice on the radio droning out the names of the dead. Maria and other women carry sandwich signs asking if anyone knows of their husbands. Most people (though interestingly not Maria) scramble after cigarettes and even cigarette butts as if they were food. An old man, possibly senile, hums "Das Vaterland," while well-fed American soldiers make vulgar jokes at the expense of the women. One of these soldiers insults Maria. When she challenges him, he apologizes and politely offers her several packs of Camels. Maria, who is not seen smoking until the end of the film, trades these cigarettes to her mother for an expensive brooch she will use to begin her career (before the post-war currency reform cigarettes were considered better than paper money in Germany). For an idealist, she shows a remarkable business sense. Maria's practical qualities, however, run in tandem with her devotion to the idea of marriage. Hard-headedness enables her to survive on one level, but the obsessive and restless ideal of her marriage is what really pulls her on. The duality of such Faustian *Tätigkeit* ("activity" does not really approximate the full meaning here) is dangerously paradoxical, even for Goethe. As Erich Heller remarks, Goethe faced considerable difficulty in reconciling his intuitions "that man's *being* was definable only through his incessant striving to *become* what he was not yet and was yet *meant* to be; and that in thus striving he was in extreme danger of losing himself through his impatient and impetuous ignorance of what he was" (31-31). Put another way, "if Faust ceased to strive, he would be damned; but he would also be damned if, in his ceaseless quest for himself and his world, he overstepped

the elusive measure of his humanity" (Heller 32).

Maria is comfortable, however, with the ambiguity of this dualism. Her marriage does not stop her from becoming a prostitute. She trades her "new" brooch for "work clothes." As she goes on her job interview, we hear the duet from *Der Rosenkavalier* playing in the background, a suggestion of idealistic love superimposed on a corrupt reality. Although she debates with a fellow prostitute about the reality of love as opposed to mere physical sensation, she does not hesitate to become the mistress of a black American soldier (George Byrd). Interestingly, her sister's husband Willi (Gottfried John) returns to take up his real but ultimately barren marriage. When Willi assures her that Hermann is in fact dead, Maria pursues her affair with the black soldier, Bill, in earnest (she even becomes temporarily pregnant by him), but she continually refuses his offers of marriage. "I am married to my husband," she tells him. While she is in bed with Bill, Hermann, who has been a prisoner of the Russians, suddenly reappears. Seeing Hermann, she immediately runs to him, but he throws her down and then (oddly enough under the circumstances) begins frantically puffing a cigarette. Only when he has finished his cigarette does Hermann fight with Bill. Maria clubs Bill on the head, killing him. Questioned by an American tribunal, she explains herself as follows: *"Ich hab' ihn* [Bill] *liebgehabt, und ich liebe meinen Mann* [i.e., her husband]." This phrase is not easily translatable into English, and of course the American prosecutor does not follow her.

The German distinction between *"liebhaben"* and *"lieben,"* which she invokes by way of explanation, sums up nicely the dualism of Maria's nature. *Liebhaben* is the ordinary, colloquial verb for love, suggesting the level of physical reality. Like Donne's "dull, sublunary lovers' love, whose soul is sense," it cannot admit absence. On the other hand, *lieben* can have higher, almost spiritual connotations. It suggests the "great love" that transcends physical reality. This is the love Maria claims to have for Hermann. It is a romantic ideal, and as such, more readily thrives on the beloved's absence than his presence. Tom Noonan is somewhat naive in claiming for Maria a role in "familiar melodrama" as "the woman who gives her all for love" (43). The soul of Maria's quite superlunary love is continuing and unsatisfied desire. Indeed, we cannot help wondering, once we have seen him, what Maria sees in the stolid Hermann. Paradoxically, Bill's murder is a welcome accident to Maria, for it removes the physical Hermann once again: he takes the blame and is sent to prison. Maria is free to nourish her obsession with monthly visits while pursuing her ordinary life safely without his companionship. As she puts it with Faustian emphasis, "I have very much to do."

One thing she does while her husband is in prison is to begin a rather calcu-

lated affair with a wealthy German-French businessman, Oswald. Oswald (Ivan Desny) is the kind of "western" West German, like the Rhenish Adenauer himself, who could make use of allied connections to spur Germany's recovery. As a number of critics have noted, he is also, like Adenauer and indeed Hitler, a "fatherly" figure to the young, fatherless Maria (See Rheuban). Maria's alliance is thus of more than personal significance. She contrives to meet Oswald in the first class compartment of a train. The only other passenger who can afford this compartment is a black American soldier, whom she rebuffs in her best, vulgar English. Oswald, impressed by her self-possession, offers her a job with his firm, and soon promotes her, both in his business and his private life. All this time, she continues visiting Hermann in prison. Hermann's punishment, which on the surface at least is scarcely deserved, may suggest that he is suffering for the hidden guilt of the old Germany. When he accuses Maria, the new German woman, of taking on the role of a man, of wearing, as it were, a man's shoes (he refers to her as a *Männergefüss),* she answers that she is his wife, only brave and beautiful and clever. "Her time," she tells him, "is just beginning." She admits her affair with Oswald to Hermann, but later refuses Oswald's proposal of marriage: she will be his mistress, but not his wife. Oswald, who does not expect to live long and wants his last two or three years to be happy, visits Hermann himself, "to meet the man Maria loves." Though we do not learn it yet, they strike up a male bargain to share Maria. This bargain, with its own echoes of Faust, suggests an interesting, covert relation between the new sanitized Germany (Oswald) and the old Germany of romantic tradition (Hermann), the two coordinates of Maria's bifurcated life. Later, when it becomes obvious that her work brings in a lot of money, Hermann and Maria argue about whose money she is making. Maria claims it is Hermann's, while he claims it is hers. Hermann is threatened by the role in which Maria has cast him. Rather than act the part of ideal (and kept) love object, he would play the more comfortable part of the husband who sells his wife, as indeed he has for half of Oswald's fortune. Oswald, meanwhile, accepts the role she has allowed him. He buys her chocolates, visits her family on holidays (like an obliging bourgeois, he even takes snap shots of the family group), and in general looks after her material needs.

Maria is surprised when she learns that Hermann has been released and has left without her for Australia or Canada. He will not return until he can pay back the money she has spent on him. In the meantime, however, he sends her a rose every month. She keeps all these in a vase, another emblem of the fact that their love thrives only on the level of a romantic ideal. Maria now appears increasingly as a hardened business woman. She humiliates her secretary and is sarcastic with

the workers who move her into her new house. When her mother, who has a rather coarse boyfriend of her own, comments that no one in family had ever had such a house, Maria informs her that she won't be welcome there. She will live alone in the house awaiting Hermann. Maria's house is another emblem of her ideal notion of marriage, which is to be free of the various entanglements of her material life. It would seem that she has found the perfect balance for the duality of her life. Hermann is safely away, yet remains a presence through his gifts of the roses. Maria continues to see Oswald in restaurants and at work. When she meets with Oswald, the music is not romantic (one remembers the earlier use of Strauss and Beethoven to suggest ideals of German romanticism), but classical (Mozart) or baroque (chamber music in the restaurant). Where real marriages, like that of her sister Betti and Willi, break up, her own bifurcated love life continues. And we see Maria smoking cigarettes for the first time. Willi, who admires Maria as a "modern" woman, comments: "Maria Braun, you're beginning to get strange." One wonders if she has not begun to overstep the elusive measure of her humanity. As Goethe himself once noted with Faust's *hubris* in mind, "everything that sets our minds free without giving us mastery over ourselves is pernicious" (Quoted by Heller 36). Heller's comment on *Faust,* that it presents a fascinating and terrifying "spectacle of man's mind rising above the reality of his being and destroying it in such dark transcendence" (37), applies also to Fassbinder's "Faust".

At this point, Maria's carefully wrought balance of material and mental life comes apart. Oswald's assistant Senkenberg (Hark Bohm) comes to inform her that Oswald has died in his sleep. The background, ironically, is a political speech by Adenauer. Her reaction is to get drunk alone in her house. Hermann now reappears suddenly once again. She is ecstatic, but he seems merely taciturn. While she waits on him, gives him presents, and tries on different sets of black underwear, he drinks beer and listens to the 1954 World Championship soccer match (significantly, Germany's first post-war victory). As they prepare to consummate their "two day old marriage," they argue again over who will own their property. (By this time she has lit another cigarette, leaving the gas of her stove on.) They are interrupted by a ringing of the doorbell. Senkenberg and Oswald's lawyer, interestingly a French woman (Christine Hopf-de Loup), have come to read Oswald's will. Maria greets them in her black underwear, but puts on a white (virginal?) outfit for the reading. As it turns out, Oswald has left half his fortune to Maria, and the other half to Hermann, whom he characterizes as having "sacrificed more than anyone can." Left alone again with her husband, Maria rather omenously runs water on her wrists (she looks at first as if she were slitting them), asks Hermann for a match, touches the dead roses in her vase, and then heads

for the kitchen stove to light another cigarette. It is significant, perhaps, that we have seen her washing her hands only once before, when she was first told of Hermann's presumed death at the Russian front. All this time, Hermann continues to watch the game. We now hear the announcer screaming: "Tor [score], Tor, aus, aus, aus." Germany has won the world championship. At the same moment, there is the sound of two explosions, and the screen fades to negative images of Germany's chancellors from Adenauer to Helmut Schmidt, as it were, pacific, "Swisslike" Germany on parade.[2]

Fassbinder would have us keep in mind that the explosions leading to these images are linked to the explosion of Hitler's Germany in the beginning of the film, and that Maria's fate is bound inextricably with this progression. It suggests the German problem of making a fresh start with new models and no questions asked. Whether the models are really new, whether one can escape from history is questionable, however. Maria, as a "Faust" caught between ideal desire and mundane reality, fails because she can neither reconcile these nor keep them indefinitely apart. Life having become merely real to her (this is suggested by her smoking finally like everyone else), Maria dies a virtual suicide in her virginal white dress in the house she has built with her imagination.[3] The second explosion suggests that Hermann too may have been a suicide, a victim of his role as the ideal object of an obsession. By counterpointing this scene with the soccer championship and the images of official Germany, Fassbinder underscores the fact that the modern material world cannot tolerate for long the romantic ideal of desire continually unsatisfied. Throughout the film, Maria's pursuit and embodiment of this ideal are parodied; indeed, modern life allows such notions to reign only under the conditions of irony. At the same time, Fassbinder emphasizes the larger implications of the Faustian theme for modern Germany. Maria's "Faust" and Hermann's "Gretchen" suggest the uneasy co-existence of the vocab-

[2]Fassbinder intentionally excluded Willy Brandt from the series because he was, as Fassbinder put it in one interview, "a symbol of the reform movement" prevailed against by "fascist technocrats" (Jagau 191).

[3]The question of Maria's suicide is in fact ambiguous. Fassbinder's shooting script called for Maria and Hermann to go for a drive in the country with Maria at the wheel. She was to drive the car off an embankment, leading to an explosion (See Rheuban 179-80). That Fassbinder chose to forego this ending is interesting. He leaves us with the teasing possibility that Maria's death was accidental or perhaps an unconscious suicide. At least, things might have been different. Fassbinder's scriptwriter, Peter Märthesheimer, told Joyce Rheuban that both he and Fassbinder had wanted a less ambiguous ending, but considered the car crash too weak (188-89). According to Märthesheimer, "Fassbinder was always of the opinion that seemingly inadvertent things signified more about people's true motivations than their superficial, conscious actions" (Rheuban 189).

ularies, as well as the politics, of the new Germany and the old. It is a relationship that attempts to subsume in the ideal structure of romantic myth the unanswered and perhaps unanswerable moral questions attending Germany's progress into the modern world, and its failure is disturbingly portentous.

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