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Each issue consists of articles and a forum for discussion. The forum presents, for instance, research in progress, critical hypotheses, responses to articles published in *Connotations* and elsewhere, as well as to recent books. As a rule, contributions will be published within five months after submission so that discussion can begin without delay.

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Pivots, Reversals, and Things in the Aesthetic Economy of Howells's *The Rise of Silas Lapham*

NEIL BROWNE

*And some certain significance lurks in all things, else all things are little worth, and the round world itself but an empty cipher, except to sell by the cartload, as they do hills about Boston, to fill up some morass in the Milky Way. (Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*)*

Some 30 years after Melville's meditation on meaning and Boston landfills, the matter of moving dirt around Boston is taken up by William Dean Howells. The building of a mansion in the newly reclaimed land of the Back Bay is, as generations of critics have noted, a central metaphor in Howells's 1885 novel *The Rise of Silas Lapham*. The house itself is a material thing around which Silas's fortunes pivot and reverse themselves. Howells's close focus on ordinary material things in this novel can be seen as moving beyond an effort to faithfully represent the everyday life of his characters. Although that effort is clearly central to Howells's understanding of realism, by marking reversals in the text—indeed participating in these reversals in a manner that contributes to their perceptibility—these ordinary things become infused with meaning.¹ This novel is full of pivots and reversals, and in the context of this essay, I would like to think in terms of how these pivot points—marked by ordinary things—allow readers to better perceive the links between aesthetics and the material environment. The aesthetic economy of *The Rise of Silas Lapham* proposes an aesthetics and ethics of connection and interrelation.

In *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, the title character is a newly wealthy paint manufacturer from the hinterlands of Vermont trying to break into Boston society. In its broadest strokes, the novel is about the shift

For debates inspired by this article, please check the Connotations website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debbrowne01513.htm>>.

in post-Civil War United States culture from an agricultural society to an industrialized nation, in Donald Pease's words, from "the restraint of self-made men to the unrestrained self-interest of laissez-faire individualists." "Restraint" is reversed; it becomes "unrestraint." Lockstep with this post-Emersonian shift, the market has begun to replace nature as the theater of self-reliance,² and as Silas, a Civil War veteran, mentions, "But I found that I had got back to another world. The day of small things was past, and I don't suppose it will ever come again in this country."³ Howells imbeds Silas Lapham in this profoundly uncomfortable transitional moment. The novel is, appropriately, composed of a pattern of reversals, some surprising some not, and even though Silas claims that the day of small things is gone, the structural pattern of the novel is stitched together by these ordinary things.

The major narrative pattern unfolds Silas's rise to wealth, his subsequent fall, and his ethical rise enabled by that fall. There is a pivot: reversal becomes gain. In short, Silas sacrifices his self-interest for the greater good. His reversal is paralleled by a subplot—the love triangle involving Silas's two daughters, Pen and Irene, and Tom Corey, the scion of an old, wealthy Boston family. Irene loves Tom to the extent that her identity is staked on that love, and both families assume her feelings reciprocated. It comes as a surprise when, following a crucial turning point in the narrative at a dinner party, Tom proposes not to the lovely Irene, who "With all her wonderful beauty, [...] had an innocence almost vegetable" (27), but to the less attractive, rather droll, intelligent daughter Pen. But the surprise is doubled. At the dinner party at the Coreys' house, Silas, unaccustomed to wine, becomes drunk and even more boastful than usual, embarrassing himself in his first foray into polite culture. Tom has come to work for Silas against his family's wishes, and the morning after the party, Silas calls him into his office and abases himself before the young man through an extravagant apology. Tom, at first disgusted, realizes that his revulsion grows from a sense of self-preservation, dependent upon his "asserting the superiority of his sort, and not recognizing that

Lapham's humiliation came from the sense of wrong, which he had helped to accumulate upon him by superfinely standing aloof and refusing to touch him" (212). Tom comes to see the complicity of himself and his class in Silas's debasement, and he goes to the Lapham house "to see Lapham and give him an ultimate proof of his own perfect faith and unabated respect, and to offer him what reparation this involved for that want of sympathy—of humanity—which he had shown" (213). Here, too, is a reversal in which Tom's allegiances shift away from class and family identity.⁴ Tom seeks to solidify this shift when, finding Silas away from home, he ends up proposing to his daughter, the unexpected sister from the Laphams' rather startled viewpoint. Tom seeks a union outside of his class parameters and further reverses family and class expectations that he naturally would choose the beautiful sister who, prior to this point in the novel, functions mostly on par with an ornamental kale.

Tom's declaration of love for Pen tears apart the tightly knit Lapham family. Exacerbating matters, Pen has been reading a sentimental novel called *Tears, Idle Tears*, which romanticizes maudlin self-sacrifice on the part of its heroine, and the normally rational Pen, who now recognizes her suppressed love for Tom, decides to follow suit and deny Tom out of devotion to her sister. This creates an untenable and unbearable situation within the Lapham family, and at this juncture Howells introduces his strongest advocate for realism, the Reverend Sewell, who is often seen as a mouthpiece for Howells's own views on the subject of novel writing and its cultural role.⁵ In one of the most notable and often cited passages of the novel, Silas and his wife Persis—in their struggle for a way out of their family predicament—confide in the Reverend Sewell, who advises that Pen marry Tom because in that way only one person will suffer—Irene—and not all three. In Benthamian manner, Sewell calls this an "economy of pain" (241). Finally, in a reversal of Silas's situation, Pen acts in her own self interest, not against it, so that fewer suffer.

It is in the materiality underlying these patterns of stress, surprise, and reversal that the social concerns voiced in the novel—itsself an

appeal for the ethics and aesthetics of realism, which Howells clearly saw as counter to an emergent, unrestrained market capitalism and its moral vacuity—resonate with the economy of our own cultural experience.⁶ Realism, of course, often depends on a relatively faithful reproduction of everyday life, but it is not its accuracy of representation—the power of mimesis—that creates the resonance. As it functions in *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, realist attentiveness to everyday things enables a perception of relations essential to aesthetic experience. Mundane things, recognizable to us all, are able to mark for us, to make more real, points in the fictional narrative where our lives and concerns intersect with the ones patterned in a novel. Aesthetic value is not lodged then in the novel, but in a reader's relation to it, and the perception of that relation is the onset of aesthetic experience that has the potential to bridge past and present. Highlighting the ability of literature to work in this way, John Dewey argues that "Literature conveys the meaning of the past that is significant in present experience and is prophetic of the larger movement of the future. Only imaginative vision elicits the possibilities that are interwoven within the texture of the actual."⁷ In the texture and the patterns of the actual present—including the material environments that support them—is embedded the possible future. The relation between the actual and the possible is also the relation between the material and the abstract. The relation is made available through the book, itself both a material thing and a conveyor of possibility. This perception of relations between the actual and the possible drives the onset of aesthetic experience.

Aesthetics cannot be limited to thinking about the aesthetic object, but must instead focus on how that object is rooted in concrete relations and how the object may then resonate with the material, ordinary objects and circumstances of cultures separated by space and time. Art, aesthetic experience, can put in motion shifting values changing with time. In *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, these shifting values are marked by material objects that contribute to the patterns and texture of aesthetic experience. Instead of an "economy of pain," we

can begin to think about how the novel, often by focusing on the material things of everyday life, creates an economy of aesthetic experience and the ethics of connection it implies.

To William Dean Howells, literary realism exercised a countervoice to the dominant aesthetics of the post-Civil War United States. He advocated realism as a corrective to aesthetic elitism, as a radically democratic art. The novel as romance had become irrelevant because, according to Howells in the April 1887 installment of "The Editor's Study," "it is the conception of literature as something apart from life, superfinely aloof, which makes it really unimportant to the great mass of mankind, without a message or a meaning for them [...]." ⁸ Readers cannot perceive their relationship to an aloof art form, and for Howells, "Democracy in literature is the reverse of all this," ⁹ and, inevitably, "The arts must become democratic, and then we shall have the expression of America in art." ¹⁰ Although Howells can be accused of sloganeering, what seems to me of the utmost importance is his insistence on the connection between literature and life. Because life takes place within the patterns of the material environment, and because without this environment, both natural and built, life would cease, Howells's claim must extend to the linkage of the aesthetic and the material environment. For him this meant the realistic novel. And though I would not choose to defend realism as the only home for a more democratically interested literature, I certainly believe that the use of ordinary material objects to enhance the perception of relations is essential to both aesthetic experience as outlined above and democratic art.

Like William Dean Howells, John Dewey was deeply concerned about the role of aesthetic experience in sustaining democracy:

In order to *understand* the esthetic in its ultimate and approved forms, one must begin with it in the raw; in the events and scenes that hold the attentive eye and ear of man, arousing his interest and affording him enjoyment as he looks and listens: the sights that hold the crowd—the fire-engine rushing by; the machines excavating enormous holes in the earth; the human-fly climbing the steeple-side; the men perched high in air on girders, throwing and catching red-hot bolts. The sources of art in human experience will be

learned by him who sees how the tense grace of the ball player infects the onlooking crowd; who notes the delight of the housewife in tending her plants, and the intent interest of her goodman in tending the patch of green in front of the house; the zest of the spectator in poking the wood burning on the hearth and in watching the darting flames and crumbling coals.¹¹

Dewey's thought sheds philosophical light on Howells's practice of realism. This line of democratic aesthetic theory not only appeals to the "great mass of mankind," but it does so by rooting aesthetic experience in the material things and occurrences of everyday life, common things readily referenced by a large readership. It fosters a perceivable relation, previously elided because, according to Dewey, "the conditions that create the gulf which exists generally between producer and consumer in modern society operate to create also a chasm between ordinary and esthetic experience."¹² An economy of aesthetic experience, then, seems to temper a market ethos, is not elite but egalitarian, responds to changing conditions across cultures, and is rooted in everyday, material things. In *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, material things are granted extraordinary power, and Howells draws value back toward the things of every day life, away from the stock market and financial speculation. The novel attempts to reverse the focus of the reading public.

The architecture of reversal in *The Rise of Silas Lapham* is reflected in the houses that figure prominently in the novel. The Laphams live in a house abominably furnished, for example, with

statues, kneeling figures which turned their backs upon the company within doors, and represented allegories of Faith and Prayer to people without. A white marble group of several figures, expressing an Italian conception of Lincoln freeing the slaves,—a Latin negro and his wife,—with our Eagle flapping his wings in approval, at Lincoln's feet [...]. (215)

The Corey house stands in stark contrast to the cluttered Lapham home. Not packed with geegaws, it is graceful and classical, and "the simple adequacy of the architectural intent had been respected" (187). But "the place looked bare to the eyes of the Laphams when they

entered" (187). The materiality of the houses and their furnishings marks a gaping social distinction between the Lapham family and the Coreys that no amount of money can bridge. Blind to this fact, once he learns that his neighborhood is less than fashionable, Silas proposes to leave their house in Nankeen Square, and he proceeds to build a mansion in the Back Bay, at that historical moment when it is in the process of being reclaimed from swampland. The Back Bay is a landfill; to paraphrase Melville, it is cartloads of earth used to fill a morass. The *OED* defines "morass" not only as a swamp but also as "A complicated or confused situation which it is difficult to escape from or make progress through" (1.b.). Certainly Silas finds himself in this complex, unpleasant predicament, just as does his house: "It was found necessary to dig for the kitchen; at that point the original salt marsh lay near the surface, and before they began to put in the piles for the foundation they had to pump. The neighborhood smelt like the hold of a ship after a three years' voyage" (43). The foundation for Silas's ambition is literally sunk in unstable, malodorous, intractable ground.

A convoluted piece of this house, a tiny object planed from pine lumber and, like Silas, a remnant of the North Woods displaced to Boston, traces the reversals in the novel. The material object connected with these reversals makes the pivot point more tangible; it contributes to the perception of a material, sensual aesthetic experience.¹³ The object participates in the texture of the actual in which the aesthetic experience is rooted. The simplest object becomes a node for the perception of relations, contributing to aesthetic experience understood in Dewey's terms as that which "at its height [...] signifies complete interpenetration of self and the world of objects and events."¹⁴ This interpenetration entails a full ethical and aesthetic engagement with the material environment. The wood shaving is introduced as the house in the Back Bay is under construction:

They had not begun to lath and plaster yet, but the clean, fresh smell of the mortar in the walls mingling with the pungent fragrance of the pine shavings neutralized the Venetian odor that drew in over the water. (51)

At this stage in the narrative the fresh smell of pine—of the forest—promises to temper the foul odors of the Back Bay. The shaving retains traces of its origin, its woody scent, which at this point seems able to mitigate the odor caused by the displacement of nature for the sake of development and land speculation. So, in the largest sense, the shaving traces the broadest social concerns of the novel, the actual displacement of nature by the market, and the market as the emergent imaginative construct in the popular imagination. The shaving makes perceivable the relation between the actual and the imaginative in both aesthetic and ethical realms, if, indeed, these can be seen as separate in this novel.

It also traces the love affair. Tom and Irene sit on a saw-horse in the unfinished house and discuss *Middlemarch* and books that would be appropriate for the library in the Laphams' new house. She—in this case representing the whole Lapham family—is out of her depth, and, clearly with other things on her mind, her discourse is distracted: "She followed the curl of a shaving on the floor with the point of her parasol" (111). The shaving then becomes the focus of an awkward moment. She continues the conversation, "Still intent upon the convolutions of the shaving" (112), while remaining oblivious to the real and many folds, twists, and turns of the world immediately surrounding her. Howells next intensifies his focus on the shaving, transforming it into as close to a sexual metaphor as we find in *The Rise of Silas Lapham*:

She found another shaving within reach of her parasol, and began poking that with it, and trying to follow it through its folds. Corey watched her awhile.

"You seem to have a great passion for playing with shavings," he said. "Is it a new one?"

"New what?"

"Passion."

"I don't know," she said, dropping her eyelids, and keeping on with her effort. She looked shyly aslant at him. "Perhaps you don't approve of playing with shavings?"

"Oh, yes, I do. I admire it very much. But it seems rather difficult. I've a great ambition to put my foot on the shaving's tail and hold it for you."

"Well," said the girl.

"Thank you," said the young man. He did so, and now she ran her parasol point easily through it. They looked at each other and laughed. "That was wonderful. Would you like to try another?" (115)

While Tom takes all this as a flirtatious game, Irene seems to take it with all its potential overtones intact: "She bridled, and bit her lip for pleasure" (116). And, when Silas shows Tom around the unfinished house and points out where the daughters' bedrooms will be, Irene becomes flushed (54). She is delighted when Tom presents her with the shaving, which she understands as intent, and she arrives home with it in her belt. Her sister taunts her: "I didn't know it had got to be the fashion to give shavings instead of flowers. But there's some sense in it. They can be used for kindlings when they get old, and you can't do anything with old flowers" (121). Later they will become exactly that: kindling. After Irene learns of Tom's love for Pen, she walks into her sister's room, and "She had a pine shaving, fantastically tied up with a knot of ribbon, in her hand. She held it a moment; then, looking deliberately at Penelope, she went up to her, and dropped it in her lap without a word" (244-45). Irene's romanticizing the shaving, signified by its fantastic decoration, is bound to fail in the context of Howells's realist aesthetics. In what seems a surprising choice for a powerful symbol, the shaving makes sense in an aesthetic economy embedded in the common materials of life. It serves to track the entire subplot of the novel. That Howells is able to invest so much in a pine shaving is testimony to the power of an aesthetic rooted in mundane, everyday things, things that also retain a trace of their natural origin.

And the shaving also bridges the subplot and the main narrative. Shortly before Silas's final descent into bankruptcy, he stops by his house, which is nearing completion, and "the whim seized Lapham to test the chimney in the music room," so "[h]e gathered some shavings and blocks together, and kindled them [...]" (311). Later he and Pen are returning from the theater, when they pass a crowd of spectators watching a house burn down, and "Lapham had no need to walk through the crowd, gazing and gossiping, with shouts and cries and

hysterical laughter, before the burning house, to make sure that it was his" (313). All he can utter is "I guess I done it, Pen" (313). His aspirations, symbolized by the house, become the material of ridicule, and the shaving is clearly part of Silas's downfall. The most striking material evidence of Silas's rise is his new house, from which a small shaving has traveled through the narrative. The love story contains within it its own contradiction; it is predicated on a mistake, one symbolized by Tom and Irene's flirtatious play with the pine shaving. This entire affair grows out of Silas's desire to rise, again, symbolized by the house of which the shaving is literally a part. That Silas kindles his own house from its own material is also a metaphor for his conduct throughout the novel. His rise has caused him to fall, his dreams to go up in flames, kindled by the material from which they are made. The tiniest wood chip, a remnant of the woods, ignites the symbol of the speculative market. Again, this complex pattern of reversals, of love lost and gained, of fortune lost and gained, and of ethical integrity lost and gained, is attended to by the smallest, seemingly most insignificant material thing imaginable—a wood shaving. The shaving then is shot through with meaning, instantiating within itself our perception of these reversals and of the relations among them. The wood chip sets aesthetic experience in motion. And this returns us to the Deweyan idea that aesthetic experience—the perception of relations—depends on the things of everyday life and, ultimately, on nature. The aesthetic economy of *The Rise of Silas Lapham* is most powerfully realized at points of reversal, at which points material things are effused with meaning, by both Howells and the reader. Great importance inheres in the material environment and in our ethical relation to it. It enables our perception of relations and connections upon which aesthetic experience, ethical and moral responsibility, and democratic citizenship depend. The material world participates in the larger community.

All things, art, novels, houses, money, are at their lowest common denominator themselves rooted not only in material culture, but also in the physical world. The material source of Silas's wealth is his

paint, a product of nature. Just as Silas's journey begins with the paint, so too is aesthetic experience materially grounded in the natural world. Dewey writes that:

It is a commonplace that we cannot direct, save accidentally, the growth and flowering of plants, however lovely and enjoyed, without understanding their causal conditions. It should be just a commonplace that esthetic understanding—as distinct from sheer personal enjoyment—must start with the soil, air, and light out of which things esthetically admirable arise. And these conditions are the conditions and factors that make an ordinary experience complete.¹⁵

Admirable things arise from nature, and the perception of the relations among these things helps complete aesthetic experience. The originary source of Silas's wealth is literally the earth: "My father found it [the paint] one day, in a hole made by a tree blowing down. There it was, laying loose in the pit, and sticking to the roots that had pulled up a big cake of dirt with 'em" (7). Silas's wealth and success are literally rooted in a material, ordinary place, in the ground of his family farm. His life rises from the soil. At base, his paint drives Silas, and he nearly loses sight of the value of his and his paint's common origin. He even goes so far as to coat the landscape with his paint: "In less'n six months there wa'n't a board-fence, nor a bridge-girder, nor a dead wall, nor a barn, nor a face of rock in that whole region that didn't have 'Lapham's Mineral Paint—Specimen' on it in the three colors we begun by making" (14). Silas's painting over the landscape is a metaphor for how his desire for market success covers up the fact that his success is rooted in everyday natural occurrences and things. Before his fall, Silas believes that the land "was made for any man that knows how to use it" (15). But Silas forgets how to use the paint that derives from the land. He reverses the relation between his paint and the landscape of his family home: the paint no longer arises from the land but obscures it. His success takes him away from his source, into the reclaimed land of the Back Bay, and during the newspaper interview that functions as a masterful overture to the novel, the reporter asks Silas if he had tried his paint on the human conscience.

Silas replies, "I guess you want to keep that as free from paint as you can, if you want much use of it" (12). Silas's reversal is caused largely because he has in fact coated his conscience with paint, just as he has painted the landscape. He can no longer see through the paint, because the paint now occludes any relationship to family and place. The label on every container of paint bears both his father's and Silas's initials, and the date his father found the paint in a hole in the ground (10). His high-end product is called the "Persis Brand" after his wife (13). But as Silas climbs, the paint represents for him not these relations but financial success and the possibility to rise socially. As the meaning of the source of his well-being is obscured by his misunderstanding of the material thing extending that meaning, his paint, Silas fails to recognize his reversal.

Of course, Silas's rise into the elite social world precipitates his crisis. When we are first introduced to him, Silas pounds an envelope closed "with his great hairy fist" (3). "He put out his huge foot and pushed" shut his office door (4). He has massive shoulders, a large head, red hair and beard, and he prides himself on his horsemanship. He rose to Colonel and suffered a wound in the Civil War. But when he attends the dinner party at the Corey's, the event that marks his reversal in fortune, he finds himself helpless:

He perspired with doubt as he climbed the stairs, and while he waited on the landing for Mrs. Lapham and Irene to come down from above, before going into the drawing-room, he stood staring at his hands, now open and now shut, and breathing hard. (188)

Arriving at the place he so desired to attain, this powerful man reduces himself to a nervous wreck. He suffers a profound reversal. In a marvelously constructed set piece, Howells again employs images of everyday things in the aesthetic economy of the text. After worrying for a week over appropriate attire, Silas fidgets on the landing in an ill-fitting suit and formal gloves, which "when he had them on, and let his large fists hang down on either side, they looked, in the saffron tint which the shop-girl said his gloves should be of, like canvassed

hams" (188). His power, instantiated in his hands, is contained by the tinted accoutrements of wealth; Silas has become a specialty ham, an upscale commodity waiting to be consumed by the elite society he so wished to join. Like Irene, whom Howells has already aligned with a vegetable, Silas—indeed all the Laphams—are about to be gobbled up.

The instantiation of meaning in material things encourages us to perceive the relations in the novel and between the novel and its readers. The aesthetic economy of the novel resonates across time, vibrates among the material things and social concerns of our own environment. In the end, not the symbols of wealth, but the materials of everyday life lend their power to Silas. Not until he returns to the landscape that nurtured him, until he returns to the Vermont farm where the earth yielded up the paint in the first place, can Silas see where the things he values reside. He tells the Reverend Sewell, met by chance in Vermont, that it "seems sometimes as if it was a hole opened for me, and I crept out of it" (365). Silas realizes that, like his paint, he too is born from the soil of his family's farm. Although he has not crept back into his hole in the earth, he has moved closer to it, to the source of his gain, of his reversal of fortune, and of his ethical rejuvenation. His engagement with the market values represented by urban culture ends in his sacrificing his ethical standing, and he winds up where he began, on his family farm in Vermont, more restrained, but more powerful and peaceful in his understanding of himself. Through Lapham, his family, and the things around them, Howells attempts to disarticulate, or at least neutralize, an emergent market ethos.

Like the aesthetic economy of Howellsian realism, Silas thrives closer to ground, in a place that enables him not to discard entirely the ethos of the market, but to temper it with values that call for more restraint. His Vermont farmhouse's "original ugliness had been smartened up with a coat of Lapham's own paint and heightened with an incongruous piazza" (8), and the Laphams abide "no luxuries, unless the statues of Prayer and Faith might be so considered" (363).

Just as the pine shaving with a trace of the woods finds its way to Boston, some of Boston finds its way back up to the Northeast Kingdom of Vermont. In the most obvious instance of the joining of two sides of the culture, Tom Corey and Penelope Lapham do indeed marry, merging the two classes. For us in the early 21st century, perhaps what resonates most powerfully is a potential accommodation between classes and between the demands of the environment and the market. The novel, through its powerful focus on the material things of common life, aids in the perception of relations between otherwise conflicting interests and groups. Aesthetic experience for John Dewey is put in motion by the perception of relations between the actual and the possible. For Dewey the aesthetic encompasses all arenas of human life, especially the moral and ethical. In fact, Dewey resists separating these categories. At the close of *Art as Experience*, he writes:

The moral office and human function of art can be intelligently discussed only in the context of culture. A particular work of art may have a definite effect upon a particular person or upon a number of persons. The social effect of the novels of Dickens or of Sinclair Lewis is far from negligible. But a less conscious and more massed constant adjustment of experience proceeds from the total environment that is created by the collective art of a time. Just as physical life cannot exist without the support of a physical environment, so moral life cannot go on without the support of a moral environment.¹⁶

The aesthetic and the moral are both interrelated parts of the same environment, and that environment is ultimately sustained by the physical environment. There is again, in its largest sense, an interrelation between the actual and the possible, between the world of material things and the possibility of aesthetic and moral experience. The perception of this connection and interrelation initiates the process of aesthetic experience that I see underwriting the power of *The Rise of Silas Lapham*. Both Dewey and Howells understood that the key to putting that aesthetic experience in motion was the idea that the aesthetic in its largest sense is dependent upon the world of material things in all its seeming insignificance. A very little thing, a wood shaving, for instance, bears the meaning of a very large novel.

So, perhaps in our attentiveness to the novel, to the commonality we share in material things, and to our own reversals, we can perceive across time the resonances of the book in our own particular place and time. Perhaps we can set in motion an aesthetic economy that can put in gear the process of moving the possible along the way toward the actual, of making art of our lives and the things in them.

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NOTES

¹I am indebted to Bill Brown's excellent study of the relationships between things and ideas in late nineteenth-century American literature, *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2003). Brown argues that modernity has denied things their full meaning, relegating them to the status of commodity fetish. Things carry far more powerful meaning in our lives. In his analysis of *The American Scene*, Brown argues that when Henry James gives voice to buildings, "Within the illogic of projection and introjection, the animate and the inanimate, like subject and object, become indistinct. And this lack of distinction can be cast as an elaborate obstruction of that modernity which insists on an ontological distinction, arbitrary and artificial, between inanimate objects and human subjects" (187). Granted, to a lesser extent, things loom large in *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, and they play a vital role in breaking down artificial distinctions between things and thought, between the actual and the possible.

²Donald E. Pease, "Introduction," *New Essays on The Rise of Silas Lapham*, ed. Donald E. Pease (Cambridge: CUP, 1991) 1-28, 15-16.

³William Dean Howells, *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885; New York: Penguin, 1986) 16; hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

⁴See John Seelye, "The Hole in Howells / The Lapse in *Silas Lapham*." *New Essays on The Rise of Silas Lapham*, ed. Donald E. Pease (Cambridge: CUP, 1991) 47-65, especially pages 51-53. Seelye argues that Tom Corey's double reversal—of family allegiance and choice of sister—is more attuned to romance than realistic fiction, but that this "lapse" in Howells marks the beginning of Howells's own advocacy within the novel for the aesthetics of realism.

⁵John Cyril Barton's "Howells's Rhetoric of Realism: The Economy of Pain(t) and Social Complicity in *The Rise of Silas Lapham* and *The Minister's Charge*," *Studies in American Fiction* 29.2 (2001): 159-87, takes issue with near critical consensus that Sewell is Howells's "rhetorical mouthpiece." Barton argues for a more dialogic understanding of Howells's work, for a more textured interlacing

of voices that leaves the issue of realism intentionally unsettled. Realism thus remains productively contested.

⁶In *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism: American Literature at the Turn of the Century* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1987), Walter Benn Michaels aligns Howellsian realism, specifically in *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, with an agrarianism hostile to rampant capitalism; see especially pages 35-41. Wai-Chee Dimock, in "A Theory of Resonance," *PMLA* 112 (1997): 1060-71, argues for the ability of literature to resonate across cultures and times, defending literature "not as a timeless entity but as a class of objects that fail to shut up, fail to restrict their resonance over time" (1066). In "Literature for the Planet," *PMLA* 116 (2001): 173-88, she also claims that texts are objects able to encourage aesthetic experience through their amplifying "environmental background noise as a generative force in literature" (179). Literature here clearly belongs to a "class of objects," a collection of material things, that amplify, reflect, prolong, and synchronize meaning across the space between their creation and the present.

⁷John Dewey, *Art as Experience*, vol. 10 of *The Later Works: 1925-1953*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston, 17 vols (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1987) 9-352, 348.

⁸William Dean Howells, *The Editor's Study*, ed. James W. Simpson (Troy, NY: Whitson, 1983) 74. "The Editor's Study" ran in *Harper's Magazine* from January 1886 through March 1892.

⁹*Editor's Study* 96.

¹⁰William Dean Howells, *Criticism and Fiction and Other Essays* (1891; New York: New York UP, 1959) 67.

¹¹Dewey 10-11; the emphasis is Dewey's.

¹²Dewey 15.

¹³Paul Gilmore, in "Romantic Electricity, or the Materiality of Aesthetics," *American Literature* 76 (2004): 467-94, also posits aesthetic experience as an extraordinary force: "Because the aesthetic is described as a material experience that transcends formal definitions of art, it provides the possibility of connecting different groups of people through shared sensual experience rather than common economics or political interests. The aesthetic's universalizing claims imply a kind of egalitarianism that might be translated to the political sphere, where it can offer a starting point for building coalitions and communities across the lines of race, class, and gender reified by identity politics" (472).

¹⁴Dewey 25.

¹⁵Dewey 18.

¹⁶Dewey 347.

Unscrambling Surprises

ARTHUR F. KINNEY

“A sense of place was everything to William Faulkner,” is the way Jay Parini begins his new biography of Faulkner (2004) entitled *One Matchless Time*; “and more than any other American novelist in the twentieth century, he understood how to mine the details of place, including its human history, for literary effects. His novels, from the outset, are obsessed with what T. S. Eliot once referred to as ‘significant soil,’ but the outward details of place quickly become inner details as Faulkner examined the soul of his characters. [...] Place, for Faulkner, becomes a spiritual location from which he examines a truth deeper than anything like mere locality. Faulkner saw himself as taking part in a great process, moving through history and, in an intriguing way, creating a counterhistory to his own.”¹

Faulkner was just one week shy of his thirty-eighth birthday when less than two miles from his home in Oxford, Mississippi, at what was known as the “three corners,” at the intersection of Route 30 and Camp Ground Road, the last full ritual lynching of a black man in Mississippi—and perhaps in all the American South—took place. The victim was Elwood Higginbotham, a black man arrested and tried for the murder of a white landowner named Glen Roberts. On a warm, moonlit night in Oxford, knots of men gathered about 7.30 p.m. on the four corners of the town square surrounding the courthouse and then moved on to the local jail across the street to remove Higginbotham by force while a hung jury was still discussing his guilt. Many of the men drove trucks which carried weapons; their faces were smudged with dirt so that they might not be easily identified. They took Higginbotham to Three Corners, removed his trousers, emasculated him, and then hanged him. They did not burn his body deliberately;

For debates inspired by this article, please check the Connotations website at <http://www.connotations.de/debkinney01513.htm>.

rather, they left it for the neighborhood—a black residential neighborhood of densely placed tin-roofed shacks—so that he could be a terrifying visible witness to any of the black community who might even think of retaliation. There was none. And then, some time later, apparently, the white citizens of Oxford in a kind of unplanned epidemic, erased the incident from their minds and from the town's history.

Exactly three decades later—during the month of January 1995—I was attempting to trace race relations in Oxford because Faulkner had used so many actual incidents in his novels and stories. I was tracing the foundation for the McCaslin family in particular, and I was fairly certain I had located the central model for L. C. Q. McCaslin in Washington Price, a native of Wake County, North Carolina, who had settled in Lafayette County—the basis for Faulkner's fictional Yoknapatawpha County—in 1837. His house was still standing, although it had been moved, and was reckoned by a local authority to be the best remaining example, in appearance and feeling, of an 1840s Mississippi plantation. The property was by far the largest in the area—5,000 acres—valued at \$6,000 along with farm implements valued at \$4,000, and it produced, according to the Department of Archives and History at Jackson, Mississippi, 4,000 bushels of corn and 115 bales of cotton annually with the help of slave labor. Moreover, Price and his heirs paid off generations of blacks—named Boles—who were always omitted from Price family wills as the McCaslins omit the Beauchamps. Two natives of Oxford had led me to this observation, and I felt I was correct that they had much to do with Faulkner mining details of place, as Parini says, in writing the various episodes of *Go Down, Moses* published in 1942, especially when others in Oxford who protected any hint of a miscegenous past were quick, and anxious, to deny my suggestion about the possible relationships of the Price and Boles families. I had long learned, from perhaps half a dozen residences in Mississippi, that confirmation and denial was the right formula for unearthing some of Faulkner's inspirations, and I was not surprised.

I was surprised, though, to learn of the lynching of Elwood Higginbotham, for no one—not my closest confidants or informants—had even hinted at such a possibility, although “Pantaloons in Black” in *Go Down, Moses* is about just such a lynching and is perhaps the most powerful episode, as it is surely the most daring, in the entire novel. I can recall how I first heard; it was from Faulkner’s nephew Jimmy, who had called me on the phone and set up a private rendezvous in a remote corner of the Holiday Inn. What he wanted to tell me, without being cited, was that at the age of eight, bored with a school play, he had wandered about the Courthouse lawn and seen the unusual gathering of men and trucks surrounding the courthouse. Unseen, he hopped on a truck and rode out to the lynching which he witnessed as an unbearable sight he had not shared with others. The men who discovered him told him fiercely to tell no one what he saw, and he hadn’t, for decades. Clearly, he now wanted to get it off his chest, and since we had become good friends, and I would not remain long in the South, he could tell me. And so he did.

When you learn something like this, that the others in the town upon whom you rely deny, you go to the records. I went to the library of the *Oxford Eagle* to look in the newspapers for September and October, 1935, but all those issues, strangely, unlike the other complete files, were missing. I went to the Lafayette County Records Office. Those issues of the newspaper were missing there, too, and there seemed to be no local record at all of any such event. The same was true in the archives of Ole Miss, located in town across the railroad tracks and a rich repository of historical material. I finally found confirmation in the only place I know it to be—in the state archives in Jackson, Mississippi. Jimmy Faulkner had remembered everything correctly, and it was registered, indeed, as the last formal ritual lynching in the state’s history.

Back, then, to Parini: if you are a writer, drawing from your own region and its special history what is most important and most representative, how would you handle this material if you handled it at all? My own fairly educated sense of the way Faulkner thought and wrote

is that he would not, indeed could not, avoid making this part of the Yoknapatawpha saga. Elwood Higginbotham clearly surfaces as Lucas Beauchamp in *Intruder in the Dust* in 1948—what is thought of as Faulkner's civil rights novel—where Lucas is (falsely) accused of killing a white man but, rather sentimentally, he is saved by an elderly white woman and a white boy and his black companion, who believe he is innocent and, by digging up a grave, are able to prove it. The whole idea of turning a terrifying racial event into a sentimental novel was acceptable in 1948—so much so, in fact, that Hollywood filmed its version in Oxford and, except for four stars, used the citizens of Oxford for their cast. What I want to suggest is that Faulkner tackled the story much earlier—at least much earlier in the history of race relations if not in years—with “Pantaloone in Black.” *Collier's* magazine found the short story Faulkner's strongest fiction they had seen—and refused to print it.² But by now Faulkner was obsessed with writing about racial relations and, I think, rather desperate to make his feelings known. I say “rather desperate,” because—this is the first surprise—the point of view he takes for the initial narration is the black man Rider—the pantaloone of the title. The word is taken from the *commedia dell'arte*; it is the stock character of a foolish old man who is taken advantage of; but Rider, who is a stunningly strong mill worker, is only twenty-four years old. That is the second surprise—unless, of course, Rider is not the main character. Immediately following the title, here is the first paragraph; it describes Rider burying his young wife of six months who had died from no known cause at all:

He stood in the worn, faded clean overalls which Mannie herself had washed only a week ago, and heard the first clod strike the pine box. Soon he had one of the shovels himself, which in his hands (he was better than six feet and weighed better than two hundred pounds) resembled the toy shovel a child plays with at the shore, its half cubic foot of flung dirt no more than the light gout of sand the child's shovel would have flung. Another member of his sawmill gang touched his arm and said, “Lemme have hit, Rider.” He didn't even falter. He released one hand in midstroke and flung it backward, striking the other across the chest, jolting him back a step, and restored the hand to the moving shovel, flinging the dirt with that effortless fury so that the mound seemed to be rising of its own volition, not

built up from above but thrusting visibly upward out of the earth itself, until at last the grave, save for its rawness, resembled any other marked off without order about the barren plot by shards of pottery and broken bottles and old brick and other objects insignificant to sight but actually of a profound meaning and fatal to touch, which no white man could have read. Then he straightened up and with one hand flung the shovel quivering upright in the mound like a javelin and turned and began to walk away, walking on even when an old woman came out of the meagre clump of his kin and friends and a few old people who had known him and his dead wife both since they were born, and grasped his forearm. She was his aunt. She had raised him. He could not remember his parents at all.

“What you gwine?” she said.

“Ah’m goan home,” he said.

“You dont wants ter go back dar by yoself,” she said. “You needs to eat. You come on home and eat.”

“Ah’m goan home,” he repeated, walking out from under her hand, his forearm like iron, as if the weight on it were no more than that of a fly, the other members of the mill gang whose head he was giving way quietly to let him pass.³

This is an intensely scrambled passage. It is a portrait of profound, almost wordless grief—a grief that is “overpowering,” according to Parini (258)—and the tight concentration on the shovel, the dirt, and the burial is surely Rider’s (he has no last name). But Rider would not compare himself to a child at the beach; he would not know what a javelin was, much less use the term analogously; and he would not see the “shards of pottery and broken bottles and old brick and other objects insignificant to sight”—nor, I suspect, but this is closer to Rider’s perspective, would he give them “a profound meaning and fatal to touch.” All that is pure Faulkner; and it is, moreover, a white man trying hard to think black.

Rider trudges on home, thinking of when he met Mannie, of how he settled down and rented a house that he worked on—he “refloored the porch and rebuilt and roofed the kitchen” with his wife (137); on the dirty road home, he thinks he sees his wife’s footprints beneath others. He gave up women and dice and whiskey to bring home all his money to Mannie, and he tended a fire he began their wedding night while she took the money to the plantation commissary for the week’s food and supplies. We are, here, completely inside Rider’s

perspective. The details are no less lyrical, but the analogies have disappeared. This sense of Rider, of seeing as Rider sees, thinking as Rider thinks, continues to expand. "They would eat once again without haste or hurry after five days—the sidemeat, the greens, the corn-bread, the buttermilk from the well-house, the cake which she baked every Saturday now that she had a stove to bake in" (138-39). And then it all changes.

But when he put his hand on the gate it seemed to him suddenly that there was nothing beyond it. The house had never been his anyway, but now even the new planks and sills and shingles, the hearth and stove and bed, were all a part of the memory of somebody else, so that he stopped in the half-open gate and said aloud, as though he had gone to sleep in one place and then waked suddenly to find himself in another: "Whut's An doin' hyar?" before he went on. (139)

The sense of disorientation is not race-specific, of course, but here it seems exactly right; we have *become* Rider. His dog greets him, enters the house with him, and then stops.

Then the dog left him. The light pressure went off his flank; he heard the click and hiss of its claws [...]. But it stopped just outside the front door, where he could see it now, and the upfling of its head as the howl began, and then he saw her too. She was standing in the kitchen door, looking at him. He didn't move. [...] "Mannie," he said. "Hit's awright. Ah aint afraid." Then he took a step toward her, slow, not even raising his hand yet, and stopped. Then he took another step. But this time as soon as he moved she began to fade. He stopped at once, not breathing again, motionless, willing his eyes to see that she had stopped too. But she had not stopped. [...] She was going fast now, he could actually feel between them the insuperable barrier of that very strength which could handle alone a log which would have taken any two other men to handle, of the blood and bones and flesh too strong, invincible for life, having learned at least once with his own eyes how tough, even in sudden and violent death, [...] the will of that bone and flesh to remain alive, actually was.

Then she was gone. (140-41)

The apparition is as powerful as any ghost can be—Rider wills his wife back, if only for a moment, before the vision fades. Mannie does not leave his consciousness. He takes down dishes, sets the table for

two, pulls up two chairs, and begins to talk to her, ladling out cold food from the stove. All the critics I know, including myself, find this an especially commanding moment in which Faulkner succeeds in making all of us see and feel what Rider sees and feels. His abrupt departure at this point and his aimless wandering—to the deserted mill where only the fireman is present, but where his muscular body begins the next day's shift with unprecedented energy and might; his dismissal of his aunt who brings him food and the God she asks him to address; then a trip for moonshine of the rawest sort where he overpays; and finally to a dicegame at night where a white man, throwing dice, cheats all the players, who are black, with two sets of dice. Angry at the way he sees the whites exploiting blacks at every turn since he left his home with Mannie, Rider attacks the white diceman and kills him, and goes back home to await the revenge of the diceman's family. Since we see many of these events from Rider's limited perspective, they take on a kind of enlarged insight that is unmatched anywhere else in Faulkner's fiction. And yet—if we pull back, and this surprised me at first—we see how limited this view is, how racially based. What Rider has seen is a "ha'nt," the rising of the dead in spirit form that was said to be a supernatural belief of blacks. Their ability at mental labor, their special masculinity, their independence from any support or consolation, their love of cheap moonshine and dice, their ability to get drunk and then pick fights: all these are racial stereotypes. What no critical reader has seen that I have read is that this is a white man's black man, that for all his yearning—which I believe is real—Faulkner has been unable to see things from a truly individualized black viewpoint, apart from a white man's stereotypes. Even Rider's crime confirms the expected.

[T]he white man's hand sprang open and the second pair of dice clattered onto the floor beside the first two and the white man wrenched free and sprang up and back and reached the hand backward toward the pocket where the pistol was.

The razor hung between his shoulder-blades from a loop of cotton string round his neck inside his shirt. The same motion of the hand which brought the razor forward over his shoulder flipped the blade open and freed it from

the cord, [...] his thumb pressing the handle into his closing fingers, so that in the second before the half-drawn pistol exploded he actually struck at the white man's throat not with the blade but with a sweeping blow of his fist, [...]. (153-54)

Quite apart from the stereotypical razor and the slit throat, there is something here of the admiration of the sheer artistry involved in the physical action and the neat use of the knife that is not the perspective of a man with too much moonshine, or a man angry at exploitation and seeking vengeance, or even a man deliberately suicidal, by killing a white man knowing that he will be caught and lynched. It is more of a social pattern than a successful psychology. That was not Faulkner's intention. He does admire Rider, and I think he feels passionately for his subjected position; I think it is an outgrowth of that dreadful Higginbotham incident in 1935 that so scarred the town of Oxford that all it could do, down to the last black person, was eradicate the memory of it.

But what I find surprising at this point is that I think Faulkner saw his limitations, too, saw that he did not get inside the deep anger and frustration and repression and fear that Elwood Higginbotham had felt, or the feelings that Rider might have, beyond the way in which whites saw or heard or thought about black behavior. And he saw that he should have too, as a cultural historian, as one who meant to understand the races so as to understand his own South, the little postage-stamp of the world that he spent a lifetime trying to comprehend and record. Apparently he saw that he had failed. For the story continues for another six pages—and these pages are about whites, about a sheriff's deputy "who had been officially in charge of the business" of finding Rider "hanging from the bellrope in a negro schoolhouse about two miles from the sawmill," being with the coroner when he "had pronounced the verdict of death at the hands of a person or persons unknown and surrendered the body to the next of kin all within five minutes" (154), although it is clear enough that the Birdsong family has taken revenge on the death of their kin. It is the

white deputy whose every action and thought we follow now, not Rider's. But notice how Faulkner puts it:

[T]he sheriff's deputy who had been officially in charge of the business was telling his wife about it. They were in the kitchen. His wife was cooking supper. The deputy had been out of bed and in motion ever since the jail delivery shortly before midnight of yesterday [...], and he was spent now from lack of sleep and hurried food at hurried and curious hours and, sitting in a chair beside the stove, a little hysterical, too. (154)

It is, in nearly every detail, parallel to Rider. Faulkner goes on,

"Them damn niggers," he said. "I swear to godfrey, it's a wonder we have as little trouble with them as we do. Because why? Because they aint human. They look like a man and they walk on their hind legs like a man, and they can talk and you can understand them and you think they are understanding you, at least now and then. But when it comes to normal human feelings and sentiments of human beings, they might just as well be a damn herd of wild buffaloes. Now you take this one today—"

"I wish you would," his wife said harshly. She was a stout woman [...] who looked not harried at all but composed in fact, only choleric. Also, she had attended a club rook-party that afternoon and had won the first, the fifty-cent, prize until another member had insisted on a recount of the scores and the ultimate throwing out of one entire game. [...]

[...] The wife turned from the stove, carrying a dish. [...] The deputy raised his voice to carry the increased distance: "His wife dies on him. All right. But does he grieve? He's the biggest and busiest man at the funeral. Grabs a shovel before they even got the box into the grave they tell me, and starts throwing dirt onto her faster than a slip scraper could have done it. [...]

"So he comes back to work, the first man on the job, when McAndrews and everybody else expected him to take the day off since even a nigger couldn't want no better excuse for a holiday than he had just buried his wife, when a white man would have took the day off out of pure respect no matter how he felt about his wife, when even a little child would have had sense to take a day off when he would still get paid for it too. But not him." (154-56)

The fact that the deputy's wife was caught cheating at cards of course resonates with the crooked diceman, something the deputy conveniently overlooks, although Faulkner does not. Clearly he wants whites

culpable throughout the story. That seems obvious. What seems to me far more subtle is that the deputy is not just voicing bewilderment—the recognition that his white culture has taught him that black men are not really human, when everything he lists suggests the humanity that characterizes Rider and that, moreover, seems to bond the two men. The deputy is arguing with himself. He does not want to be black. He wants to understand. He is not black. He is compassionate. His obsession with Rider—with what Rider stands for, with his secret bond with Rider (something Faulkner may have in some unvoiced way taken from Conrad, for they may be secret sharers) is what drives the narrative and the dialogue. Perhaps surprisingly, the deputy sounds something like Faulkner. He is the authorial persona, trying to tease out the significance of the portrait he has just drawn of Rider. Is there something, after all, that rises above the stereotypical moonshine and dicegame and razor? It is as if Faulkner looked at what he had written and thought, this merely extends what divides us; it doesn't allow progress. My portrait of Rider has actually gone nowhere at all, unless I can convince myself, and my readers, that there is a common bond of humanity between a repressed black and a mystified white, see some way to connect the two. In this way, he shares the deputy's obsession. He also confesses his limitations.

There is a radical difference between the fate of Higginbotham and the fate of Rider. The whole town, it would seem, turned out to lynch Higginbotham; only the Birdsongs, who seem arguably more personally justified, go after Rider. The Birdsongs do not commit a ritual lynching; it is not even public, but within the schoolhouse. It is more like a private vendetta. Is this an attempt to make lynching more palatable? Is it an authorial strategy to get more people to read the story because it seems to have a cultural rather than an historical basis? Is it an attempt to allegorize history? Or is it an attempt to resituate the event so as to get a simpler, clearer vision of it?

These are real questions, and I think Faulkner is very much aware that they are. But then the story takes another surprising turn. The

deputy and Mayhew, the sheriff, hearing of the murder, go to Rider's house to find him.

"Not that we expected to do any good, as he had probably passed Jackson, Tennessee, about daylight; and besides, the simplest way to find him would be just to stay close behind them Birdsong boys. Of course there wouldn't be nothing hardly worth bringing back to town after they did find him, but it would close the case." (156-57)

We are back now with vigilante justice, with the encapsulated horrors of whites pursuing blacks. But then:

"So it's just by the merest chance that we go by his house. I don't even remember why we went now, but we did; and there he is. Sitting behind the barred front door with a open razor on one knee and a loaded shotgun on the other? No. He was [...] laying in the back yard asleep in the broad sun [...]." (157)

The horror dissipates. Rider is human and innocent (or sleeping off the moonshine) and not dangerous at all; a 'good nigger.'

"And we wake him and he sets up and says, 'Awright, white folks. Ah done it. Jest dont lock me up,' and Mayhew says, 'Mr Birdsong's kinfolk aint going to lock you up neither. You'll have plenty of fresh air when they get hold of you,' and he says, 'Ah done it. Jest dont lock me up' [...]." (157)

The story becomes a story of freedom. What Rider wants is to be free of pain and grief and worry and loneliness. He isn't worried about justice. He's worried about repression.

What we have now, I think, is not sentimentality once more—or the revelation of common humanity; what we have is a much deeper, and perhaps more insightful, understanding of Elwood Higginbotham, but told in a story so distant and so distinct from Higginbotham's that Faulkner is able to make a telling case without raising old ghosts and old prejudices. What was it like, after all, being Elwood Higginbotham renting a white man's land, surrounded by a white man's crops and when once you try for a bit of independence, a bit of freedom, a bit of saying this farm land is what I am planting, not you, you are chased

down, locked up, and then strung up? It may be oblique, but it got Faulkner a far larger readership, and perhaps a much more thoughtful readership, than a more direct, if fictionalized account.

Faulkner's story ends when, imprisoned, Rider pulls up his cot bolted to the floor and uses it to smash down the door of his cell—an astonishing show of strength—and gaining his necessary liberty, he is finally run down by the Birdsongs, just as Mayhew and the deputy knew he would be. Having peered into Higginbotham's situation from a different set of circumstances, what fiction can do, Faulkner approaches the historical situation half-way.

But why, then, call a sympathetic (if at first incomprehensible and unavailable) character like Rider, who seems so accessible, so human, so understandable, a pantaloon? Why make him a comic, derided figure of stock Italian farce, the black-faced figure he had drawn in college and beyond for literary magazines? Such a vast oversimplification would seem to have nothing at all to do with this story, nor with the frightful event that lies behind it. Unless, of course, one is attempting to show how wrong easy and stereotypical assumptions can be; how easy it is to ridicule someone you do not understand and how disastrous such ridicule is. It is an exaggerated form, but not an unrelated form, to 'a brute' or 'the negro.' No real human being is ever merely a category, a stereotype, even in the approximate representation of fiction.

Collier's refusal to publish the story was followed with similar rejections from *The American Magazine*, *Redbook*, and *The Saturday Evening Post* (which nevertheless did publish a shorter version of "The Bear" and of "Go Down, Moses," later to appear in the book); it was ultimately published in the October 1940 issue of *Harper's*. All three stories were reworked as chapters in *Go Down, Moses*, a collection of related stories which Faulkner insisted was a novel, in 1942. There "Pantaloon in Black" was the third chapter, after the initial "Was," chronologically the earliest story, and "The Fire and the Hearth," which sweeps from the early years of Lucas Beauchamp's marriage in 1897 to 1942. The trilogy of hunting stories follows: "The Old People,"

“The Bear,” “Delta Autumn.” The order appears chronological, with “Pantaloons” coming before the long McCaslin segment, before the time covered by the McCaslin hunting stories. That is, it is Faulkner’s present-day Yoknapatawpha, and only six years after Elwood Higginbotham’s lynching. The placement in the novel makes it seem earlier, so our final unscrambling is a chronological one. Along with a real pantaloons incident, Lucas Beauchamp attempting to salt his fields with false gold that nearly costs him his long-standing marriage in “The Fire and the Hearth,” “Pantaloons in Black” is a darker, more contemporary story. The story of Now in *Go Down, Moses* is the story of a black who wanted freedom, a lonely man who wanted his wife, and a family who took justice into their own hands and lynched their enemy before he could stand trial, before he had even been assigned a lawyer. Faulkner found a way to release his own apparent obsession, despite his own need to understand blacks better, to make that need dramatic, unavoidable, secure in his history and inescapable for his readers. The real pantaloons are named Birdsong.

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NOTES

¹Jay Parini, *One Matchless Time: A Life of William Faulkner* (New York: Harper Collins, 2004) 1.

²Parini 245.

³William Faulkner, *Go Down, Moses and Other Stories* (New York: Random House, 1942) 135-36. All references are to this first edition.

Vladimir Nabokov and the Surprise of Poetry: Reading the Critical Reception of Nabokov's Poetry and "The Poem" and "Restoration"*

PAUL D. MORRIS

Vladimir Nabokov is a surprising poet.¹ As a question of audience awareness, for many readers, the very designation of Nabokov as a poet comes as a revelation. Although an author amply admired for his ability to stylise and shape to formal perfection his every expression in prose—and thus fully deserving of the epithet 'poetic'—Nabokov is but infrequently identified as a poet, despite an impressive body of poetic writing. Thus, in 1930, long before the renown of his English language works, the émigré Russian critic Gleb Struve could comment in review of Nabokov's third novel that "[f]ew of those presently enraptured by *The Defense* likely know that Sirin [Nabokov] began his literary course as a poet [...]" ("Tvorchestvo Sirina" 3). Struve made this remark at a still relatively early stage in Nabokov's career as a Russian writer at a time when he had over 400 poems in print, including three independent volumes of poetry. As a matter of scholarly reception, confrontation with Nabokov's poetry has often provoked reactions of critical surprise—occasionally in the form of admiration, more often as consternation and rejection—even for those readers aware that the author of such 'poetic' novels as *The Gift* and *Pale Fire* was also a practicing poet. As a result, neither Nabokov's numerous Russian lyrics nor his relatively few English poems have garnered either the quantity or quality of critical response otherwise devoted to his writing. And lastly, as an essential component of an interpretive argument regarding his artistry as a whole, Nabokov's poetry may be

*The poems "The Poem" and "Restoration" by Vladimir Nabokov appeared in his collection *Poems and Problems* and are reprinted here by arrangement with the Estate of Vladimir Nabokov. All rights reserved.

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said to form a constitutive part of his literary identity; surprise, in turn, in terms of both form and content, is central to Nabokov's poetry. In ways fundamental to his artistic project, Nabokov's poetry is *about* astonishment. Surprise is the quintessence of his poetry; it is the fundamental manifestation of poetry's ability to startle and engage perception. Poetic surprise expresses the artistic and hence, for Nabokov, highest form of human engagement with the inexplicable mystery and wonder of existence.

In the following discussion, I intend to examine facets of each of these dimensions of surprise with specific reference to Nabokov's English poetry. I will first comment on the identification of Nabokov as a poet and the reception of, in particular, his English poetry before taking up the notion of surprise in two of his English poems, "The Poem" and "Restoration." Although commentary on Nabokov's rich poetic oeuvre will be limited to these two English poems, the comments could be made in analogous form about his Russian poetry.

* * *

That Nabokov is rarely identified as a poet is astonishing and in itself cause for closer investigation. Even casual reflection promptly reveals the many ways in which Nabokov's oeuvre was shaped by both his literary interest in poetry and the verse of his own composition. Nabokov almost certainly authored over one thousand poems and saw hundreds published in nine volumes of poetry.² In his autobiography *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov illustrated his adolescent awakening into artistic consciousness with a paradigmatic description of the inspiration for, and composition of, his "first" poem. Several of Nabokov's plays were written in verse, while all of his prose writing—fictional and non-fictional—is consistently marked by the poet's care for cadence and rhythm as well as the euphonic potential of language. Nabokov famously claimed the inability "to see any generic difference between poetry and artistic prose" (*Strong Opinions* 44). His dramas, short-stories and novels are populated with poets and fes-

tooned with poetry of his own composition; they regularly foreground the theme of poetic inspiration and creation. Nabokov's interest in, and skilled practice of, literary translation is devoted primarily to poetry (or poetic prose); the literary criticism of his émigré years is often dedicated to poetry and poets. As a young author, Nabokov introduced himself to a broad Russian audience with poetry; years later as an established writer, he announced his mid-career transition from Russian to English and acquainted himself with a new, American audience with a poem of 1941 entitled "Softest of Tongues"—a poem which thematises the difficulties of abandoning the "softest of tongues," Russian, for "clumsy tools of stone," English. And finally, as the author of texts which frequently conclude with reference to their narrative beginnings, Nabokov enclosed his entire oeuvre within the matching book-ends of two separate volumes of verse entitled *Stikhi* (*Poems*)—one from 1916 and the other, posthumously, from 1979. Nabokov's artistic world is patently suffused with poetry.

Despite the ample presence of poetry in Nabokov's writing and his clear self-designation as a poet, this facet of his literary identity has never been adequately acknowledged, either within the pre-war Russian émigré literary institution or the post-war world of Anglo-American letters. The reasons for this are manifold and must include the quality and prominence of his prose oeuvre. Equally important, however, has been the relatively negative reception of Nabokov's poetry. The assumed deficiencies of Nabokov's poetry seems to have formed a lasting hindrance to his recognition as a poet. During the 1920s—a period when Nabokov was most active as a poet—he was judged by many a talented though ultimately epigonic poet. Credited as an excellent versifier with a fine ear for language, Nabokov was nonetheless criticised by Russian émigré critics who lamented the purported absence of a distinctly Nabokovian poetic voice. Unable to perceive the characteristics of a still emergent idiom and confused by the relative formal conservatism of Nabokov's verse, critics assumed excessive indebtedness to established poetic models, particularly those from the nineteenth-century Russian tradition of Pushkin, Fet

and Tiutchev. With the increasing acceptance of Nabokov's prose writing, a further consideration was added which contributed to the relative demotion of his poetry: the weakness of Nabokov's poetry was assumed to lie in his "true" artistic calling as a novelist. Gleb Struve summarized and canonized this émigré assessment in 1956. In his retrospective study *Russkaia literatura v izgnanii* (*Russian Literature in Exile*), Stuve claimed that, ultimately, Nabokov produced the poetry of a prose writer:

There are in emigration not a few people who deny that Nabokov is a poet and who value only his prose. Nabokov moved from verse to prose, although it would be wrong to say of his prose, as one may of the prose of Tsvetaeva, Osip Mandel'shtam or Pasternak, that it is the prose of a poet. It would be perhaps more accurate to say that his poems are the poems of a prose writer. Some of his poems are wonderful (even amongst those he himself would now probably repudiate); they are capable of seizing and hypnotising one, though in the final analysis there is something lacking in them, some element of final music. With Nabokov, there is a close relationship between prose and poetry. His poems were perfected in accordance with his mastery of the craft of story writing. (170-71)

The influence of Struve's authoritative analysis has been pronounced; its presence may frequently be discerned throughout the few subsequent evaluations of Nabokov's Russian poetry. Nonetheless, while Struve's criticism is plausible and even seems confirmed by Nabokov's gradual—though never total—transition from poetry to prose, it is a critical judgment which has been more often stated than demonstrated. Detailed investigation of Nabokov's poetry was never undertaken by his émigré critics. Instead, émigré criticism tended all too frequently to make perfunctory acknowledgement of his poetry before assimilating it into a larger argument about his qualities as a novelist.³

The ambivalent reception of Nabokov's verse most certainly had as much to do with institutional factors within Russia's imperilled émigré literary institution as with the poetry itself.⁴ For Russia's exile culture of the inter-war years, literature was an exceptionally important, if fragile, vessel for the preservation and continuation of an

otherwise endangered tradition. In the close, unusually self-reflective environment of émigré Russian culture, literary assessments were easily freighted with extra-literary criteria of appraisal. The unusually vociferous polemics which characterized much cultural debate offer external expression of this acute self-reflexivity. Given this extraordinary context, it is unsurprising that Nabokov's writing was also confronted with forms of criticism motivated by criteria other than aesthetic failings or merit. A reading of Nabokov's reception as a poet from the distance of three-quarters of a century indicates that Nabokov's authorial persona was as often the object of criticism as his poetry. Precocity and excessive aestheticism were identified in Nabokov's poetry and tendentiously linked to his character and class background. Aleksandr Bakhrakh, for instance, saw evidence in the "ultra-aestheticism" of Nabokov's poetry that "[f]or Sirin 'the new world is blasphemous' and thus he attempts to rescue himself from it, defending himself by creating his own separate world or, more accurately, a semblance of such a world." The "peacocks" and "tea roses" Bakhrakh identified in Nabokov's poetry thus confirmed the supposed "soullessness" and "coldness" of his writing (17). For another émigré critic, Roman Gul', Nabokov was a skilled versifier, though a weak poet: "The rhythms are correct, the meters fitting, everything is in place. This is a fine example of a poet as 'an excellent apprentice.' Knowledge of poetic technique and the poetry of bygone poets is visible. Everything is printed off in threadbare clichés. Nowhere is there the beating of 'his own' pulse" (23). Gul' saw the ultimate source of Nabokov's weakness as poet in his inexperience of the world, his never having travelled beyond his "blue drawing-room" (*golubaia gostinaia*). Still other reviews of his poetry attest to Nabokov's entanglement in the fractious literary polemics of the inter-war years. According to this format, Nabokov and his poetry were tendentiously assessed according to what both he and his verse were said to represent in broader, extra-literary contexts.⁵

As an émigré novelist, Nabokov confronted related forms of criticism. He was frequently claimed, for instance, to have simply copied

western European trends in literature to create a form of writing which was then said to suffer, most damningly, from “un-Russian” qualities. The author of “cold” and “soulless” poetry also wrote “un-Russian” novels. Whereas Nabokov was ultimately able to wrest an appreciative audience for his prose, he never won a similar appreciation for his poetry. The impression thus remains that for all of the different types of criticism voiced regarding Nabokov’s poetry, a significant source of reader discomfort resided in the radical autonomy of Nabokov’s artistry. Vera Lur’e, one of the earliest critics of Nabokov’s verse, may thus stand as representative in her inadvertent indication that, whatever its supposedly epigonal character, the independence of Nabokov’s poetry was especially problematic: “This [the boringness imputed to Nabokov’s poetry] does not arise out of deficiencies in the author’s talent; but it is simply not possible to pass by all contemporary artistic achievements and gains, to renounce all movements and schools and to use images which have long ago faded and ceased to be symbols” (23). Lur’e’s censure of Nabokov’s poetry is evocative of the consternation registered by émigré critics upon confrontation with a form of poetry which seemed to refuse assimilation in either contemporary schools of poetry or established paradigms of criticism. Nabokov’s poetry (as with his prose) clearly presented the inter-war, émigré Russian literary institution with the challenge of the new, albeit in the form of the old. A tradition of critical assessment which was conceptually unable to ‘read’ Nabokov’s poetry according to its intrinsic criteria of aesthetic and thematic focus was destined to generate resistance. An analogous form of critical blindness and bewilderment characterises the reception of Nabokov’s English poetry.

* * *

Nabokov’s small but significant body of English poetry constitutes an unexpected and particularly surprising facet of his oeuvre. Nabokov wrote twenty-three English poems, not including his longest poem, the 999-line “Pale Fire” of the eponymous novel. Nabokov published

at least three English poems in his very early twenties while in Cambridge and Berlin. The bulk of his English verse production was composed in the United States, however, in the period from 1941 to 1957, at the beginning of the final of his four stages of poetic production, a stage characterized, as Nabokov himself claimed, by “sparser output and a more robust style” (*Poems and Problems* 13-14). These poems were written and published at irregular intervals—frequently in the *New Yorker*—and subsequently collected for publication in two separate though similar volumes. Fourteen poems appeared in 1959 in Nabokov’s first, slim volume of English poetry entitled *Poems*; in 1970, Nabokov re-published the same fourteen poems, now accompanied by a representative selection of thirty-nine Russian poems in English translation, in the collection entitled *Poems and Problems*. The date of publication of both of these volumes merits a moment’s reflection.

Here, as on previous occasions in his career, the publication of a volume of poetry re-directs attention to the place of poetry in his oeuvre. In 1952, for instance, at a time when he was already based in the United States as an English language author, Nabokov had released *Stikhotvoreniia 1929-1951* (*Poems 1929-1951*) as the final publication of original Russian poetry to appear during his lifetime. With this collection of poetry, Nabokov had marked his departure from the Russian émigré world of letters. In 1959, one year after the literary achievement and *succès de scandale* of *Lolita*’s publication in the United States, Nabokov was able with the publication of *Poems* to capitalize upon the related boons of financial independence and reader interest to project his poetry, however briefly, from the periphery of his oeuvre to its centre.⁶ Likewise, in 1970, Nabokov returned audience awareness to his English and Russian poetry—and translations—with the publication of *Poems and Problems* one year after the sensation caused by *Ada* in 1969 and the mid-1960s tumult over his rigorously literal translation of *Eugene Onegin*.

Whatever Nabokov’s motivation in publishing and then re-publishing a selection of his English poems, a review of the reception of Nabokov’s English poetry reveals that criticism was ill-equipped

conceptually to deal with this facet of his oeuvre. As in the instance of the equivocal reception of Nabokov's Russian poetry between the wars, his post-war English poetry also stumbled over expectations which had as much to do with an emerging critical paradigm concerning the author as with the poetry itself. As a young author of Russian poetry, Nabokov had been a still un-established poet who confounded his émigré audience with technically accomplished, verbally gifted verse which nonetheless seemed to disregard contemporary trends in poetry. In the post-war years, this form of critical recognition was not at issue. Although not identified as a poet, Nabokov was acknowledged as an exceptional writer. As early as 1941, Edmund Wilson had praised Nabokov's first English novel to be published in the United States, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, for the exceptional poetic quality of its prose: "I haven't really told you why I like your book so much. It is all on a high *poetic* level, and you have succeeded in being a first-rate poet in English. It has delighted and stimulated me more than any new book I have read since I don't know what" (Karlinsky 56; emphasis in original). Paradoxically, the high degree of praise accorded by Wilson and others to Nabokov the (poetic) novelist accounts for some of the difficulties in confronting his poetry. The author of *Lolita* and later *Pale Fire* and *Ada* was no longer an unknown entity, but rather a novelist who was being written into critical understanding of post-war American literature—and in particular what was later to be designated postmodernism—as a defining, if at times problematic, influence. This understanding of Nabokov left little space for the critical appreciation of poetry which, more than seeming anachronistic in its non-modernist style, appeared disconcertingly *sui generis*, inassimilable in any established critical paradigm of the novelist or his writing. Critics were plainly surprised and, in a sense, speechless—left groping for an appropriate critical response.

Most of the few reviews to greet Nabokov's first volume of English poetry in 1959, for instance, were benignly positive, perhaps out of respect for his obvious achievements as a prose writer. Nonetheless, as a whole, the reviews display a lack of critical engagement or inter-

pretive specificity which suggests bemused admiration for the poet's verbal dexterity rather than informed comprehension of either the poems themselves or their role within the author's expansive oeuvre. More specifically, the assessments of Nabokov's poetry indicate that it was read against assumptions concerning the phenomenon Nabokov as novelist. *Lolita* loomed large over Nabokov's English poetry. The professional poets and critics James Wright and Anthony Hecht, for instance, explicitly indicate early on in their respective reviews of *Poems* that the poetry is being read as the writing of—in Wright's case—the author of "such novels as *Lolita* and *Invitation to a Beheading*" (378) and—in Hecht's—"the author of a particularly celebrated novel" (593). Perhaps due to associations with *Lolita*'s scandalous subject-matter, both reviews emphasise the purported strangeness and surprise of Nabokov's poetry, with Wright noting "the very monstrosities which Mr. Nabokov likes to describe" and Hecht claiming that "it is occasionally Mr. Nabokov's pleasure to take a particularly grisly subject and write about it in tripping anapests." Hecht, in particular, extends this line of thought to draw general inference regarding Nabokov's authorial stance towards human experience: "In every case, he stands at a polite remove from experience, and even when he deals with violence or madness or the grotesque it is always with flawless social poise" (594). The extent to which "monstrosities," "grisly" subjects, "violence," "madness" or "the grotesque" are in fact a characteristic (or even discernible) quality of Nabokov's poetry is neither demonstrated nor explored. In the poems to be discussed below, for instance, they are not a factor. Initiating a response which would be repeated in most subsequent reviews of Nabokov's English poetry, both Hecht and Wright singled out "An Evening of Russian Poetry," Nabokov's perhaps most accessible English poem, for unqualified praise. Overall, both reviews are positive, especially Wright's: "In any case, I doubt if I have read in a long time a book of poems that gave me so much sheer pleasure in the experience of being entertained" (378). Despite this praise, however, the weight of assessment falls on entertainment; it is apparent that Nabokov's poetry seems a surprising curio, a charming

exercise in linguistic facility to be expected from the author of *Lolita*, though not ultimately an achievement of artistic depth.

Other reviews of *Poems* indicated still greater difficulty in assimilating Nabokov's poetry to a critical paradigm distinct from assumptions about Nabokov the novelist. In his review of *Poems* for the *New York Times Book Review*, the poet Philip Booth expressed general admiration for the "literate wit" and "offbeat perception" of Nabokov's verse (6) without offering interpretive analysis. Chad Walsh's review for the *New York Herald Tribune Book Review* indicates his surprise that Nabokov wrote poetry; Walsh identifies Nabokov as the author of *Bend Sinister* and *Lolita* "who now reveals himself as a poet with a sure and sometimes moving touch" (4). Walsh approaches Nabokov's poetry not as the writing of a poet with an extensive oeuvre—albeit in Russian—but as an author who "appears to write poetry as a by-product of an active life, and his verses have the charm of the intermittently kept journals of a highly civilized man." Underlying even these more positively toned reviews is the pervasive suggestion that Nabokov's poetry is "lightweight," the charming dabbling of an author renowned for the ludic appeal of his work.⁷ Charles Tomlinson's review for the *New Statesman* is indicative of the urge to read Nabokov's poetry negatively against a particular set of expectations regarding Nabokov the novelist. In terms of the thrust of its critical strategy, Tomlinson's review is consistent with most of the reviews of *Poems*, all of which seemed to equate linguistic proficiency with an absence of profundity. Where Tomlinson's review diverges from the others is in its expression of outright censure:

Nabokov's *Poems* are chiefly light-weight. They have a fluency that persistently treads on the edge of over-professional facility, and yet often redeems itself by some instinctive grace. "On Translating Eugene Onegin" and particularly "An Evening of Russian Poetry" contain good sketches, a controlled nostalgia, a wit that isn't morbidly slick. There are good jokes in "The Ballad of Longwood Glen," but others again are sadly New Yorkerish whimsy. By and large, words come to him too easily for us to believe he has ever known that resistant silence from which the deeper poetry emerges. (674)

Conceptually prepared for the poetry of a writer of “over-professional facility,” Tomlinson is unable to hear the “resistant silence” contained within Nabokov’s poetry. Anthony Thwaite’s review for *The Spectator* echoed the tenor—and critical vocabulary—of Tomlinson’s expectations and assessment; in his estimation, Nabokov’s poems are “short and slight, all of them [...] extremely clever, sometimes over-clever” (770). For Thwaite, the only poem to rise above “slickness” (in the term borrowed from Tomlinson) was “An Evening of Russian Poetry.”

F. W. Dupee’s article of 1963, “Nabokov: The Prose and Poetry of It All,” has the distinction of being one of the first assessments of Nabokov’s poetry that attempts to treat it as a formative component of Nabokov’s oeuvre, as a portion of his literary identity.⁸ For Dupee, however, the creative deployment of poetry in Nabokov’s oeuvre was of greater interest than the poetry itself. Not unlike Wright, Hecht, Tomlinson and Thwaite, each of whom read Nabokov’s poetry in the shadow of *Lolita*, Dupee begins his brief account of Nabokov’s poetry with reference to Humbert Humbert’s “occasional poems.” Dupee contrasts Humbert’s “obscure and peculiar” efforts with those of his creator Nabokov, claiming that for the latter, the uses of poetry are high. Despite the seriousness of Nabokov’s assumed poetic intentions, however, Dupee draws illustrative comparison with Joyce to indicate that whatever Nabokov’s thoughts on, or the interest of, his verse, the poetry itself is minor:

Like that other master of prose, James Joyce, Mr. Nabokov aspired in youth to be a poet. More than Joyce did, he has continued to write verse and to fill his novels with reflections on poetry. The reflections are often of major importance; the verse—the verse in English at least—is minor, as minor as verse could be and still remain interesting. (133)

Despite this indication of limited expectations of Nabokov’s poetry, Dupee nonetheless offers perceptive comments regarding the place of poetry in Nabokov’s writing, especially in his final Russian novel, *The Gift*. Dupee reads Nabokov’s poetry in the context of his prose, though

he explicitly refutes the possible conclusion that, as an artist, Nabokov has “sacrificed” poetry to prose; reference to the poetry of *Poems* indicates that this has not happened. Although Nabokov’s poems as a whole are identified as “minor,” “An Evening of Russian Poetry” is identified as “great” with regard to its quality of “wit mingled with lyrical delight.” For Dupee, in general “[t]he English poems do have a peculiar miniature excellence: perfect lucidity, precise wit, the glow of a lighted candle cupped in an expert hand against the windy verse roundabout” (139). Extending out of this relative praise and his brief analysis of *Pale Fire*, Dupee sees the ultimate value of Nabokov’s poetry in his ability to combine it with his prose, making “a team” of “the poet and novelist in him” (141). Here, too, analysis of Nabokov’s poetry returns to, and culminates in, comment on a novel.

Sustained commentary on Nabokov’s English poetry is not to be encountered again until after the publication of *Poems and Problems* in 1970. In a manner similar to the response which greeted *Poems*, the response to the English poems and translations of *Poems and Problems* reveals the long shadow of an emergent critical understanding of Nabokov the provocative novelist, but also translator of *Eugene Onegin*. Nabokov the poet was read as the assumed author of non-mimetic, metafictional novels, the fabulator. Marianne K. Hultquist’s brief comment on *Poems and Problems* is indicative of this tendency: “Although it is slyly deceptive, *Poems and Problems* emphasizes the deception and artifice of which Nabokov is capable both through the translations of the Russian poems and the array of chess problems—a sort of metaphor for the chop-logic that characterizes fictional worlds” (271). The anonymous author of the mention of *Poems and Problems* in *The Booklist* limited reference to Nabokov’s English poems to a negatively formulated subordinate clause: “Although the English poems are insubstantial, the chess problems, recently composed, exhibit Nabokov’s characteristic dexterity and complexity” (27). Howard Nemerov’s review for *The New York Times Book Review* betrays puzzlement at the presence of chess problems as well as Russian poems with translations. Positive reference is made to three unquoted, un-

analysed English poems, although the general tone suggests that the poems are to be read as a novelty produced by an otherwise great author: interesting but of limited lasting value: "Nabokov's poems written in English are in large part deft and neat and not much more, some of them not far from cute [...]. Maybe it will be best to regard this book as a sort of souvenir for the author's many readers, the record of some diversions of a master" (5). Writing in *The Listener*, Francis Wyndham takes up reference to the chess problems in the volume to assert a negatively connotated sense of trickery in Nabokov's poetry: "I can see some slight resemblance between Nabokov's problems and his *New Yorker* poems, which are full of witty ingenuities and cunningly planted shocks, slyly forcing the vernacular into a classic mode and refurbishing the banal with baroque elaboration. This type of verse can often be either facetious or sentimental—and there is a very faint hint of both qualities here" (116). In Wyndham's reading, Nabokov's English verse is little more than the deceptive adornment of banality in classic poetic form—potentially an advantage in chess problems, but not in poetry.

The review of *Poems and Problems* by the poet and critic Richard Lattimore for the *Hudson Review* also reveals the tendency to read Nabokov's poetry through assumptions regarding his literary persona—a persona constructed by a literary institution insufficiently aware of the dimensions of Nabokov's oeuvre. Lattimore's review deals first with Nabokov's Russian verse in English translation and then with the English poetry. His comments on Nabokov's translated poems comprise the longest section of the review, and are framed less as criticism of the poetry than as implicit opposition to Nabokov's theories of literal translation. The second section of the review is devoted to Nabokov's English poetry and derives from Lattimore's negative reading of Nabokov's translations. Although positive in thrust, the assessment of Nabokov's English verse nonetheless remains negative in tone and implication: "In most of the English-composed poems (but not in the unaccountable 'Ballad of Longwood Glen'), the awkwardness [of the translations] vanishes. Nabokov's

virtuosity in English is manifest from his prose, tiresome as that can sometimes be" (507). Indicative of his begrudging praise is Lattimore's positive reference to "An Evening of Russian Poetry" which nonetheless pivots on negatively formulated assumptions concerning Nabokov: "Always the one-upman, Nabokov patronizes his imaginary audience and his reader: this poem is, nevertheless, mellow, beautiful, and wise" (508).

Analysis of Nabokov's poetry was filtered through more than expectations and perceptions of the literary persona Nabokov. As intimated in Lattimore's review, critics also approached *Poems and Problems* from the perspective of their response to Nabokov's controversial espousal of literal translation. Writing in *Time*, John Skow began his review entitled "Drinker of Words" with criticism of Nabokov's literal self-translations. Skow illustrates his contention with reference to a single (!) word—caprifole for *zhimolost'*—as an example which is meant to prove that Nabokov was capriciously obscure in his use of language. It is this assessment, emerging from a reading of his translation, that colours Skow's reading of Nabokov's poems in general; for Skow, Nabokov is "a provincial linguistic pedant," "an overrefined rhymester" (67). Thus, although Nabokov is judged "an expert poet," he is also construed as a cunning, but ultimately frivolous wordsmith, "a pleasing and self-pleased illusionist" (68). Konstantin Bazarov, in his review for *Books and Bookmen*, also approached Nabokov first as a translator and secondly as a poet, stating that *Poems and Problems* as a book "raises a whole series of different problems about Nabokov both as a translator of his own and other people's work and as an original creative writer" (xii).⁹ According to Bazarov, for Nabokov "art is also a game, with Nabokov as a player whose approach to writing is that of an intellectual puzzle-maker producing artefacts which are all clever construction and stylistic acrobatics, an aesthete trapping glittering bejewelled butterflies in his lepidopterist's net" (xii). Only in the final lines of his review does Bazarov proceed—without analysis—to comment on Nabokov's poetry. While some of the later Russian poems are deemed "very fine indeed," Nabokov's English po-

ems, except for "An Evening of Russian Poetry," are dismissed as "mere lighthearted squibs" (xii).

Nabokov's English poetry was not assessed via reference to *Lolita* and his theories of translation alone, however. As in the instance of F. W. Dupee's comments, *Pale Fire* also served as a conduit of approach to Nabokov's verse.¹⁰ The anonymous review of *Poems and Problems* in the *Times Literary Supplement*, for instance, begins its discussion of Nabokov the poet with reference to Nabokov the author of *Pale Fire*. Justification for this approach is quickly provided—Nabokov is "primarily a novelist" (984). Nabokov's poetry is reduced to subordinate status on the basis of a set of assumptions regarding Nabokov the gamester and novelist: "Higher games, charades, impersonations, the evocations of the ghost of the author when he was young and somebody else, chips from the workshop, so these poems by a novelist may be termed." With this conceptual preparation, it is but consistent (however erroneous) that the English poems should eventually be designated "neatly constructed memoranda rather than attempts to find an equivalent for mood or feeling." And like Dupee, though without his insight, the anonymous reviewer comes to a comparison with Joyce to claim that "the subtle and various exploitation of language to the end of expressing complex states of feeling and thinking" which is missing in the poetry "is reserved for the novels." Although not as negative as Tomlinson, the anonymous reviewer, too, essentially suggests that Nabokov's poetry lacks depth.

Even a brief review of the reception of his English poetry thus reveals that Nabokov's poetry suffered from the surprise it produced. Unable to find a critical vocabulary with which to articulate an adequate response to Nabokov's verse, critics attempted instead to assimilate the poetry into an accepted understanding of the novelist. Accordingly, Nabokov the master prose-writer was seen to write poetry either as a pale imitation of his achievement in prose, or as an exercise in literary gamesmanship. The harbinger of the 'postmodern,' the skilled manipulator of generic form in the formulation of non-mimetic fiction did not write intricately rhymed verse in iambic te-

trameter, and if he did, then only as a diverting pastime or in the sly, “lightweight” play of parody. This process both parallels *and* contrasts with the émigré reception of Nabokov’s Russian verse. In this earlier instance, too, suspicion regarding the quality and intent of Nabokov’s poetry induced critics to develop interpretive paradigms derived from extra-literary criteria—most commonly in appeal to an understanding of Nabokov the novelist; in contrast, while Nabokov’s émigré critics claimed to see in his verse the heavy influence of an entire panoply of poets, his Anglo-American critics were unable or unwilling to link him to anything but his own challenging literary voice. Common to both histories of reception, however, is the inability to move from the necessarily superficial level of journalistic assessment to a more comprehensive, rigorous level of scholarly investigation actually based on Nabokov’s poetry.

It is here, in reversal of a trajectory of critical analysis which leads from poetry to prose, that consideration of surprise in Nabokov’s poetry may be shown to be illustrative of a principle essential to Nabokov’s artistry as a whole. In fundamental ways, Nabokov’s verse is about, and based upon, surprise. Analysis of two English language poems by Nabokov which foreground the principle of surprise, “The Poem” and “Restoration,” indicate the ways in which surprise is programmatic to Nabokov’s artistry, particularly with regard to the revelatory role accorded by Nabokov to metaphor. For Nabokov, the surprise of poetry emanates from its ability to startle and transform perception. Given the importance to be accorded Nabokov’s poetry as the mediator between consciousness and world, comments on these particular poems will be prefaced with brief initial remarks concerning Nabokov’s views on consciousness. “The Poem” and “Restoration” will then be read to illustrate the aesthetic and metaphysical dimensions of Nabokov’s poetics of surprise, and also to suggest the value of Nabokov’s poetry for a fuller understanding of his artistry.

As Brian Boyd has suggested, Nabokov's artistic project is in significant ways concerned with the mystery of consciousness (*Nabokov's Ada* 67), which is perhaps most fully explored in *Speak, Memory*. Nabokov's autobiography literally begins and ends with the surprise of consciousness, and famously describes existence as a series of ascending stages—a helix spiralling in four upward turns from space into time, then into human consciousness within space-time and from there, potentially at least, into a fourth realm of transcendent consciousness unconstrained by the restraints of either time or space (301). For the consummate artist Nabokov, the summit of human activity in life, the pinnacle of experience within the third spiral of the helix of being, is the exercise of the creative consciousness, in particular, though not exclusively, in art. This is most directly apparent in chapter 11 of *Speak, Memory*, the chapter devoted to Nabokov's adolescent initiation into the wonder of inspiration and creative activity in his pivotal account of his first poem. Nabokov's stylised recreation of the experience attendant to the writing of his first paradigmatic poem is not of importance in the first instance as a record of a single poem—in the narrative of *Speak, Memory* the poem in question is not even reproduced in verse form. In Nabokov's chapter-length retelling, the poem is essential as a sign of his awakening into an exceptionally privileged form of consciousness, the consciousness of the artist-poet. Essentially, Nabokov identifies poetic creation as an epistemological enterprise, the expression of a fundamental impulse to apprehend the surrounding environment, and then to recast it according to the inclinations of the poet's imagination. In Nabokov's words from *Speak, Memory*: "[...] all poetry is positional: to try to express one's position in regard to the universe embraced by consciousness, is an immemorial urge. The arms of consciousness reach out and grope, and the longer they are the better. Tentacles, not wings, are Apollo's natural members" (218). This relatively simply stated though far-reaching discursive claim is likewise repeatedly enacted in artistic form throughout Nabokov's fictional universe, particularly in the illustrative experiences of his various fictional poets. *The Gift*, for instance,

begins with the young poet-author contemplating a street scene with the intention of storing it away as a scene with which “to start a good, thick, old-fashioned novel” (4). Here, the protagonist’s consciousness is witnessed reaching out to feel and probe his environment. *Pale Fire* likewise contains a scene illustrative of the poet’s apprehension of the world. Charles Kinbote, the mad, obsessively observant companion to John Shade, witnesses Nabokov’s greatest of fictional poets doing that which, according to Nabokov, is essential to the poet: “[...] perceiving and transforming the world, taking it in and taking it apart, recombining its elements in the very process of storing them up so as to produce at some unspecified date an organic miracle, a fusion of image and music, a line of verse” (27).

Nabokov’s statement about the “positional” role of poetry and Kinbote’s observation about a line of verse as “an organic miracle, a fusion of image and music” brings discussion to Nabokov’s poem of 1944, “The Poem,” which provides direct insight into the demands and expectations made of poetry by Nabokov and the metaphysical sources of inspiration and artistic creation.¹¹ The following is the poem in its entirety:

Not the sunset poem you make when you think aloud,
with its linden tree in India ink
and the telegraph wires across its pink cloud;

not the mirror in you and her delicate bare
shoulder still glimmering there;
not the lyrical click of a pocket rhyme—
the tiny music that tells the time;

and not the pennies and weights on those
evening papers piled up in the rain;
not the cacodemons of carnal pain;
not the things you can say so much better in plain prose—

but the poem that hurtles from heights unknown
—when you wait for the splash of the stone
deep below, and grope for your pen,
and then comes the shiver, and then—

in the tangle of sounds, the leopards of words,
 the leaflike insects, the eye-spotted birds
 fuse and form a silent, intense,
 mimetic pattern of perfect sense. (*Poems and Problems* 157)

“The Poem” begins with the speaker’s rejection of the conventional in poetry. In anaphoric repetitions, the first three stanzas enumerate what a true poem is not. Standardized subject matter such as sunsets, the self-generated lyricism of a conventional muse, social concerns and carnal lust are all dismissed as “the things you can say so much better in plain prose.” Likewise rejected is the mechanized formal structure of such poetry—“the lyrical click of a pocket rhyme”—here marked in the “aloud”-“cloud” *consonne d’appui* rhyme of the first stanza, itself appended to the triple rhyme “think”-“ink”-“pink.” Opposed to this is the poem whose source is an external, transcendent sphere “from heights unknown,” a source of inspiration which, although seemingly extraneous, somehow emerges from “deep below” in the poet’s consciousness. The source “deep below” of the preferred type of poetry is not only described in the text of the poem, but also prepared for—and illustrated—in its prosody. Both an enjambment and, more skilfully, the anapaestic rhythm of the line “when you wait for the splash of the stone” enforce a “wait” for the delayed revelation of “deep below” in the succeeding line.

Unlike that which is rejected as the subject matter of “plain prose,” the substance of the ideal poem is neither delineated nor described; rather, emphasis is placed on its creation in metaphor and its necessarily revelatory effect. The final two quatrains of “The Poem” implement the ideal of a perfect poem by utilizing metaphoric imagery which illustrates its goal rather than describing it. Through the use of metaphors of organic, exotic imagery, the final quatrain enacts the perfect poem’s sudden, surprising revelation of meaning, the conveyance of sense in a manner more immediate and compact—“silent, intense”—than that available to prose. Through the hastened accumulation of metaphors which conclude in a declarative statement, the very texture of experience is revealed and the mind allowed suddenly

to see with perfect clarity, almost intuitively, the meaning previously camouflaged “in the tangle of sounds, the leopards of words.” Significantly, “The Poem,” itself an example of the kind of poetry it advocates, ends in asserting renewed representational contact with the world of experience, a “mimetic pattern of perfect sense.” “The Poem” thus succeeds not only in describing what a poem is, but also in allowing the reader to experience an analogous sense of lyric wonder and discovery in reading the poem. In this respect, “The Poem” itself illustratively enacts poetry’s effect on consciousness and the sudden, wondrous arrival of lyric meaning which takes consciousness to new, transformed awareness of the world. Given the link forged by poetry between consciousness and world, it is not surprising that Nabokov should use an image similar to the one concluding this poem when, in *Speak, Memory*, he comments on his supposition of a child’s first experience of consciousness: “It occurs to me that the closest reproduction of the mind’s birth obtainable is the stab of wonder that accompanies the precise moment when, gazing at a tangle of twigs and leaves, one suddenly realizes that what had seemed a natural component of that tangle is a marvelously disguised insect or bird” (298). Both poetry and the plunge into consciousness provide a “stab of wonder” when the world is revealed to be other than what it was previously perceived to be.

“The Poem” thus demonstrates the aesthetic dimension of Nabokov’s poetics of epiphanic revelation, of surprise; it both describes and advocates a form of poetry which effects a transformed perception of the world. Nabokov’s 1952 poem “Restoration” also begins with the mysteries and potential of consciousness, but expands thematically to provide poetic treatment not only of Nabokov’s aesthetics, but also his metaphysics. “Restoration,” one of Nabokov’s most intriguing poems, suggests that poetry is allied to consciousness in its capability to reveal unseen facets about both this world and a beyond.¹² Less a lesson than the surprise of sudden revelation or discovery, poetry is divulged in this poem to afford entrance into the mystery of existence, to act as a portal to another dimension of ex-

panded consciousness. Divided into six five-line stanzas of iambic tetrameter with alternating aabba rhymes, the first three stanzas of the poem allude to the mysterious, ineffable source of poetry, while the second half returns to the mundane, yet ever wondrous, realia of life and the world. At once a meditation on the mysteries of an intuited beyond and identification of the investigative, epistemological function of poetry, "Restoration" pivots on the revelatory potential of art to surprise and expand perception.

To think that any fool may tear
by chance the web of when and where.
O window in the dark! To think
that every brain is on the brink
of nameless bliss no brain can bear,

Unless there be no great surprise—
as when you learn to levitate
and, hardly trying, realize
—alone, in a bright room—that weight
is but your shadow, and you rise.

My little daughter wakes in tears:
She fancies that her bed is drawn
into a dimness which appears
to be the deep of all her fears
but which, in point of fact, is dawn.

I know a poet who can strip
a William Tell or Golden Pip
in one uninterrupted peel
miraculously to reveal,
revolving on his fingertip,

a snowball. So I would unrobe,
turn inside out, pry open, probe
all matter, everything you see,
the skyline and its saddest tree,
the whole inexplicable globe,
to find the true, the ardent core
as doctors of old pictures do
when, rubbing out a distant door

or sooty curtain, they restore
the jewel of a bluish view. (*Poems and Problems* 167-68)¹³

“Restoration” opens with an invocation of the mysterious fragility of the lightly veiled boundary—“the web of when and where”—separating physical existence in time and space from the expanses of a transcendental realm, what Nabokov described in the previously cited passage as the fourth spiral in the helix of being. In the third-line apostrophe, “O window in the dark!,” Nabokov explicitly draws on the image of a window—a motif of transition prevalent throughout all of his poetry—to convey the simplicity of the shift to a blissful state of consciousness. Referred to here is the miraculous conquering of the physical laws of being via an act of consciousness. The brink to nameless bliss is a transition as potentially innocuous as the windowed aperture from the house of being to the unknown dark expanses outside. The move to another dimension is as simple, or as surprising, as levitation. The second stanza of “Restoration” expresses a variation of a theme common to Nabokov’s poetry: mysterious travel in the rapture of consciousness altered and expanded by, especially, inspiration or love. Here, a privileged form of consciousness is shown to conquer the reason-bound laws of causality and rationality. In the next stanza, we learn that this levitating escape from the physical to enter into another state may appear frightening in its strangeness, in the radical change it portends; it is “a dimness which appears / to be the deep of all her fears.” Rather than a depth and the end of being, however, this “dimness” is actually a transition to another dimension of consciousness; in the metaphoric terms of time and an awakening from the sleep of physical life, it is a form of Platonic anamnesis, a new beginning at “dawn.”

The beginning of the transitional, fourth stanza redirects the movement of the poem from the metaphysical to the aesthetic with abrupt reference to artistic practice. Here, as was illustrated in the above-discussed image of the suddenly revealed bird in “The Poem” and in *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov links the consciousness of the poet with that of a child’s in its capacity for surprise and wonderment. In stanza

three, it is the speaker's young daughter, a child, who intuitively and instinctively senses (and accepts) without conscious reflection the thinness of the boundaries of time and space. In stanza four, it is the poet with the conscious dexterity of his artistry who purposefully effects this transformation. Nabokov illustrates the function of poetry in a multi-layered metaphor about the ability of a poet to peel an apple—itsself metaphorically named—suddenly to reveal, after the delay of accumulating descriptive phrases and an enjambment at a stanza-break, the apple's metaphoric likeness, a snowball. Here it is the conjuror Nabokov describing the working of poetry through metaphoric reference to a poet who magically removes a thin boundary, an apple peel, to disclose not what is expected, but something transformed by poetry and metaphor into something surprisingly different. This, the poem suggests, is the epistemological potential unique to poetry. Stanza five in particular, with its accumulation of verbs of tactile exploration ending with "see," enacts Nabokov's comment from *Speak, Memory* of the poet's consciousness reaching out to probe the surrounding world. Poetry harnesses and utilizes the creatively associative, conjunctive potential of metaphor to initiate a process of discovery and disclosure, leading to revelation of the specificities and mysteries of "the whole inexplicable globe," and beyond. Poetry provides a privileged form of knowing capable of reaching beyond the known and accepted. In his article "The Art of Literature and Commonsense," Nabokov suggested that the goal of metaphors is to "follow the course of their secret connections" (*Lectures* 373). And, in a manner analogous to the frequent thematic motifs of transition within Nabokov's writing, metaphors are vehicles of transition between surprising associations of both physical and metaphysical import. It is metaphor which allows Nabokov to unite in a single poetics his fascination for an intuited, ineffable metaphysical dimension *and* wonder at the specificity and quiddity of phenomenal existence. Metaphor and poetry encourage renewed, sharpened awareness not only of the multi-layered texture of reality but of previously unperceived correspondences to further dimensions of consciousness.

For the poet not only probes the phenomenal world, but removes the “distant door,” the “sooty curtain” providing access to previously unperceived realms of awareness. This poetics of the metaphor is not so much the modernist project to “make it new” as a self-reflective exercise in decorative brilliance, but the Nabokovian one to “make it revelatory,” transformative—in short, surprising and epiphanic. Poetry is both a product of artistic consciousness *and* an enhancement of consciousness; it is a response to the world *and* its transformation. In this regard, “Restoration” provides concise illustration for Robert Alter’s essential comment about Nabokov’s entire creative project:

Nabokov has often been celebrated for his brilliance as a stylist; but it is important to recognize that this brilliance [...] is not ornamental, as in some of his American imitators, but *the necessary instrument of a serious ontological enterprise*: to rescue reality from the bland nonentity of stereotypicality and from the terrifying rush of mortality by reshaping objects, relations, existential states, through the power of metaphor and wit, so that they become endowed with an arresting life of their own. (105-06; emphasis added)

The “restoration” of Nabokov’s title takes on an added layer of significance in the context of Alter’s identification of the urge in Nabokov’s writing to engage the world through his art. And what Alter says here about Nabokov’s writing in general is particularly relevant to his poetry: Nabokov’s poetry of surprise is capable of uncovering and granting access to the quintessence of being, “the ardent core” of an ultimately “inexplicable globe,” while metaphor, in “rubbing out a distant door / or sooty curtain” removes the boundaries of the physical, and containment in the literal, to afford unexpected vistas onto something beyond, the “jewel of a bluish view.” Poetry, with its surprising, even irrational leaps of association, takes consciousness to dimensions closed to “plain prose.”

“Restoration” and “The Poem” thus not only illustrate the importance of surprise to the aesthetic and metaphysical dimensions of Nabokov’s artistic project, but bear witness to the relevance of his poetry for a comprehensive understanding of his use of literature to effect the positioning of consciousness in the world of experience. The

potential of his verse to aid in an essential realignment of critical understanding of his entire oeuvre is perhaps the ultimate surprise to be experienced in reading Nabokov's poetry.

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NOTES

¹The following is a revised and expanded version of a paper presented at the 8th International *Connotations* Symposium, "Textual Surprises," in 2005.

²The question as to the exact number of poems Nabokov wrote is difficult to answer with certainty. Nabokov himself suggested that the thirty-nine poems translated into English for publication in the 1970 *Poems and Problems* "[...] represent only a small fraction—hardly more than one percent—of the steady mass of verse which I began to exude in my early youth, more than half a century ago, and continued to do so, with monstrous regularity, especially during the twenties and thirties" (*Poems and Problems* 13). Barry P. Scherr is undoubtedly correct when he suggests that "[e]ven if the poetry found within his prose works and his translations is left aside, he still published over 500 poems in Russian along with nearly two dozen in English" (106).

³As representative of this tendency, see, for instance, the first sentence from a review by German Khokhlov devoted to Nabokov's 1929 collection of short stories and poems, *The Return of Chorb*: "In order to see Nabokov in his full stature, it is necessary to read his novels" (190).

⁴Evaluation of the record of Nabokov's reception as an émigré Russian poet is fraught with difficulty. Although the criticism of Nabokov the poet was generally negative, the reasons for this assessment were often contradictory. For a more detailed, though still incomplete, review of Nabokov's reception as an émigré poet, see my "Vladimir Nabokov's Poetry in Russian Émigré Criticism: A Partial Survey."

⁵In one particularly infamous example of *ad hominem* attack, for instance, Georgii Ivanov, a figure closely associated with the "Parisian Poets," claimed that Nabokov's poems were "simply vulgar" and thereby as deserving of censure as the unnamed critic of an earlier review who had suggested that Nabokov was "an exceptional master of verse" (235). See Boyd for a full account of the background to Ivanov's attack (*The Russian Years* 350). Gleb Struve, in a review of Nabokov's poetry for *Rossiiia i slaviansstvo* in 1930, directly and positively contrasted Nabokov's poetry to that of the so-called "Parisian Poets" centered around the influential émigré critics Georgii Adamovich and Georgii Ivanov.

⁶D. Barton Johnson first referred to this possibility with his perceptive observation that this was "a rare opportunity [for Nabokov] to define his *oeuvre* for posterity" (312).

⁷The charge of “lightness” was a critical assessment also levelled at Nabokov’s prose. A few years after the publication of *Poems*, for instance, the earliest reviews of *Pale Fire* would frequently—and equally erroneously—suggest the same.

⁸F. W. Dupee was, famously, the scholar and former editor of the *Partisan Review* who provided the article in *Anchor Review* which accompanied the first publication of excerpts from *Lolita* for an American audience in 1957.

⁹Interestingly, Bazarov’s analysis of Nabokov the “failed” translator-poet begins with criticism of the same single example chosen by Skow—Nabokov’s use of the word “caprifole” as the translation for *zhimolost’* in the poem “The Rain Has Flown.” As in the reception of Nabokov’s Russian poetry, the repetition of isolated points of criticism—down to the vocabulary deployed—suggests that critical opinion was frequently being recycled rather than independently formulated.

¹⁰The problematic reception of *Pale Fire* upon its publication in 1962 may also be read, at least in part, as a consequence of the inability of critics to accommodate the poetry of the novel. Many of the earliest negative reviews of the novel display angered incomprehension upon confrontation with the poem “Pale Fire.” See for instance Dwight MacDonald’s negative though judiciously intended review of the novel and poem: “The most that can be said for the poem is that it is often good pastiche (though more often doggerel). [...] But the torrent of virtuosity deafens one to whatever meaning the poet may have been trying to communicate” (439-40). As in the rejection of Nabokov’s poetry, much of the early reception of *Pale Fire* seems also to have been determined as much by perceptions of the assumed literary goals of the author as by the work itself.

¹¹Throughout his poetic oeuvre, Nabokov frequently returned to similarly terse titles such as “The Poet” or “The Poem.” The titles of several of his collections of poetry—as with those of John Shade—are variations of the title *Poems*. This brevity would seem to indicate the synecdochic relation of particular poems and volumes of poetry to his poetic writing in general.

¹²See Zoran Kuzmanovich’s “Strong Opinions and Nerve Points: Nabokov’s Life and Art” for an analysis which uses the poem as a suggestive text in the reading of various motifs from Nabokov’s life and works.

¹³Brian Boyd records that Nabokov composed “Restoration” in haste on the occasion of an invitation to offer a poetry reading “in the Morris Gray poetry series at Harvard’s Sever Hall, in a season that had begun with William Carlos Williams and would end with Wallace Stevens” (*The American Years* 216).

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Perversions and Reversals of Childhood and Old Age in J. M. Coetzee's *Age of Iron*

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Introduction

This paper is based on a critical rereading of J. M. Coetzee's *Age of Iron*. 'Surprise' as the central aspect of investigation is understood and used here in the sense of 'textual surprise': elements of unexpectedness or unorthodoxy within the text that provoke a new perspective on the overriding themes of the novel. *Age of Iron* in fact contains various interlinked elements of textual surprise such as the intersection of the personal and the political, the shifting identities of the characters,¹ or the symbolism and the ambiguities of language. All these elements are synthesised by Coetzee into new ways of considering age. The concept 'age' carries generational as well as historical, individual and social reference, which Coetzee makes subtle use of. The focus in this paper is on childhood² and old age as central issues. Middle age, which is slightly less prominent in the novel, will also be covered to some extent.

Notions of childhood have in fact undergone tremendous changes over the centuries. There is agreement among scholars that modern conceptions of childhood originate from the Enlightenment, especially from Rousseau, and from Romanticism. More recent childhood studies in children's and adult literature have provided us with more precise insights into children's culture(s) and images of the child in various historical periods and socio-cultural contexts. The application of varied critical approaches to childhood has revealed the sophisticated character of implied notions of 'the child' and childhood in the discourses of literature, education, pedagogics, psychology, religion,

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and philosophy.³ Old age, by contrast, has only recently seen a revival of scholarly interest outside science, medicine, and psychology, and come under the investigation of literary and cultural studies.⁴

Age of Iron, published in 1990 and written between 1986 and 1989, takes us to South Africa in the year 1986. While the main protagonist, Mrs Curren, an old white lady, is dying in Cape Town, desperately longing for a reunion with her daughter who has been living in the U.S. since 1976, we see South Africa literally and metaphorically ablaze.⁵ The writer exemplifies the state of a country deeply ruptured by racial conflict by offering unusual perspectives on childhood and old age, and modifies conventional assumptions about them by revealing their disturbing aspects, unstable character, and shifting and new meanings. More specifically, he discloses their perversions and the reversal of their mutual positions to each other. The result is an intriguing discussion of issues of status, authority, power, and legitimacy that transgresses the divisions of race and gender.

Perversions of Childhood

Throughout the novel, a constant undermining of conventional notions of childhood can be observed in the narrative structure. A substantial number of these notions are formulated through metaphors and images which tend to accentuate rather common qualities of being a child. These are, for instance, the need for comfort, dependence, and security⁶; helplessness and ineffectiveness⁷; immaturity, inexperience, irrationality, and emotionality⁸; irresponsibility,⁹ innocence and the lack of morality/amorality¹⁰; and insignificance and non-authority.¹¹

Two techniques used by Coetzee, however, create surprise here: Firstly, he takes a conventional assumption about childhood, such as a child's inexperience, and makes it part of a child-sex nexus: at the end of her life, Mrs Curren grasps the nature of her relationship with Vercueil as one of mutual care and help, induction instead of seduc-

tion. Vercueil is likened here to a boy who does not know how to love. The nearer Mrs Curren's end comes, the more faithful he is, but still she has to guide his hand (196). This is followed up by Coetzee with an animal-sex-death nexus: Mrs Curren suspects that Vercueil has neither a conception of death nor of sex, just the "curiosity of a dog that sniffs at one's crotch, wagging its tail, its tongue hanging out red and stupid as a penis" (196-97). Secondly, Coetzee uses childhood in a quite unusual way to represent—and reflect on—the historical and racial conflict in South Africa at the time the novel is set. For example, a striking metaphor employed by Coetzee to connote helplessness, irrationality and immaturity indicates the ethnic confrontation: Mrs Curren is ashamed to have spoken and behaved like a child—she was whinging with "a child's voice," (109)—towards the cousin of her black domestic Florence, Mr. Thabane, after the sight of the dead boys' bodies on the Cape Flats. Her lapse into child(ish) behaviour and the irrational wish to get back to the safety of her house, to her "bed of childhood slumber" (109), are contrasted with the fact that the blacks have nowhere to escape to in the conflict.

Other conventional assumptions about childhood, beyond the metaphorical use of the child, which conceive of childhood as an important phase in life with various positive connotations are modified, qualified and even annulled through ethnic, gender, and historical reference.

Childhood is often conceived of as a time of intellectual curiosity and linguistic discovery, when a child starts to explore the relationship between words and reality, or, between signifier and signified. Children in Coetzee's novel are easily impressed by words and stories that create illusions, i.e. verbal impressions and pictures of the imagination that differ from what things are like in reality. This is a general psychological feature of childhood, but Coetzee adds an ethnic dimension to it by using a white childhood for illustration—the talks of Mrs Curren's mother about her visit to the Piesangs River and Plettenberg Bay (18).

Childhood likewise connotes a life in a continuous state of present without the sense of danger, a conception of death, mortality or transience. This is confirmed by Mrs Curren's recollection of her own fearlessness in going downhill on a bicycle (16) and by Vercueil's comparison to a boy who doesn't know death (196-97). However, there are passages when Coetzee modifies this feature of childhood, actually questioning its truthfulness. He does this by referring to individual experience: Mrs Curren's retelling of the story of her mother as a child in the early years of the twentieth century, travelling with her parents in an ox wagon from Uniondale to Plettenberg Bay, reveals that *her mother* at least was indeed afraid of death as a child (16-17). Furthermore, Coetzee specifies the general assumption in terms of politics and ethnicity and turns it into an accusation: Mrs Curren assesses the engagement of young male blacks in the current political conflict as dubious; she criticises the use of violence and the short-sighted focus on present political concerns. It is exactly the fact that the children are *not* afraid of death, their misplaced courage and, consequently, their refusal to make proper use of their childhood, which disturbs her most (48-51).

Innocence, another common assumption about childhood, is continuously unmasked by Coetzee. He makes the reader aware of its false character: at first Mrs Curren's childhood, back in the old days of South Africa, is fashioned into a period of innocence. Her playing familiar tunes on the piano brings back the memory of the South Africa of her childhood, when people used to have servants and the maiden would play the piano on a hot Saturday afternoon (23-24). Of course, the narrator's nostalgic attitude is due to her retrospective view from the time of open racial conflict back onto a period which was supposedly stable and peaceful. At this stage of narrative development, the affirmative emotional recollections are not called into question, but later more rational and politically-minded considerations emerge in Mrs Curren. As the text gradually reveals, there has never been such a thing as childhood innocence—and there never will be under the present conditions in South Africa. What is more,

those present conditions are for the first time understood by Mrs Curren to be the result of a long existent political crime already in operation in her childhood. What she now grasps is that her white childhood innocence had been bought dearly at the expense of the blacks and that her own attitude towards the crime had over decades been shockingly uncritical.

For Coetzee, the most prominent conventional notion as regards childhood seems to be procreation. To give birth to a child implies biological succession, a link to life and some guarantee for the future, a means of transgressing one's death, of projecting oneself into the future (cf. the use of this motif in Shakespeare's 'procreation' sonnets). The sense of procreation is so strong in Mrs Curren that it even acquires a significance beyond life, in the afterlife. Her notion of heaven is that of a place without fear of the future because she has successfully secured biological succession (25).

However, procreation, too, is placed by Coetzee in a historical and political context, to demonstrate its problematical aspects in apartheid South Africa. Mrs Curren's case is telling: unlike the people currently holding power in South Africa (fictionally as well as in reality at the time of publication), who secure their safe and prosperous existence abroad, who live up to their life expectancy and die peacefully in their beds, unbothered by their deeds of the past and surrounded by their grandchildren, she is cut off, as it were, from her biological successors, her daughter and her grandchildren abroad (128). Moreover, she has to admit to not only having been separated, but even estranged from her daughter and abandoned and deserted by her (139-40). The estrangement extends to her grandchildren, whom she has not yet met. Looking at a picture of her two grandsons taken on a lake, she acknowledges the limits of biological succession and reflects on the differences in child mortality and life expectancy in the U.S. and South Africa (195). The grandchildren may be her flesh and blood, but for her they are remote beings of whom she has only seen photographs. The biological line of succession to her seems to be "already dead"

(195). This is exactly why Vercueil can take up the function of a surrogate daughter for Mrs Curren at all.

In Vercueil, there is not even an indication of childhood—he is, as it were, old by nature. He has no wife, no children, no family of his own; “There is an air of childlessness about him” (11). This means that he is free of fetters, obligations, and responsibility. To the narrator, this has a touch of the unnatural. There is no line of succession, no biological extension, no evidence of evolution in him though he is a mother’s child as well. Surprisingly enough, Mrs Curren now extends her line of succession to him. In a highly complex passage, Coetzee links the two levels of nourishment and writing: Mrs Curren feeds Mr. Vercueil in a literal and physical way (even his dog, 7-8), and she feeds her absent daughter mentally, with words—inspired by Vercueil—that are related in a simile to the bodily liquid given by a mother to a child (9).

Not untypically for Coetzee, the importance of procreation in one thematic area—that of childhood—is extended to other areas such as fauna and flora, which serve as a foil. The device enables the reader to see the cross-connections between the biological and the political: the rabbits in Mrs Curren’s household have not been taken care of by her domestic’s son and have died; her garden was left unpruned so that the trees were overproductive and, as a consequence, the fruit was rotting (20). In the light of later developments, which include the killing of people, the passage seems to suggest the unconscious wish for procreation. Remarkably enough, it is the derelict Vercueil who is to be the future gardener in Mrs Curren’s home. Heightening the metaphorical meaning of his being ‘an heir’ to a person and a house (5) that stands for the country (later the house is called his home, 47), he is portrayed in a Shakespearean sense as a redeemer of the whole rotten country (21) and its new possessor.

Eventually Coetzee’s redefinitions of conventional assumptions about childhood reach a new quality as he shows them to become quite perverted. One perversion consists in the fact that the childhood connotation of procreation is modified in terms of race and gender, a

device which results in the denial of its life-affirming qualities. The writer in fact reserves these qualities to *female* childhoods only, but he does so across the divisions of race. They are exemplified by Mrs Curren and her daughter (5, 6, 76) as well as by Florence's daughters. Florence's daughters—with allegorical significance named Hope and Beauty (90)—remain alive, perhaps due to their not being involved in fanaticism and violence. In a sequence of allegorical dream vision (177-78, 185), Florence is heightened symbolically to a Greek Goddess, and her daughters to God-children. In contrast to these girls, Florence's son Bheki—only 15 years old (35)—and his friend get killed in the political conflicts. In other words, the young black females exclusively seem to represent South Africa's future hope. This is underlined by the fact that Florence has never entrusted Mrs Curren with their real African names (37), but then, of course, the girls are rendered allegorically as icons; unlike Bheki and his friend they are not characterised.

Missing biological succession is thus located by Coetzee in *male* childhoods, again across the divisions of race. Coetzee interpolates two complementary conceptions of futile *male* childhood in South Africa. Whereas the young blacks, left to themselves, kill time on the streets (67-68), waste their childhood on crimes and on acts of aggression, white male childhoods are spent in ignorance, in neglect of the possibilities of life, and in narcissism (7)—innocence turned into parasitism. Neither the young blacks nor the young whites use the chances offered by childhood and adolescence properly. Both modes of childhood are life-denying. Procreation seems to be tragically made void of its original purpose. As Coetzee presents it, the consequence is moral degradation among black *and* white children. In a language reverberating with religious imagery and implied humanist connotations of childhood, such as cognitive and emotional growth, Mrs Cullen describes that she is afraid—more than of the homeless people—of the behaviour of these black *and* white youngsters. The blacks are hard and cruel; the whites are unthinking softies (7).

In a second perversion, Coetzee portrays black male childhood in its ultimate consequence as the incarnation of a childhood which has been utterly deprived of its original positive impulses and has annulled itself: the young male black protagonists, Bheki and his friend, represent a whole generation of black children engaged in the current political struggle. Their childhoods are devoid of the characteristic elements which are highly appreciated in progressive white European educational sciences, such as curiosity, discovery, games, plays, and pleasure. Black children experience a childhood which involves (at best) an extremely rapid 'development' of sorts, (at worst) ignorance or blind fanaticism, yet in any case a fundamental challenge in personal and political terms, including the risk of losing one's life in the battle.

A case in point is the friend of Florence's son Bheki. Mrs Curren cannot love Bheki's friend at first. He is a child without a real childhood; in fact, his childhood is already over. His innocence is rather ignorance, for he only seems to have aged into adulthood without having truly developed or matured. So he appears to her as a rotten fruit (78-79). Whenever Mrs Curren tries to approach him, she feels a "wall of resistance" (79). He is not able to learn and has no prospects for the future. The humanist historical lessons that she, as a former teacher of classics, has to teach are lost on him (80, 81). Frustratedly, Mrs Curren grasps that this rising generation (which may not necessarily drink and be dirty like Vercueil), which represents the new Puritans, who hold up the rule, cannot (again unlike Mr. Vercueil) be talked to but only lectured to (81, 82)—and this in vain. She can only look with astonishment and incomprehension at the little Puritans who have put childhood behind them (125). And, indeed, Bheki's friend is placed by Coetzee into a life-denying context throughout the novel: his incomprehension, the refusal to listen and to learn will eventually lead to death.

Bheki is the first to die. What strikes Mrs Curren is that only when "he died he was a child again" (125, cf. 109). Mrs Curren weeps for dead Bheki as an example of a life sacrificed for questionable causes,

of the dashed hopes and chances of childhood, the broken line of biological succession (109). It is with this terrible example in mind that she later on tries again—and again in vain—to keep Bheki's friend from throwing his childhood away too.

Significantly, a black childhood is a time without games, for the racial confrontation is “not a game after all” (125), as Mrs Curren tries to demonstrate to Bheki's friend, but a war on children (144). In an ultimately futile attempt to dissuade Bheki's friend from throwing his life away, she uses her illness, cancer, as a means of persuasion. The boy appears to her as an immature man, or rather as a “poor child”: he wants to go home but does not know where it is (147).

Before he too dies at the hands of the police, Bheki's friend is likened (or rather contrasted) to Christopher Columbus. Instead of “holding [a] compass to his chest” like a talisman, awaiting his glory and power, he has a bomb in his hand (150-51). The image could be interpreted in two complementary ways: Bheki's friend is a new hero who is at the same time a non-hero—his life is not committed to exploration or geographical discovery but to battle and death. And Bheki's friend is a decoloniser, a dead repossessor of the country undoing the effects of Columbus's colonial enterprise. Mrs Curren conveys the boy's collective function through the use of food as a cultural metaphor: destined to be a garden boy in the old system, eating bread and jam for lunch at the back door, drinking out of a tin, he is now battling for all the insulted and injured, the trampled, the ridiculed, for all the garden boys of South Africa. A garden boy has been turned into a warrior, a child soldier, yet this is a questionable improvement which again confirms Coetzee's doubting the value of personal sacrifices for political causes. Mrs Curren's last appeal to the police is: “‘Wait!’ I said. ‘Don't do anything yet, he is just a child!’” (152)—a child at best or worst. The phrase “the garden boy” carries yet an additional significance: it is symptomatic of a whole South African mode of thought about black workers, conceived, paternistically, as children. Whereas, for instance, ‘the girl’ was used colloquially to refer to a female domestic worker, ‘the boy’ meant a gardener.

These terms are still current in some sectors of South African society even today.

The annulment of childhood is finally depicted in the form of a country and adults devouring their own children—an unnatural process that forestalls the future. In the sense of a political allegory, the country is seen as one whose politicians “are munching without cease, devouring lives” (28). The victims are fascinated by what is about to devour them (29). The political deaths of children in South Africa are associated analogously through reference to other eras and regions of political conflict, such as the Spanish Civil War, the Cuban Revolution or the Boer War:

Between the hours of eight and nine we assemble and they show themselves to us. A ritual manifestation, like the processions of hooded bishops during Franco's war. A thanatophany: showing us our death. *!Viva la muerte!* their cry, their threat. Death to the young. Death to life. Boars that devour their offspring. The Boar War. (29-30)

This decisive aspect of the annulment of childhood is increased in its effect through images which indicate the extension of the personal into the political: South Africa is described as a land of buried youth, hope and chances for the future, in need of resurrection; adults walk over buried black children (125-26).

The third perversion of the concept of childhood is inherent in the defunct and dysfunctional role of parents and the changed notions about education. The debate of these issues is further complicated because Coetzee emphasises generational as well as ethnic responsibility here.

Mrs Curren addresses these issues in conversations with Florence at the time when the troubles in the schools begin. She criticises the *laissez-faire* methods of education practised by the middle generation: carelessness is transferred from an inactive or irresponsible middle generation to an aggressive young one, which is fearless of nothing and has no respect at all, not even for life, i.e. is careless of itself and of others (48). In the novel the events happen in a reversed order: first

the children are careless of Vercueil (49), and then of themselves. The result is that children—uncared for or left to themselves by their parents—become “children of death” (49).

Florence denies the charges brought forth by her employer, but Mrs Curren reminds her of the degree the children’s violence has reached. Her domestic puts the blame for it on the whites. Coetzee’s further treatment of the issue underlines that there is a relentless war going on between generations and races in which the guilt is shifted to and fro, and violence perpetuates itself because of the lack of respect, responsibility and conflict management. At this point of the debate, the aspect of generational responsibility is emphasised (49-50).

Florence, however, is not to be accused of having turned her back on her children. She transfigures Mrs Curren’s “children of death” (49) into “children of iron,” insisting that: “These are good children, they are like iron, we are proud of them” (50). Mrs Curren, in contrast, loathes this dangerous, child-sacrificing ideology. She points out the militaristic aspects behind it, the death for wrong (i.e. patriotic) causes, and uses historical precedent (Spartan matrons) and the world’s ages theory (clay, earth, granite, iron, bronze) to make her point clear (50-51).

Step by step, Coetzee thus gives the debate a different turn, moving it away from the generational question towards its historical and ethnic implications: Mrs Curren comes to regard the present conflict within a greater line of historical continuity. She has to admit that the whites are indeed to blame for having sown the seeds of fanaticism on both sides. The historical precedent is seen in the military and religious, i.e. socio-political and cultural influence of Afrikanerdom, which brought fanaticism to the country (50-51).¹² In this reflection, anthropology and evolution (ages of the earth) are linked to generations and human ages, national history, and religious missions. Catholicism may have committed its crimes in Latin America, but in Africa Calvin redivivus—the spirit of Calvin and radical forms of Protestantism—have had their own devastating effects. This implies

that Calvinism obviously has had different ethnic emanations in white and in black Puritanism:

Is it truly a time out of time, heaved up out of the earth, misbegotten, monstrous? What, after all, gave birth to the age of iron but the age of granite? Did we not have Voortrekkers, generation after generation of Voortrekkers, grim-faced, tight-lipped Afrikaner children, marching, singing their patriotic hymns, saluting their flag, vowing to die for their fatherland? *Ons sal lewe, ons sal sterwe*. Are there not still white zealots preaching the old regime of discipline, work, obedience, self-sacrifice, a regime of death, to children some too young to tie their own shoelaces? What a nightmare from beginning to end! The spirit of Geneva triumphant in Africa. Calvin, black-robed, thin-blooded, forever cold, rubbing his hands in the afterworld, smiling his wintry smile. Calvin victorious, reborn in the dogmatists and witch-hunters of both armies. How fortunate you are to have put all this behind you! (50-51)

Lastly, Coetzee synthesises ethnic and generational factors of difference in the attitudes towards political changes—whether they should be brought about through violence or peacefully, from within the system—and as to the question of what is of higher importance: the personal or the political, the present or the future. Bheki's position of 'liberation before education,' which was socially current at the time,¹³ is juxtaposed with Mrs Curren's position leaving options in personal lives open for the future, despite adverse political circumstances (67-68).

In Coetzee's fictional discourse, education has less and less importance; black children behave perversely out of protest and neglect or sacrifice their vital interests. Immediate class and race motivations take priority over long-term educational and larger social concerns of the future. This symptom is accompanied by a simultaneous withdrawal and loss of adult authority, responsibility and influence. Parents become non-entities.

Across the divisions of race and gender the concepts of parent- and motherhood are thus called into question by Coetzee. He does this by portraying childhoods in the "age of iron" as characterised by separation, estrangement, and death. Black childhoods are character-

ised by parent absentees; they are either physically not present (in the case of Bheki's friend) or not interfering (Florence, Thabane). While black children are deserted by their parents, white parents are deserted by their children (Mrs Curren by her daughter). The traditional interpersonal relationships are shown to be disrupted and dissolved in white *and* black family structures. What is particularly abhorrent to Mrs Curren is the idea of a wasted and despised childhood filled with brutality as a consequence of neglected mother- or parenthood (50-51).

I would, however, not go so far as to fully agree with Dominic Head's largely negative interpretation of Coetzee's treatment of childhood in the novel. He interprets Mrs Curren's relinquishment of her own authority—through her childhood notions—as an atonement for her complicity with the dying colonial order. He denies her any moral authority in discussions about childhood, regards her development in the novel as a process of abnegation and renunciation, but understands the relinquishment of the innocence of childhood as Curren's political progression.¹⁴ Here, a few subtle, but important distinctions have to be made: certainly—and remarkably enough—Coetzee relinquishes childhood innocence. Yet Mrs Curren's notions of childhood do not result in a relinquishing of her own moral authority. Childhood is not 'sold' to make good for her historical guilt as a coloniser. Nor is childhood irrelevant in the age of iron—on the contrary. And by no means does the critical discussion of the status and position of childhood within colonial discourse lessen the personal significance of childhood for Coetzee as a writer and as a person, as he has demonstrated in his autobiographical work. It does not relinquish the simultaneous significant aspect of wonder and innocence in childhood.¹⁵

In conclusion, it can be stated that the elements of textual surprise in Coetzee's rendering of the concept of childhood stem from diverse factors. He fills the conventional assumptions with new, unusual or more critical meanings, modifies them in terms of history, race and gender, and juxtaposes them with perversions of childhood, such as

the denial of procreation, the annulment of black childhood, and defunct or dysfunctional parent- and motherhood.

Perversions of Old Age

Coetzee starts with conventional connotations of old age, exemplified mainly by Mrs Curren. The writer shows old age to be concerned with retrospective views accompanied by a number of irrational wishes: for a reversal of the effects of time (for becoming young and beautiful again), for a return of the old secure and peaceful times, a renewal of the happy conditions of childhood, for having prospects in life or enjoying the former close daughter-mother relationship (55, 57, 139). In old age, the moments when one experiences the feeling of being alive—as in childhood—are supposedly rare. Childhood recollections reveal this fact all too clearly and are therefore often bitter-sweet recollections of youth (cf. Mrs Curren's recollection of going downhill on a bicycle, 16). Childhood and youth, contrasted with old age, come to stand for the possibilities once offered in life.

Orderliness and discipline are singled out by Coetzee as further conventional connotations of old age—at least in Mrs Curren's generation, which has been brought up with a firm sense of mutual duties and responsibilities. Even under the conditions of illness and political terror, Mrs Curren finds it impossible to part with these principles: she commissions Vercueil to bring her garden back under control though she is also aware of other pressing concerns (21).

Highly prominent (negative) aspects of old age are physical decline and bodily deformation. An old body is shown to betray an old person, refusing to do its physical duty. It becomes a burden, defunct; especially the female body because it loses its capacity to nourish. Coetzee interprets the holistic concept of a person as a kind of contract which can no longer be fulfilled in old age and illness when the physical and the mental diverge. For him there is no such thing as healthy dying. Being alienated from one's body is equated with being

weaned from it. It is a reversal of the process of feeding a child (12-13). Characteristically, Coetzee extends the refusal of nourishment to animals: the cats are fed by Mrs Curren, but they refuse to eat (12).

Coetzee represents the old body as an ugly body. In a way that is slightly disturbing, he has the narrator, Mrs Curren, constantly examine herself, noticing her effects on others (cf. 180, 152, 156), especially other people's responses to her appalling physical state (152, 155, 156). These passages have a strong somatic component to them, but eventually they may acquire an almost pornographic dimension, as in the following quote. The description of the narrator's own appearance as almost naked is not fully scrutinised, but it definitely goes beyond a simple statement along the lines that Mrs Curren's clothes were soaking wet. The additional mention of a male gaze by a young spectator of the scene gives the passage at least a voyeuristic touch:

Under the eye of a boy in an olive rain cape I got out of the car, so cold in my wet clothes that I might as well have been naked. (105)

The struggle of old people with illness and (fear of) death is accentuated throughout the novel (10, 26). It often results in a craving for love and communication. Life means to touch and be touched, and death to do so no more (73, 74); the longing for a touch in moments of frustration over the approach of death has an almost seductive quality. In Coetzee's rendering of that impulse, he associates religion, prostitution, and eventually paedophilia. Yet more oddly, the wording of the following quote seems to suggest male desire in a female narrator constructed by a male writer (a practice which differs from Coetzee's procedure in other novels or in his autobiographical work):

When those nurses passed us a little while ago I was on the point of getting out of the car and giving up, surrendering to the hospital again, letting myself be undressed and put to bed and ministered to by their hands. It is their hands above all that I find myself craving. The touch of hands. Why else do we hire them, these girls, these children, if not to touch, to stroke, in that brisk way of theirs, flesh that has grown old and unlovable? Why do we give

them lamps and call them angels? Because they come [...] But also because they put out a hand to renew a touch that has been broken. (73-74)

As with the concept of childhood, Coetzee gradually also enriches the concept of old age through concrete historical, political and ethnic reference: he presents Mrs Curren as an individual old person who allows herself to get involved in the political conflict and take sides in it. The focus is still on old age, but Coetzee treats issues of history and ethnicity as equally important or firmly interlinked with the concept of old age. In his attempt to represent the current apartheid realities, he employs old age as an object of disrespect on the part of the young and middle generations: Mrs Curren has a difficult time explaining to Bheki and his friend that it is not acceptable to sleep in her garage without asking for her permission. In the episode containing the boys' bicycle accident, she suffers another example of disrespectful treatment at the hands of the police. This politically determined connotation of disrespectfulness is picked up in the description of a second encounter with military authorities after the episode in the hall on the Cape Flats. Old age committed to political justice is made to appear as silly or mad (105). Later Thabane speaks to Mrs Curren like a teacher; she feels like a child in his presence (98).

Along with old age (and especially old age and illness) goes the fear of being regarded or found out as incapable of coping. Mrs Curren is taught such lessons by Florence, Vercueil and Thabane. From a certain point in time, she can no longer manage her household. She depends on her domestic, Florence. Again Coetzee places the personal problem within a concrete historical, social and ethnic context and employs a synecdoche: he uses the breakdown of the conventional relationship between mistress and servant to reflect changes in the social and ethnic order of South Africa at large, i.e. he renders the personal relationship as symptomatic of larger political and societal concerns. The identities of mistress and servant are shifted; their new relationship is based on a reversal of power. Soon Florence is indispensable in all essential things in life and newly empowered. Her superiority (36, 38, 41, 54, 128) stems from two sources: a decrease in her mistress's

domestic authority due to her old age and illness and, additionally, her employer's growing awareness of her own long, silent compliance with the existing regime and the subsequent feelings of guilt and shame.

Finally, there is the concern of old age about the last things in life: wills, bequests, various arrangements, and the afterlife. Coetzee depicts moments of despair, of panic about the notion of non-existence, accompanied by reflections on the nature of the afterlife—will it be better than the first life on earth? (13). Afterlife has in fact various dimensions for Mrs Curren. It is associated with memories, visions, and some mystery. The narrator anticipates it either with realism, worries or humour. A romantic-escapist notion is that of heaven as a hotel lobby. It is a carefree zone (cf. above; with biological succession secured), a posh waiting room or antechamber filled with music and memories, devoid of pain and earthly sorrows (25).

Surprisingly enough, however, Coetzee contextualises even the afterlife in historical, political and ethnic terms.

When Mrs Curren, in a talk to Vercueil, reflects on possible rules and allowances in afterlife, a more worried notion comes to the surface. It is an afterlife without privacy and individuality; people are watched over, there is no possibility to keep secrets (188). This frightening notion of afterlife has Orwellian qualities of a continuous supervision that have been sketched on the basis of the social reality of current South Africa.

The South Africa of the past and the present determines Mrs Curren's notions of afterlife. She nostalgically recalls sleepy weekends spent by the white middle classes of South Africa in the past. This childhood recollection is shaped into a reflection of historical and political awareness now; she comes to grasp the unique and historically irretrievable nature of this (family) experience. Surprisingly, Coetzee does not leave it at that, but creates an unusual family situation: the white woman who is deprived of her own child because her daughter lives in exile acquires a new family. This is composed of people with ethnic backgrounds other than her own and includes the

non-white, non-privileged classes: when Mrs Curren is waiting in her car in the parking lot at Groote Schuur, she is accompanied by Vercueil, Bheki and Florence (69). Furthermore, in a second childhood recollection of a sleepy South Africa, which is juxtaposed with the new "landscape of violence" (92), Mrs Curren expresses her doubts about a peaceful continuation of life in afterlife because of the whites' detestable behaviour in the country. The fear of being denied the entrance to paradise is now reinterpreted in terms of South African history and colonialism:

Will we at least be allowed our Nirwana, we children of that bygone age? I doubt it. If justice reigns at all, we will find ourselves barred at the first threshold of the underworld. (92)

Mrs Curren's development in the latter part of the novel is remarkable as she becomes committed to a political cause and hence much more active than the middle generation, which—by contrast—remains surprisingly inactive. A telling image for this activity in old age is that of Mrs Curren's car. The old car, still allowing her to coast downhill, is a remnant from a world of reliability. Mrs Curren is shown to belong to that old world, not simply because of her age but because this world offered options for activity. Paradoxically, she is resisting change not because of backwardness, but because of a greater flexibility inherited from that past world. She refuses to be made helpless by the times, or by technology, and wants to hold options open for the future. Therefore Mrs Curren is not a fossil from the past, but active, in contrast to the representatives both of the middle and the young generation (72). They are the fossils, not fit for the future.

The middle generation (Florence, Thabane, Vercueil) is inert. It is the one that refuses to take up responsibility or watches with pride as the young generation gets killed in the conflicts. Whereas Mrs Curren questions the justifiability of personal sacrifices for a political cause, Thabane, the schoolteacher, who left his profession in times of trouble and became a shoe-seller (100), justifies the new political role and function of black children (as does Florence). He confuses a political

problem with a generational one and praises the young generation for its comradeship (149-50).

Florence, represents a model of motherhood different from Mrs Curren's. On the private level, Mrs Curren respects Florence's resoluteness, though she clearly recognises that this is a quality she would probably not enjoy herself if she were her daughter (36). On the political level, the two women's notions of mother- or parenthood clash. Whereas Florence—with her children at home—comes to represent absent, passive, or irresponsible motherhood,¹⁶ Mrs Curren—with her daughter in exile—represents active surrogate motherhood, for other people or their children (Vercueil, Florence, her children, Bheki and Bheki's friend). She assumes new educational and political responsibility despite her illness and frustration—thus compensating for a motherhood which is defunct and acting as a deputy.

Moreover, the reader perceives, with surprise, various processes of adoption and learning and eventually little acts of protest, resistance, and subversion in Mrs Curren, who seems not to have been a very politically-minded person before. Coetzee's depiction of old age in "the age of iron" highlights the narrator's newly won political insights and newly developed political attitudes. Personal, historical, political, and ethnic considerations are interlocked. Thus, Mrs Curren copes with the conflicting claims of the old and new inhabitants of her home: the new inhabitants trigger off new insights into her relationship with her daughter, essential aspects of motherhood, and the poignancy of the present political situation.

She adopts Vercueil as her surrogate daughter (to some extent also as her surrogate mother) and trusts the derelict with his mission as the decisive tool and medium of communication between mother and daughter—although the fulfilment of his function is thwarted because the novel ends without Mrs Curren's letter reaching her daughter. It is only through Vercueil that Mrs Curren fully understands the personal and the political situation she is in. Coetzee fashions her situation into a complex one with personal, social, historical, political, ethnic and

gender components. He surprises the reader by giving the exile situation, which is so symptomatic in the novel, a wholly unusual interpretation: for him it is not Mrs Curren's daughter who is the true exile, but Mrs Curren, who holds out in South Africa in times of national disaster and international isolation (75, 76).

Florence becomes her second ambivalent daughter surrogate. She gains power over her employer, but she also becomes a silent, imaginary addressee of panicky emotions that Mrs Curren would otherwise have unloaded on her daughter (40). Significantly enough, the black domestic acts as her white employer's political and social conscience. Florence and her family increase Mrs Curren's awareness of the present political conditions as well as of the nature of the political crime and the historical guilt of the whites.

Florence herself is a living model of black South Africa: confronted with Florence and her needs and problems, Mrs Curren is divided between pressing personal and political concerns—her illness and the political fate of the country. Both are associated in the simile of the smoldering country and her burning body (39). To underline her identification with black issues, Mrs Curren evokes a parallel to Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*. She identifies with the outsider position of Shylock the Jew to point out that blacks *and* whites are exposed to similar trials (40).

Through Florence and her family—husband, children, and relatives—Mrs Curren is related to the harsh realities and the physicality of black life, for instance in factories and schools. South Africa becomes concrete and visible for Mrs Curren through the domestic and social life of the blacks. The method Coetzee employs here is to let material or physical objects relating to food and meals, sexuality, procreation, politics, and ethnicity (41-44) signify socio-cultural relationships. The black material culture is shown to be part of these relationships: blacks work for the daily welfare of whites (44).

In the latter part of her life, the potential for identification with the black cause grows in Mrs Curren. She begins to feel empathy for Bheki's friend, who at first is only a touchstone in the newly com-

posed household challenging the status of both Mrs Curren and Vercueil. From being an unwanted and unloved son, Bheki's friend is transformed into a third child surrogate. Mrs Curren uses her cancer as a political metaphor for shame and self-loathing (145) to shake the child into awareness of the consequences of his deeds. Later the "cancer of the heart" is used in a similar way in her political resistance against the police (155).

In old age, Mrs Curren comes to display rare qualities of survival and perseverance. She exhibits an astonishing potential for resistance in personal and in political terms—to the seeming fatalism and the inevitabilities of old age and to the oppressive regime. She struggles against being dispossessed of her own house, by her body, by other (young and middle-aged) people and her country at large. She defies old age, illness, dependence, death, and personal and political disempowerment. Eventually, Mrs Curren comes to fight political arbitrariness and the regime in power. She may be old and ill, but she is a critical observer of the regime as it presents itself through the media, such as TV (9, 10, 28, 29), radio (23) and the newspapers. Dying as she is, she does not refrain from enlightening Vercueil with her critical opinions about the deceptive and illusionary practice of the media in South Africa to correct his naïve views.

In the end, she turns out not to be an "ineffectual bird." Rather, she takes action and commits little acts of political subversion: she helps when the bicycle accident with the boys happens; she lays a charge against the two policemen; she confronts the police with moral exhortations; she searches for Bheki; she behaves bravely on the Cape Flats (89-107). Furthermore, as she confides to Vercueil, she thinks of killing herself in order to end this state of shame (86, 113) and set a signal. Later, however, Mrs Curren admits that "there was always something false" about this heroic impulse. Significantly, it is Florence who is to be a judge on the seriousness of her death (141-42).

Mrs Curren's most impressive deed in terms of old-age protest, resistance against disempowerment, and political subversion happens during the seizure of her house by the police, to which Bheki's friend

has resorted with a weapon. The wording of the passage suggests a similar affection for Bheki's friend shortly before his death as that she has always felt for her own daughter. This is a new quality in their relationship (152). After Bheki's friend has been killed, she insists on accompanying him in the same ambulance—a spectacular form of resistance, as touching as it is doomed to futility. When the police deny her this, she relinquishes her home.

A very striking feature is Coetzee's instrumentalisation of the concepts of "history," "blood" and "race" in this context. The idea of an historically obsolete country is foremost in the novel. Through her education and profession, Mrs Curren has an acute sense of history. Her situation is one in which she tries to keep her self-respect in the face of a self-confident, satiated country that has long outlived the culmination of its colonial power. She feels that life under the conditions of this regime is humiliation, a disgrace, and that it cannot last. Mrs Curren perceives South Africa as an obsolete, die-hard, illegitimate, parasitic, self-perpetuating system that has produced a stupefied country. Coetzee adopts a number of striking images to illustrate this awkward condition. For example, the phrase "a locust horde, a plague of black locusts infesting the country, munching without cease, devouring lives" (28-29) mixes issues of politics, power, food and eating.

Many more images are linked with history and blend the personal and the political: e.g. the image of the desolate house, which suggests a dissolving body, giving the passage an additional political meaning. Mrs Cullen feels that even her house is doomed to death because it was built on doubtful or dishonest historical foundations—erected by convicts and without a human past (14-15). Furthermore, the sight of the face of a woman is associated with a reversal of evolution (the scales thickening on the eyes) and interpreted as a metaphor for backward evolution in South Africa (127). Elsewhere, obsolete South Africa is likened to a sinking ship, a country of closed borders, cut off from the international community (22, 23). The references to the powerful force of the cultural boycott in operation then are actually,

and not just fictionally true. Another telling image links the ideas of an historically obsolete South Africa *and* futile old age: South Africa is seen as a prison or cage for animals with the inhabitants safely locked up by their own wish, connected with their surroundings only through wires: the technology (telephone, TV, radio) is perfect, but the spirit of freedom and autonomy is gone. The inhabitant, Mrs Curren, is called “some wingless, ineffectual bird. A dodo: the last of the dodos, old, past egg-laying” (28).

Last but not least, in Mrs Curren’s letters to her daughter, where she voices her just fury and anger about the prevailing political conditions, the dimension of private writing is expanded through historical reference: Mrs Curren feels entitled to political protest precisely because she has witnessed the traumatic event in which Florence’s son Bheki has been killed. She passes her own mission as a historical and emotional witness on to her daughter as an absent, non-affected, physically and geographically distanced recipient. Her task will be to filter things and find truth (103, 104). All in all, Mrs Curren’s attitude towards her own white race and its historically wrong colonial mission in South Africa is one of deep distrust and self-contempt (79-80).

This is related to the issue of “blood,” which has historic reference in the racial politics of South Africa and refers both to the lives of individuals in the present, and the “race” it defines over a number of generations. Mrs Curren characterises South Africa as a country that drinks the blood of animals and people, and that is never satiated. Gradually she becomes fully aware of the national disaster of the literal (i.e. physical and social), but also moral and mental disintegration of South Africa. The narrative techniques of the novel anticipate the massacre of the black boys by the police through powerful images of a whole hierarchy of deaths in flora and fauna and in people: first the rotten fruits and dying animals (rabbits and chicken, 20, 41-42), then the dying of people, especially black children, finally the death of Mrs Curren.

Coetzee creates a whole line of association through blood: the scarlet and black blood of Bheki's friend, the blood generally of whites and blacks, the daughter's menstrual blood in the U.S., Mrs Curren's menstruation and menopause, her bloodless illness of cancer (63-64). The little amount of blood lost by Mrs Curren's daughter in a childhood accident (she stayed in the same hospital as later Bheki's friend) in comparison to the huge amounts of blood spilt by blacks is critically assessed as irrelevant (62-63). The blood connection evoked is a device constructed by Coetzee to demonstrate the historical guilt of the whites. Coetzee uses the occasion for further comments on the special quality of black blood (cf. also 124). Blood is seen as something special and precious that needs to be preserved; it is a mark of individualism, yet at the same time a connecting human factor and a physiological constant across the spectre of races. The political question formulated here is: will there be a common future for blacks and whites together, or will the races remain segregated by blood? This is expressed through a nature metaphor: will the South Africa of the future be a Baikal Sea (the black waters and white shores representing a restored mankind) or another Karoo (the barbed wire signifying a segregated mankind)? (63-64).

In conclusion, it should be stressed that while Coetzee does not spare the reader the appalling details of physical decay, he shows old age to be superior to youth and middle age when it comes to political activity. By combining the personal resistance to illness and death with political resistance, the writer treats issues of history and ethnicity as equally important or firmly interlinked with the concept of old age.

Reversals of the Mutual Positions of Childhood and Old Age or Adulthood

Age of Iron presents the reader with surprising, even alarming reversals of the conventional positions of childhood and old age or adulthood across the divisions of race.

The first reversal can be seen in adults who are in need of being mothered and comforted like children and in children who take up the role of care-takers of adults (5, 6, 20, 54-55, 73, 127). Mrs Curren signals several times that she wants to be comforted and taken care of by Vercueil, who thus becomes some sort of mother substitute for her. Actually, anybody could step in and provide that consolation for a 'child' (cf. above, the role of Florence). There are passages, however, where Coetzee gives this reversal of the relationship and responsibilities of child and parent a negative edge: Mrs Curren and her daughter are both like iron. The daughter refuses to come back to South Africa before the political conditions have changed, and the mother does not ask her to come before her death (75) though she painfully misses her. Coetzee describes an adult craving for a child's love as a reversal of the natural order of things and assesses it as something bordering on paedophilia.

"Because that is something one should never ask of a child," I went on: "to enfold one, comfort one, save one. The comfort, the love should flow forward, not backward. That is a rule, another of the iron rules. When an old person begins to plead for love everything turns squalid. Like a parent trying to creep into bed with a child: unnatural." (73)

The second reversal is that children take over or gain authority and exert power over adults. They start to instruct and direct the elderly and middle-aged in a newly gained feeling of self-importance, behave disrespectfully towards their elders, adopt threatening forms of behaviour, become cruel monsters and raise their hands to their elders. They also assume 'unnatural' roles, but in a different sense. This happens across the spectre of skin colours. Mrs Curren's responses to such a kind of behaviour alternate between bowing to her fate and protesting in personal and political terms. The attempts by the black children in Mrs Curren's home to disempower her and Vercueil are prominent: after the arrival of Bheki's friend, the boy at once teaches Vercueil, the earlier arrival, a lesson about alcohol (45). Coetzee broadens the incident into one of political significance by

comparing the self-important child to uninvited political leaders, "the new guardians of the people" (45). Florence checks her son's approval all the time (66), thus attesting to the undue authority of children exercised over adults.

When Mrs Curren addresses Florence on the question of responsible parenthood, she refers to the violence in the townships the year before and especially the cruelty exercised by children, hitherto unheard of. Florence had seen a woman on fire: when she screamed for help, the children laughed and threw more petrol on her (49).

In a later scene, Mrs Curren tries to find her way back to the Cape Flats. It is a child, a "little boy wearing a balaclava cap too large for him" (92), ten years old at most, who leads the way in a self-assured manner. He is characterised as a "child of the times, at home in this landscape of violence" (92). The boy acts as a guide to Mrs Curren and Thabane (94) in this "looming world of rage and violence" (96), which sharply contrasts with Mrs Curren's own protected childhood in the sleepy South Africa of the past. On her return to her car from the Cape Flats, she finds that a rock has been thrown through the windscreen. The rock becomes a symbol of the disempowerment of adults by children: "Big as a child's head, mute, it lay on the seat amid a scattering of glass as if it now owned the car" (104).

After the police have seized her house and killed Bheki's friend, Mrs Curren leaves it and wanders off. In Buitenkant Street, she is attacked by three boys only ten years old and younger. What they want from her—her gold teeth—is at first incomprehensible to her, but they show no mercy (161). Coetzee surprises the reader again by creating a political analogy that underpins the extreme ambivalence of child behaviour: the child-scavengers are about the same age as the children in the Soweto school strike of 1976 (156, 157).

On a more abstract level, Coetzee entwines the personal and the political. He creates the image of South Africa as an old country in the process of being repossessed by new children. Significantly, the passage follows one expressing satisfaction about the security of biological succession in old age, about leaving the house to one's

children. But now it is the derelict who is the heir to the lady's home, and black children are the heirs to the country. This unexpected effect of colonialism is described through the interface of land, house, and children. The coloniser is likened to a rapist, and the new heirs are the offspring of this act. Again, there is a child-sex nexus employed:

I think of those abandoned farmhouses I drove past in the Karoo and on the west coast whose owners decamped to the cities years ago, leaving fronts boarded up, gates locked. Now washing flaps on the line, smoke comes from the chimney, children play outside the back door, waving to passing cars. A land in the process of being repossessed, its heirs quietly announcing themselves. A land taken by force, used, despoiled, spoiled, abandoned in its barren late years. Loved, too, perhaps, by its ravishers, but loved only in the bloomtime of its youth, and therefore, in the verdict of history, not loved enough. (25-26)

In a food-and-eating metaphor, both the body and the country are seen as being eaten by ravenous children (cf. the boys who are rapacious as sharks, 7). Coetzee uses the cancer image as an inversion of pregnancy and motherhood. A healthy body and a natural process are thus turned into something inhumane, unnatural, and destructible. Furthermore, Coetzee brings in Mrs Curren's care of a wounded child (Bheki) to support the idea of motherhood parodying itself and, by some hints at paedophilia, possibly indicating the nature of a crime of adult against child or coloniser against colonised:

There is something about it that does not bear thinking of. To have fallen pregnant with these growths, these cold, obscene swellings; to have carried and carried this brood beyond any natural term, unable to bear them, unable to sate their hunger: children inside me eating more every day, not growing but bloating, toothed, clawed, forever cold and ravenous. Dry, dry: to feel them turning at night in my dry body, not stretching and kicking as a human child does but changing their angle, finding a new place to gnaw. Like insect eggs laid in the body of a host, now grown to grubs and implacably eating their host away. My eggs, grown within me. How terrible when motherhood reaches a point of parodying itself! A crone crouched over a boy, her hands sticky with his blood: a vile image, as it comes up in me now. (64)

Elsewhere this interpretation of cancer as a perverted pregnancy (with pregnancy being anomalous in an elderly woman anyway) is

reinforced. In the end, cancer, or the unwanted child, will eat Mrs Curren up:

[...] I have a child inside that I cannot give birth to. Cannot because it will not be born. Because it cannot live outside me. So it is my prisoner or I am its prisoner. It beats on the gate but it cannot leave. [...] My daughter is my first child. She is my life. This is the second one, the afterbirth, the unwanted. (82-83)

After Mrs Curren has looked at the children's corpses on the Cape Flats, she admits to Thabane to being moved. Coetzee demonstrates her internalisation of the conflict by giving the metaphor of a children's war a literal meaning. Mrs Curren applies it to herself and even locates it within her own body: this war lives inside her now and she lives inside it (103).

The illness in the body and the country imply that body and country consume themselves destructively and perversely. South Africa is presented as a country that has outlived itself, is pregnant with cancer, but is ready for a new start out of the ruins of the past:

Monstrous growths, misbirths: a sign that one is beyond one's term. This country too: time for fire, time for an end, time for what grows out of ash to grow. (65)

Conclusion

In *Age of Iron*, J. M. Coetzee surprises the reader with highly ambivalent, disconcerting and even alarming notions about childhood and old age. Conventional characteristics are modified by the writer in terms of history, race and gender. General notions as well as individual and unique stances are made more poignant through political reference. In other words, Coetzee exemplifies notions of childhood and old age through the depiction of the social realities in the State of Emergency, at the time at its height, or, vice versa, uses these concrete examples to pinpoint the perversions of childhood and old age in the colonial discourse. In Coetzee's rendering, the ages of life cease to be

clearly defined stages of *human* development. Rather, they turn out to be precarious states of existence exemplifying what has gone amiss in society at large. Childhood and old age function as synecdoches for apartheid South Africa at its most extreme.

Childhood is thus presented as wasted, manipulated, sacrificed, perverted or annulled. It is no longer a time or state of paradise. Moreover, Coetzee undermines and eventually rejects any notion of innocence. He does so by juxtaposing the seemingly eternal, peaceful childhood of the white colonial South Africa of the past with the non-existent black and the parasitic white childhoods of the present. Black childhoods are more specifically characterised by non-protection, adult manipulation, victimisation, terror, and dubious personal sacrifices for political causes. To be or to have a black male child implies a precarious future, more likely no future at all, futility instead of fertility, procreation perverted and annulled. The consequence of the lack of adult care and responsibility and incapability of learning in children is death.

Characteristically, the personal and the political are constantly interlocked in these presentations. The promise for the future ideally represented by procreation, biological succession, and generational bonds is no longer valid because of the essential rupture in the parent-child relationships as well as absent, passive or irresponsible parenthood, and a power shift from adults to children. This relinquishing of reciprocity in the generational relationships affects society at large; the future of the country is gloomy as well. Because of the self-destructive war of South Africa against its children, there is no nurturing of a future generation. Consequently, Coetzee has no promising prospects for the future to offer for whites, non-whites or blacks. Significantly, the only offspring Curren and Vercueil leave is a text.¹⁷ The question of responsibility—white colonial guilt or black irresponsibility/aggressivity, the latter perhaps a response to the first—is assigned generational *and* ethnic explanations.

As a consequence, the status of the child is a dubious, ambivalent and critical one: children are manipulated and victimised, but they

also take on a caring role and assert power over adults. They are only children by appearance. Drawn into adult conflict, they face and take up adult tasks, but have no chance of surviving. Childhood becomes an aggressive political metaphor: both a country devouring its own children and a country eaten by its children are unnatural processes that forestall the future.

In his rendering of old age, Coetzee stretches the limits of what can be said about its physical and mental realities. But he also fuses it with historical, political, and ethnic issues that expand the concept of old age beyond the personal, the individual, and the unique. As he sees it, old age is betrayed as well. The voices of the old and the sick rarely get a hearing. The old, however, may be more active than the young and middle-aged, though they are at the same time in need of being mothered and comforted.

By contrast, middle age in *Age of Iron* is not to be trusted; its representatives are shown to be incapable of shaping society constructively. Middle age is associated with a lack of insight or historical and political conscience, inertia, a lack of decision and responsibility, a waste of life and human resources, and blind fanaticism. Old Mrs Curren comes to exhibit a greater potential for resistance, more political vigour and social responsibility than all the representatives of middle age in the novel.

Traditional generational relationships are dissolved in a process cutting across the divisions of race. The status of the old is challenged by the aspirations of the young, i.e. the white and the old are in the process of being replaced by the black or non-white and the young—in personal as well as political terms. Coetzee thus presents an entanglement of issues of age, generation, parenthood, ethnicity, gender, and politics.

The ideological effects or purposes of the perversions and reversals of childhood and old age are to free them of their conventional, unreflected or innocent connotations. These are loaded by Coetzee with new and surprising meanings that critically reflect the colonial history of South Africa. Discourse and counter-discourse are thus

firmly entwined. The discussion of childhood and old age is surprisingly, but very consistently, shaped into a vehicle for the writer to come to terms with colonialism: its past wrongs, its destabilising force at present (at the time of publication), and the ambivalent positions of coloniser and colonised. Coetzee unmasks colonialism at the same time as he unmasks illusionary concepts of childhood and old age.

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NOTES

¹Cf. my essay "Mr. Vercueil and His Dog: Shifting Identities in J. M. Coetzee's *Age of Iron*," *Literatur und Lebenskunst: Festschrift für Gerd Rohmann zum 65. Geburtstag*, ed. Eva Oppermann (Kassel: Kassel UP, 2006) 184-205. Some of its ideas have been included in the present paper.

²The term 'childhood' is understood here in the broader sense and includes adolescence.

³As a result, insights have emerged into the intersection of childhood and socio-cultural and gender practice, of the workings of language and ideology. Cf. Jacqueline Rose, *The Case of Peter Pan or The Impossibility of Children's Fiction* (1984; London: Macmillan, 1994); Karín Lesnik-Oberstein, *Children's Literature: Criticism and the Fictional Child* (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1994); Valerie Sanders, ed., *Records of Girlhood: An Anthology of Nineteenth-Century Women's Childhoods* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000); Charles Sarland, "Ideology," *International Companion Encyclopedia of Children's Literature*, ed. Peter Hunt (London: Routledge, 1996), 41-57; John Stephens, "Linguistics and Stylistics," *Companion Encyclopedia* 58-70.

⁴Cf. Christa Jansohn, *Old Age and Ageing in British and American Culture and Literature* (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2004).

⁵The metaphorical level of the text exemplifies the intersection of the personal and the political in the categories of person, body, house, and country—categories which are associated through personification. See, e.g., mad person and mad country (105); burning child, woman, body, house, burning/smoldering country (39, 49, 110, 186); children of iron and age of iron (50); heir(s) to a person, a house, and a country (5, 25, 26, 47); a body, a house, and a country in dissolution (14, 15); a smelly person and a smelly country (70); marriage to a person and a country (70); blood in a body, a person, and in a country (5, 29, 62, 63, 64, 65, 110, 124); an ugly/ill body or person and country; children/people, a body, a country being eaten or devoured (7, 12, 28, 29, 30, 64, 65); dying fruits and animals, dying children/people, and a dying country (20, 41, 42, 65). All references and quotations are taken from J. M. Coetzee, *Age of Iron* (1990; New York: Penguin Books, 1998).

⁶Mrs Curren wishes her daughter to "Come and bury your head in my lap as a child does [...]" (139).

⁷Mrs Curren dreams of being trapped in a crowd: "I hit back, but my arms were a child's arms: *foo, foo* went my blows, like puffs of air" (51).

⁸Vercueil looks with "childish hurt" (116) when his attempts at assisting Mrs Curren in her suicidal plans are not appreciated enough by her. Mrs Curren knows that it is "childish [...] to point fingers and blame others" (117). When Bheki died "he was a child again. The mask must have dropped in sheer childish surprise when it broke upon him in that last instant that the stone-throwing and shooting was not a game after all" (125). Mrs Curren is haunted by Bheki's "look of childish puzzlement with which he had met his death" (109).

⁹Vercueil, as Mrs Curren tells him, wastes his life like a child does. He does not work to earn a living (8), but will have to do so in a South Africa of the future (72).

¹⁰Mrs Curren senses: "I lose my sense of shame, become shameless as a child" (119). For her, Vercueil is "[l]ike those children on Mill Street: no decency in him" (197).

¹¹When the police seize Mrs Curren's house and she insists on not leaving her home to support Bheki's friend, the police "paid my words no more attention than they would a child's" (155).

¹²For more background information on the Afrikaans language, Afrikanerdom, the Afrikaner history, myth, heritage, colonialism and nationalism, see the respective passages in Michael Atwell, *South Africa: Background to the Crisis* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1986); Jörg Fisch, *Geschichte Südafrikas* (München: dtv, 1990); Martin Pabst, *Südafrika* (München: C. H. Beck, 1997); Leonard Thompson, *A History of South Africa* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1990); Dieter Mahncke, *Konflikt in Südafrika: Die politische Problematik Südafrikas in ihren innen- und außenpolitischen Dimensionen* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1989); Ampie Coetzee, "South African Literary History—The Black and the White Perspective," *Proceedings of the Anglistentag 1995 Greifswald*, ed. Jürgen Klein and Dirk Vanderbeke (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1996) 335; Dominic Head, *J. M. Coetzee* (Cambridge: CUP, 1997) 6, 7, 17, 133, 135; Susan VanZanten Gallagher, *A Story of South Africa: J. M. Coetzee's Fiction in Context* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1991) 28-31, 37-41.

¹³The Soweto School Strike had been a consequence of the government enforcing Afrikaans upon blacks in secondary education. For more detailed reference to the history of South Africa (especially the Soweto uprising of 1976, the 1985 student-led educational boycotts, the Cape Town unrest of 1986 and the wave of nationwide unrest in the mid-1980s, the respective educational issues involved and the government's efforts to control the media etc.), see: Michael Atwell chs. 7-9; Mahncke ch. 2; Fisch 336-38, 344; Thompson ch. 6; Pabst ch. 6; Albrecht Hagemann, *Kleine Geschichte Südafrikas* (2001; München: C. H. Beck, 2003) ch. 9 ff.; David Atwell, *J. M. Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing* (Berkeley: U of California P; Cape Town: David Philip, 1993) 120; Head 131-33; VanZanten

Gallagher 2, 194-96, and Sue Kossew, *Pen and Power: A Post-Colonial Reading of J. M. Coetzee and André Brink* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1996) 179, 190.

¹⁴Cf. Head 130, 134-36, 139-41 (with special references to the ox wagon episode, the debate about comradeship vs. the mystique of death, the doll folk metaphor or doll motif, the episode of the scavenging children, the family album episode). Elsewhere he speaks of the irrelevance of childhood in the age of iron.

¹⁵J. M. Coetzee, *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews*, ed. David Attwell (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1992) 29.

¹⁶There is no indication in the text that she becomes politically active, e.g. in an institution such as the Detainees Parents Support Committee. Cf. VanZanten Gallagher 195-96.

¹⁷Cf. VanZanten Gallagher 209.

On Cheney on Spenser's Ariosto*

LAWRENCE F. RHU

Calling Spenser's reprises of Ariosto "parody" initially strikes me as wrongheaded. But it is striking nonetheless, and that is not a bad way to capture a reader's attention. It may not exactly fit the rhetorician's terminology for an apt strategy in opening a discourse, *captatio benevolentiae*, because it arouses resistance in a mind sometimes still disposed to think of Edmund Spenser, in Milton's phrase, as "our sage and serious poet," or as a Puritan poet, as he is often described nowadays.¹ Moreover, from this early modern English perspective, Ariosto seems, at best, a foolish dreamer, as Milton (*Paradise Lost* 3.459) characterizes him in a dismissive allusion to Astolfo's lunar escapade in *Orlando Furioso*. He is hardly a visionary in the clearly serious ways that his major English inheritors can be fairly described as such. So, what sympathy could they possibly have with him?

Similarly, both to recall Spenser's alleged ambition to 'overgo' Ariosto and to consider the novain that Spenser created as the basic stanza form for *The Faerie Queene* a primary means of achieving such a goal seem like ruminations on a fool's errand. Given the highly inflected nature of Latin, with its four basic conjugations of verbs and five basic declensions of nouns, Italian became a vernacular language rich in potential rhymes. Like Dante's linked tercets, Ariosto's octaves exploit structural possibilities native to the grain of the literary resources he stood in the way of inheriting. By contrast, Spenserian novains, like Spenserian sonnets (indeed, like English sonnets in general), demonstrate the relative poverty of English in this regard. The courtiers in

*Reference: Donald Cheney, "Spenser's Parody," *Connotations* 12.1 (2002/2003): 1-13.

For the original article as well as all contributions to this debate, please check the Connotations website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debrhu01513.htm>>.

Urbino, whose *sprezzatura* Castiglione evokes and celebrates in *Il libro del cortegiano*, shunned sonneteering as a “game” (even in Italian), lest they be seen to sweat over the elegant accomplishments they meant to display nonchalantly. Elizabethan poets, however, were loath to acknowledge, let alone accept, this structural limitation of their language, as both Spenser’s practice and Sidney’s extravagant claims about the capacity for rhyme in English indicate.² National pride, however, does not alter the facts of this matter. Only poetic achievement can do that, by offsetting the conditions for writing such poetry in English with the remarkable performances that such aspiring minds as Spenser and Sidney managed to execute in *The Faerie Queene* and *Astrophil and Stella* respectively.

Likewise, once Donald Cheney engages our attention, the strength of his argument and the subtlety of his readings make persuasive sense; and the stakes are high because of the predictable preconceptions that he so deftly undoes. His idea of sympathetic parody puts him into conversations about influence and imitation that have been increasingly dominated, even in Renaissance studies, by agonistic models of conflict in which poets supposedly go one-on-one in struggles for a place in the sun of cultural status and readerly attention. Reformation culture, both Catholic and Protestant, encouraged such conflict. Tasso, Spenser’s near contemporary, inhabited a world in which Ariosto’s reputation severely constrained ambitions to inherit the mantle of his priority as the preeminent narrative poet who had decisively supplanted his Florentine precursor, Dante Alighieri. Ariosto’s popularity made it more desirable to reinterpret his poem in the light of new criteria of excellence than to acknowledge his obvious shortcomings from the perspective of an increasingly fashionable neoclassicism. Reformatting, rather than reformation, enabled his devotees to buy time while they developed arguments to defend his innovative genius rather than decry his violation of recently restrictive neo-Aristotelian taboos.

Virtually contemporary with the 1590 *Faerie Queene*, Harington’s Englishing of *Orlando Furioso*, published in 1591, bears the marks of

such editorial refashioning, with its manifold glosses and commentaries, as well as the translator's introductory 'poetics' that sounds, in many ways, like an abbreviated version of Sidney's *Defence* especially attuned to the genre of heroic poetry.³ In his letter to Sir Walter Raleigh, which appeared as a postscript to the first three books of his epic romance in 1590, Spenser effects a further abbreviation of these literary principles and thus aligns himself with the 'moralization' of Ariosto's masterpiece that had accompanied its 'neoclassicizing' despite the Italian poet's comparative *sprezzatura* about precisely such matters. Perhaps "What thou lovest well remains," as Ezra Pound claims, but it may require some unforeseeable retrofitting to accommodate changing standards of taste and value.⁴ Moreover, Spenser's letter explicitly refers to Tasso's heroes, Rinaldo and Goffredo, alone among modern exemplars, as though, from the high-minded perspective of a document of that sort, Ariosto's protagonists posed insuperable challenges and were best left out.

Conspicuous allusions to classics, both vernacular and ancient (such as Tasso, Ariosto, Virgil, and Ovid), and to the *rota virgiliana* that Spenser reproduces to describe his career as a poet reveal this sort of willful affiliation with canonical forerunners. Similarly, the brief introductory verses of plot summary (which can mislead)⁵ smack of the readers' aids and other paratextual signifiers that accompany late cinquecento editions of *Orlando Furioso* and *Gerusalemme Liberata* in efforts by publishers and authors to legitimize 'modern' works. In Tasso, due to neo-Aristotelian strictures, some of these features went underground, so to speak, and could not be voiced by the poet *in propria persona*; but when Spenser's narrator queries, "Who knows not Colin Clout?" toward the end of what proved to be the final installment of his poem during his lifetime (the 1596 *Faerie Queene*), he was expressing an aspiration that he had labored conspicuously to achieve, even though he had only, at best, ambiguously succeeded.

Many did not know him in 1596, nor will they ever. But the lucidity and directness of Cheney's thesis and its elaboration make an understanding of Spenser's project far more available and easier to acquire

than heretofore. "Sympathetic parody" offers an unusually inclusive characterization of the moods of imitation and indebtedness so often discernible in *The Faerie Queene*, and the specific examples that Cheney adduces in making his case about Spenser's Ariosto undergo a sharp-eyed scrutiny that reveals both subtle details and dominant tones.

Spenser is drawn both to episodes in the *Furioso* which are fraught with signs of allegory, such as the 'arborification' of Astolfo and the stripping of Alcina, and to a novella like the tale of Ginevra and Ariodante, which Spenser transforms into a blatantly symbolic narrative in the process of adaptation.⁶ The patent allegories of such Spenserian episodes, with their often purely symbolic figures and settings, bespeak their author's almost total immunity to the canons of mimesis that predominate in young Tasso's poetics. Despite his belated addition of an "Allegoria del poema" to the *Liberata*, which probably inspired Spenser's Letter to Raleigh, Tasso was anxiously anticipating official disapproval and censorship of his poem's elements of romance and, especially, the erotic themes that these entailed and Tasso clearly cherished. But, after Spenser's occasional reworkings of Ariostan material in its first two books, *The Faerie Queene* confidently offers a sustained version of a major strand in *Orlando Furioso's* plot. The adventures of Britomart, the heroine of Spenser's third book, are founded upon those of Bradamante in the earlier Italian poem.

The transition to these adventures, which constitute what you might call the Ariostan motherlode in this mine of intertextual treasures, contains a particular gem. In relation to his Italian precursors, Spenser confidently hides this allusion in plain sight by setting it in the brightest of foils, and Cheney discovers this jewel. Spenser so discerningly understands the tensions of genre between (and within) his two primary Italian pretexts that he exploits it dramatically in both grand and subtle gestures. The destruction of the Bower of Bliss at the end of Book 2 takes place with climactic finality and brings emphatic closure via Spenser's homage to Tasso's lushest erotic episode. It is palpably epic in its conclusiveness, as if the telos of such errantry required complete finishing off. We will not hear a significant echo of Tasso in

Spenser's poem for its next three books. Yet, to begin again in Canto 1 of Book 3, Spenser soon hits almost the highest note of Ariostan irreverence. In what is virtually the opening romance episode of *Orlando Furioso*, once the exordium is over and the present stories of individual knights have begun, chivalry wins fulsome praise in an authorial apostrophe to its "grand goodness."⁷ However, the depicted manners of these cavaliers are as much pedestrian as equestrian, and the ideals of chivalry yield to pragmatic compromise in the interest of sexual fulfillment, despite differences of religion and other priorities of group loyalty. The pursuit of Angelica turns epic concerns of faith and war into secondary matters, inconsequential in comparison with the prerogatives of sexual appetite; and it produces the cartoonish image of two rival knights cleverly agreeing to share a horse and catch up with the object of their desire before they continue their duel. Having lost one or another key piece of their knightly equipment (a helmet in one case, a horse in the other), they are typical of high-profile heroes throughout Ariosto's poem. There is always something missing: a sword, a brain, etc. They hardly seem memorably efficient at anything else except going AWOL to chase women, whom they seldom catch and often treat ungallantly, if they do.

There are many light touches of great perspicacity in Cheney's graceful essay, but his notice of Spenser's sly recovery of Ariosto's two-cavaliers-on-a-horse comedy strikes me as something special—not only finely observed by Cheney, but rarely remarked by others. I had never noticed this nuance of artistic imitation till I first heard Cheney point it out, and I had been looking long and hard for such details. They enable the central argument of Cheney's essay to gain secure conviction even in resistant readers who too readily trade in much broader strokes. "Sympathetic parody" becomes an apt phrase for two poets of such apparently different temperaments operating in such strikingly different milieux. This concept helps readers forgo false alternatives and cultivate a manner of listening closely that allows us to hear voices long abandoned to silence by habits of read-

ing grown dim-sighted with routine overuse and deaf to subtle ranges of poetic resonance caught by Cheney's keen ear.

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NOTES

¹*Aereopagitica*, John Milton, *Complete Poems and Major Prose*, ed. Merritt Y. Hughes (New York: The Odyssey P, 1957) 716-49, 728. All Milton citations come from this volume.—Anthea Hume, *Edmund Spenser: Protestant Poet* (Cambridge: CUP, 1984) 13-40, esp. 14, 21-23. See also John N. King, "Was Spenser a Puritan," *Spenser Studies* 6 (1989): 1-31.

²*The Defence of Poesy*, Sir Philip Sidney, ed. Katherine Duncan-Jones (Oxford: OUP, 1989) 212-50, 248-49.

³See Robert McNulty, ed., *Ludovico Ariosto's Orlando Furioso Translated into English Heroical Verse* (1591) (Oxford: OUP, 1972); Simon Cauchi, "The 'Setting Foorth' of Harington's Ariosto," *Studies Bibliography* 36 (1983): 137-69; and Daniel Javitch, *Proclaiming a Classic: The Canonization of Orlando Furioso* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1991) 48-70.

⁴See Canto LXXXI in Ezra Pound, *The Cantos* (1-95) (New York: New Directions, 1965) 95-100, esp. 96.

⁵See "Duessaes traines" in the summary stanza that serves as a heading of Canto 1 of Book 3, where Duessa never appears despite this explicit forecast of her activities-to-come in the sequel. All citations of *The Faerie Queene* come from the edition by Thomas P. Roche, Jr. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978).

⁶Spenser's episode of Fradubio draws upon the transformation of Astolfo into a tree in *Orlando Furioso* 6, though the roots of this passage extend back to the Polydorus episode in *Aeneid* 3. Dante's imitation of this Virgilian pre-text in *Inferno* 13 is extremely important for Ariosto but not for Spenser. The stripping of Duessa imitates the revelation of Alcina to Ruggiero by his rescuer, Melissa, in *Orlando Furioso* 7. The story of Ariodante and Ginevra appears in *Orlando Furioso* 4 and 5. Spenser's editors have long noted these sources.

⁷Cf. Ludovico Ariosto, *Orlando Furioso*, ed. Cesare Segre (Milan: Montadori, 1976) Book 1, canto 22.

Shakespeare's Country Opposition: *Titus Andronicus* in the Early Eighteenth Century

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Since the play's first performance in the early 1590s, *Titus Andronicus* has enjoyed a rather uneven performance history. William Shakespeare's first revenge tragedy achieved some considerable popularity in the playwright's lifetime, with regular performances until his death in 1616 and, as a further mark of the play's popularity, the appearance of quarto editions in 1594, 1600 and 1611. Subsequently, however, the play appears to have been largely ignored in England and, although the theatres reopened in 1660, the next recorded performance did not come until 1678, when Edward Ravenscroft's adaptation, *Titus Andronicus, or, The Rape of Lavinia* (not published until 1687), once again brought Shakespeare's tragedy to the London stage. Ravenscroft's version, which, according to the adapter, was "confirm'd a Stock-Play" (Preface), was then revived briefly in the two seasons of 1685-87 and again in the 1704-05 season (Avery 73, 76). The most sustained revival of *Titus Andronicus*, however, occurred between 1717 and 1724. In the course of these seven seasons the play was performed ten times, before it once again disappeared from the theatres until the mid-nineteenth century (Avery 80).¹

Critics have unanimously attributed the first revival of *Titus Andronicus* to the political events of the late 1670s. Thus, Michael Dobson points out that Ravenscroft's moderately revised *Titus* was the "first of the Popish Plot's wave of Shakespeare adaptations," a group of plays which were invariably characterised by a strongly royalist stance (72). Jean I. Marsden similarly suggests that Ravenscroft's adaptation "thrived because of the *frisson* created by its parallels with Titus Oates and his accusations" (42), while the perhaps strongest

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statement with regard to the play's politics comes from J. Douglas Canfield, who has described the Restoration adaptations of Shakespeare, including *Titus*, as "royalism's last dramatic stand" (235). That the play's resurrection did indeed represent a political act is a notion supported by the adapter himself. In those "distracted times," when "neither Wit nor Honesty had Encouragement," when rogues aimed to "deceive and destroy both the Honest and the Wise," wrote Ravenscroft in the preface to his version of *Titus Andronicus*, a selfless playwright had to "expose to the World the Picture of such Knaves and Rascals" and awaken the nation to the "Treachery of Villains, and the Mischiefs carry'd on by Perjury, and False Evidence." Of course, these words were written retrospectively in 1687—*Titus* was revived shortly after Monmouth's failed rebellion in 1685—and, having replaced the original *apolitical* prologue with one which emphasised his steadfast royalist-conservative principles, Ravenscroft, by explicitly re-fashioning his adaptation as a direct satire on Titus Oates and the early Whigs, may well have wanted to find favour with the court of James II. Whatever Ravenscroft's exact motives were for publishing the play text in 1687, one thing is clear: the adapter wanted his version of *Titus Andronicus* to be interpreted politically, identifying as he did the play's main themes as perjury, corruption and self-interest, and, by implication, their binary opposites of virtue and honesty. In this sense, Ravenscroft's adaptation was certainly offering topical commentary on the events of 1678 and the political climate of the years 1685-87, a period of steadily increasing agitation against James II.

Even the play's revival during the 1704-05 season may plausibly be considered a response to the contemporary political climate. Anne Stuart's accession to the English throne in 1702 sparked a resurgence of royalist, High Tory political sentiments. High Church Tories not only began to restate in a highly vocal fashion conservative political theories, especially the doctrines of divine right and non-resistance, but also became preoccupied with the republican threat to Church and state apparently posed by the Puritans. In an effort to seriously weaken, if not extinguish, religious dissent, High Church Tories em-

barked on an aggressive campaign to outlaw the practice of occasional conformity (the Dissenters' annual taking of communion in an Anglican Church to satisfy the requirements of the Test Act), which had allowed Nonconformists to hold municipal and national office. The so-called Occasional Conformity Controversy reached a temporary climax in 1704, when, after the passage into law of a bill against the practice had already failed twice, High Tory MPs made the desperate and ultimately unsuccessful attempt of tacking a third bill onto an unrelated piece of proposed legislation. With its central themes of hypocrisy, deception and the destruction of the Church and the monarchy by republican Dissenters, the highly vocal High Church campaign against occasional conformity closely echoed at least some of the rhetoric associated with the Popish Plot. Ravenscroft's adaptation of *Titus Andronicus* was thus not out of place in the context of the politics of the early years of Anne's reign.

The possible motives for the extended revival of *Titus Andronicus* between 1717 and 1724 are rather less clear, however. After the turbulences of the Jacobite Rebellion in 1715, England appeared set for a period of relative quiet in high politics. The Jacobite threat had been all but defeated, the Tories, permanently tarred with the brush of Jacobitism, found themselves pushed to the political margins, while the Whigs represented a united and powerful force with a firm grip on the ministry. There was, moreover, no reason why this political calm should not last for the foreseeable future, since the passage into law of the Septennial Bill in 1716, which extended the life of Parliament from three to seven years, meant that the next election and its associated campaign—a period which usually saw an increase in riotous behaviour—was unlikely to take place much before 1722. Thus, the revival of *Titus* in 1717 occurred in a political climate that was markedly different from those of the earlier instances: the monarchy appeared no longer at risk from the attacks of Stuart sympathisers and conspirators, the succession had been settled, and the nature of the English constitution had ceased to be the focus of political debate.

Bearing in mind this seemingly 'uneventful' historical context, it is perhaps not surprising that several commentators have attributed the revival of *Titus Andronicus* around 1720 to the desire of a young actor, James Quin, to use the part of Aaron to demonstrate his theatrical powers. Thus, in his introduction to the Oxford Shakespeare edition of the play, Eugene M. Waith suggests that the play's lengthy run was largely due to its strong characterisation rather than any political lessons it might have to teach. Aaron, we are told, "was considered to be the starring part in these years" (46). Jonathan Bate, editor of the Arden edition, agrees—*Titus* was "such a favourite" in Quin's repertoire due to the part of the arch-villain—and adds that it was in fact Quin's theatrical ability which made Ravenscroft's adaptation a popular success (54). Thus, it appears that the underlying reason for the seven-year revival of *Titus Andronicus* was not, as previously, the topicality of the political subplot of the play, but the "grand opportunities" (Dessen 7) offered by the role of Ravenscroft's Aaron to Quin and other actors.

There is indeed some evidence for this account of the early eighteenth-century revival of Shakespeare's tragedy. The fact that *Titus* disappeared from the London stage in 1724 is of particular significance here, for the final eighteenth-century performance of the play on 19 March of that year was Quin's benefit. There were no financial reasons for choosing *Titus Andronicus* for the occasion. Judging by the available information on takings, the play was not a major success: the receipts listed for three performances in 1720 and 1721 range from a moderate £35 to a very modest £16 (Avery 605, 606, 613). To put this into perspective, the receipts for *Whig and Tory* were £82, £64 for *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and £22 for *The Emperor of the Moon*, all of which were acted within a week of *Titus*. At least the final eighteenth-century performance of *Titus* fulfilled the purpose of the occasion: receipts on benefit night came to £64 for tickets, plus £80 in cash donations (Avery 766).

Yet, while the play apparently failed to draw large audiences, there was a small group of patrons, identified only as "several Persons of

Quality,” who requested the play to be performed on at least two occasions (13 August 1717 and 8 July 1718; see Avery 459, 499). It should be noted, however, that these well-off theatre-goers did not necessarily attend performances of *Titus* to take pleasure in Quin’s interpretation of Aaron—Quin had no part in the 1718 production. Here, we do well to remember that the eighteenth century’s was “an *actors’* theatre in which many members of the core audience went again and again to see the same small group of favourite performers in an ever-rotating series of showcase roles” (Hume 45-46). It appears, then, that Quin’s choice of *Titus* for the benefit performance was based on a personal preference he had developed for the play, and that this predilection was shared by a small group of wealthy patrons; this common interest in *Titus* may well have had its roots in Ravenscroft’s revised and extended role of Aaron.

However, in the context of the play’s history as a piece of topical political commentary and the theatres’ heightened sensitivity to political currents in the early eighteenth century (Loftis 1), this explanation remains unsatisfactory, not least because it unduly limits the play’s appeal to the realm of actorly grandstanding. More particularly, it fails to do justice to the way in which *Titus* did, in fact, engage with the period’s dominant political discourses, as well as party politics. The play, I purport, can be shown to reflect Country Whig, or Patriot, concerns and, as a result, should be regarded as belonging to the group of Patriot adaptations of Shakespeare’s Roman plays which include *Julius Caesar* and *Coriolanus*. In this sense, the play represents an element of the cultural current which, in the 1730s, was to make Shakespeare “an Opposition playwright rather than an Establishment one” (Dobson 136-37) and the antithesis to the Grubstreet hacks employed by Walpole. *Titus* may plausibly be regarded as an expression of Country Whig ideas and, by extension, as a highly topical reflection on the divisions within the Whig government, the so-called ‘Whig Schism,’ which commenced with the move into opposition of Robert Walpole and Charles Townshend in 1717. In large measure, my argument will rely on evidence gleaned through historical contextuali-

sation, biographical information on James Quin and, of course, by attending to the text of Ravenscroft's adaptation itself.

By his own admission, Quin was not a Tory royalist of, say, Ravenscroft's kind. Indeed, by all accounts quite the opposite was the case. According to Horace Walpole, Quin, in a debate concerning the royal prerogative, made the declaration: "I am a republican, and perhaps I even think that the execution of Charles I might have been justified." (cited in *DNB* 553). We do, of course, need to bear in mind that the actor was said to be "vain, obstinate, and quarrelsome" and that his "wit was apt to degenerate into extreme coarseness and his manner into arrogance" (*DNB* 553), so that the above statement is probably coloured by hyperbole and designed to antagonise his royalist interlocutor. We also need to remember that early eighteenth-century 'republicans' did not usually want to see a repeat of the events of the civil war years. Rather, eighteenth-century republicanism sought to protect Britain's Polybian constitution from the transgressive actions of one or more of its three estates, especially those of the monarch's. The powers of the king had to be checked as far as possible, but the monarchy itself remained an integral part of the constitutional set-up. Even a well-known eighteenth-century commonwealth man like John Toland, who had been the major force behind publications of a strongly republican hue around the turn of the century, was asserting in 1717 that the monarchy represented the "very first of our three Estates" and was therefore "essential to our Constitution" (8-9). It is likely that Quin shared this Country—later Patriot—view of the English constitution, with its emphasis on the notion of a "Government of Laws enacted for the common good of all the people [...] as they are represented in Parliament" (Toland 12-13). Quin's qualifying statement that "the execution of Charles I might have been justified," moreover, strongly indicates that he did not harbour anti-monarchical sentiments *per se*, but that he subscribed to the notion of a contractual, elective monarchy based on a legislative which provided for the punishment of kings, should they engage in unlawful and tyrannical actions. In other words, Quin's statement suggests that he held 'Old'

or 'Commonwealth' Whig sentiments which shaped the political philosophy of the Country and Patriot oppositions.

That Quin's words were not merely a disingenuous retort in a heated political debate becomes apparent in his acting preferences and, perhaps surprisingly, also in his theatrical abilities. Quin, it seems, had something of a penchant for Patriot parts; two of his favourite roles were the famous republican hero Cato and *Julius Caesar's* Brutus, as depicted in the eighteenth-century adaptation of Shakespeare's original (*DNB* 552; Ripley 24). Significantly, these two plays and their exemplars of Roman civic virtue accompanied Quin throughout his stage life. While he had to wait until 1734 for the opportunity to act Cato—Barton Booth, the actor who had monopolised the part, died in the previous year—Quin became directly involved in Addison's play in the early years of his career. The exact year of Quin's first appearance on the London stage is uncertain—the *DNB* suggests 1714, while the anonymous author of *The Life of James Quin* claims that he was first employed by the Theatre Royal in August 1717—but we do know that one of the first plays in which he performed was *Cato*. During the summer of 1717, Quin, we are told, was "assiduously employed in studying several parts" (*Life* 9) in preparation for the following season. Importantly, one of these roles was Syphax, a Numidian admirer of Cato, which Quin performed for the first time in 1718 (*DNB* 551). Thus, if not immediately, then at least within three seasons of his arrival in London, Quin had secured a part in what has been described as the "climax" of the "dramatic celebration of political liberty in Anne's reign" (Loftis 44).

The general excitement created by *Cato* following its first performance in April 1713 is well known. Anecdotes abound of Whigs and Tories contending with one another in the vigour of their applause for lines which celebrated Cato's civic virtue and Roman liberty, and of substantial presents to the actors involved in the play, for their services in the cause of liberty (Loftis 57-58). The play evidently had an impact on the emotions of those who saw it, inculcating in the audience a patriotic hatred of tyranny and corruption, and a love of liberty

and selfless, stoic virtue—all of which apparently went beyond party affiliation. There is, of course, no reason why Quin should not have been affected by the Patriot sentiments of *Cato* as deeply as the audience. If we also bear in mind that the actor had only

an indifferent education, and was no wise given to what is technically named study, ridiculing those who sought knowledge in books, while the world and its inhabitants were open to them (*DNB* 553),

it is not unreasonable to assume that Quin's ideas of Roman civic virtue and republicanism were shaped to a considerable extent by Addison's play, which, as the editors of the play's most recent edition point out, provided "many of the words and images that informed republican sensibilities during this period" (Henderson and Yellin xi). Like so many theatre-goers, especially those who could not afford to buy expensive books on the subject, Quin probably received a substantial part of his 'Patriot education' from *Cato*.

Cato became Quin's favourite part soon after he made it his own in 1734. His admiration for the classical republican hero may be gleaned from an on-stage incident. During one of the play's performances at Drury Lane, a young actor who was playing the small part of a messenger, "in saying 'Caesar sends health to Cato,' [...] pronounced the last word *Keeto*; which so struck Quin that he replied, with his usual coolness, 'Would he had sent a better messenger'" (*Life* 24). The young man felt highly insulted by Quin's quip and later that night challenged Quin with knife-in-hand, only to be killed by the older actor in an apparent act of self-defence. Undoubtedly, Quin's dismissive treatment of the young actor has its roots in some considerable professional arrogance, but, given the relative insignificance of the young man's pronunciation error, we can also fairly assume that it derived at least partly from Quin's heightened sense of Roman dignity and reverence for *Cato*.

Additional evidence for Quin's Patriot inclinations comes from another one of his preferred parts, as well as contemporary assessments of his acting talent. Besides *Cato*, Quin also inherited from Booth the

part of Brutus, which he acted from 1733 until his retirement in 1751. Eighteenth-century audiences recognised the Dryden/Davenant edition of *Julius Caesar* as another theatrical expression of Roman *amor patriae*. While “Caesar was presented as the villain who suppressed liberty,” Brutus was “the ideal patriot with whom English lovers of liberty identified themselves and their causes” (Ripley 28). Particularly the revised final lines of the play unambiguously presented Brutus as a “magnanimous patriot and martyr to the cause of freedom” (Ripley 30). The significant extent to which Quin identified with the figures of Cato and Brutus becomes apparent in contemporary assessments of his acting ability. Quin, we need to remember, was judged to be only “almost a great actor” (*DNB* 553), and besides his celebrated strengths, he also displayed some weaknesses in his interpretations of certain parts. Most significantly in the context of this article, he was apparently unable to suppress his own personal beliefs and inclinations on stage. After having praised his voice, Charles Churchill, in his satirical commentary on contemporary actors, *The Rosciad* (1761), summarised Quin’s style of performance thus:

In fancied scenes, as in life’s real plan,
He could not, for a moment, sink the Man.
In whate’er cast his character was laid,
Self still, like oil, upon the surface play’d.
Nature, in spite of all his skill, crept in:
Horatio, Dorx, Falstaff, still ‘twas Q[ui]n. (cited in Resnick 31)

Churchill’s observation is telling. On some occasions, Quin evidently struggled to make his characters believable, because too much of his own personality shone through in his interpretation. The reverse of this is, of course, that Quin produced his best performances when he was acting a part that closely reflected his own inclinations, that is, when he was able fully to empathise and identify with the character. According to contemporary commentators, this was usually the case when he acted Patriot parts: “His Brutus and Cato will be remembered with pleasure by the surviving spectators of them, when their candour would wish to forget his Lear and Richard,” wrote Thomas

Davies (cited in Resnick 31). Given his predilection for Patriot heroes, it is not surprising that, after Booth's death, it was Quin who "contrived to preserve [*Julius Caesar*] from desuetude" (Ripley 24).

Why, then, should someone like Quin, whose political beliefs echoed those of the Country Whigs, and who openly confessed his republicanism, find pleasure in a play that was closely associated with Stuart royalism? Ravenscroft's *Titus*, as we have seen, was traditionally revived when the monarchy was threatened by conspiracy and rebellion, or when the English constitution had to be defended against the subversive machinations of republican Puritans. Indeed, the adapter himself acknowledged the play to be a piece of royalist propaganda by identifying, in his new preface of 1687, Titus Oates and the early Whigs as the target of the play's criticism. The additional, alternative prologues and epilogues, moreover, offered unequivocal support to hereditary monarchy and Tory political philosophy. The "Prologue, Spoken in Lent," for example, exhorted the audience to "learn all due Allegiance [sic] to the King" and to "Leave Crossing Birth-Rights and disposing Crowns." The answer to the above question is simply that Ravenscroft's comments concerning the supposed political stance of *Titus* are misleading.

Dobson suggests that, in the volatile atmosphere generated by the Popish Plot, Shakespeare adapters, including Ravenscroft, tended to "blur the political issues of the plays they adapt[ed] by further distracting attention from the issues of loyalty and kingship onto the sheer pathos offered by the spectacle of their suffering heroines" (75-76). While the sufferings of Titus remain largely unchanged, Dobson's suggestion may plausibly be maintained with regard to Aaron, whose part is significantly expanded, and who, being tortured on a rack, is forced to witness the murder of his beloved offspring in a significantly modified final scene; this scene, moreover, sees the Moor betraying some quasi-heroic features (Bate 53). However, the notion that the politics of *Titus* are obscured and clothed in ambiguity by Ravenscroft's modifications is debatable. The impact and the extent of the changes made by Ravenscroft have, in fact, generated some disagree-

ment among critics. Dessen, for example, recognises “several substantive changes in the plot and motivation” (7), while Bate considers the adaptation to be “remarkably true to the original” (49). Through its chief departure from Shakespeare’s text—the foregrounding of the role of Aaron—Ravenscroft’s version, concludes Bate, “is an activation of potential that is latent in the [original] text, and in this respect it may be described as ‘faithful’ despite all its innovations” (54). Matthew Wikander similarly comments on the adaptation’s fidelity to the plot of the original and notes that Ravenscroft chose not to “offer up specific instances” of anti-republican and anti-Whig sentiments, but instead recognised that “the play as a whole serves as a speaking picture, an image of the bloody rapine of civil war” (343). Moreover, “by emphasising familial disruptions at the end of the play, Ravenscroft is not merely sensationalizing *Titus Andronicus*: he is in fact interpreting it, offering in his adaptation of the play a reading heavily influenced by divine right political theorists” (Wikander 343).

Bate’s assertion concerning Ravenscroft’s foregrounding of arch-villain Aaron is entirely valid. The basic characteristics of Aaron are there “in embryo” in Shakespeare’s original and, via “a degree of reordering and rewriting” (54), Ravenscroft simply emphasised the contending elements of the character in order to increase the villain’s appeal to the audience. However, what appears to have escaped critical notice is that Ravenscroft’s *Titus* also remained faithful to Shakespeare’s original in a different, and—in the context of the play’s polemical message—more important way, namely its politics. The political subtext of the play is established in lines 1-66 and 181-261 of Act 1, Scene 1 and, significantly, Ravenscroft decided to leave these sections virtually unchanged. These passages are, as Andrew Hadfield has remarked, “carefully written and staged as a balanced exploration of opposing political languages and assumptions” (472). Indeed, by creating new scene divisions, Ravenscroft provided a visible demarcation of the two overtly political sections from the episode concerned with the sacrifice of Alarbus, thus drawing our attention to the political issues, rather than blurring them. In Ravenscroft’s adaptation,

Saturninus and Bassianus's initial quarrel forms a significantly shortened Scene 1, which is continued and brought to a conclusion in a new third scene that commences with the speech in which Marcus asks Titus to "set a head on headless Rome." Titus's return from battle and the sacrificial dismemberment and burning of Alarbus now appear in a self-contained second scene and it is here where Ravenscroft made some substantive changes, which, as we shall see, offered an alternative inflection on the politics of the play.

The political languages and assumptions evident in the opening act of *Titus* do not suggest that the play supports a Tory-royalist stance, nor does its conclusion. The early passages in question describe the process of determining a new head of state, and outline, more or less clearly, the nature of the existing constitutional system and political institutions which govern *Titus's* fictional Rome; this nature, as several critics have asserted, is of a republican kind. T. J. B. Spencer, for example, has remarked that, either side of Saturninus's tyrannical rule, the Rome of *Titus* "seems to be, at times, a free commonwealth" (32). Hadfield offers more specific commentary and points out that the "lesson of the electoral game of the opening scene [...] is that Bassianus is the most suitable candidate" for the empery. Importantly, Bassianus's suitability is anchored in his invocation of "republican principles" in support of his claim (475). In a similar vein, and in contrast to Wikander, Quentin Taylor draws our attention to the fact that, in the concluding act of the play, Rome's constitution is given a "republican cast" through an emphasis on the "elective and merit-based" character of its executive authority (144). Thus, the politics of *Titus* may be said to be presented within a general framework of republicanism. In this light, James Quin's fondness of the play begins to appear more plausible. However, in order to establish which specific elements of the play might have appealed to an actor or audience who held Patriot sympathies, and to demonstrate the play's topicality, it is necessary to explore *Titus's* political subtext and contemporary politics in greater detail.

While there is a general consensus with regard to *Titus's* overall republican tendency, there appears to be some disagreement with regard to the exact point of departure of the constitutional decline charted by the play. In other words, of which constitutional system do we witness the decline? Spencer considers *Titus's* Rome a "commonwealth that only partly takes it [the hereditary monarchical principle] into account" (32). In contrast, Taylor comments that, while the play is characterised by "a degree of institutional ambiguity," there is a suggestion that the Rome of *Titus* is a "hereditary monarchy" based either on primogeniture (if we accept Saturninus's claim) or on merit (if we believe Bassianus) (133-34). Barbara Parker states, somewhat vaguely, that the "rulerless interregnum" at the start of the play is the result of the "collapse of the monarchy" (121). Hadfield is even less clear in his assessment of the constitutional system depicted, stating that the play offers a "condensed snapshot of Roman history, its cyclical movement back and forth between empire and republic" (470). At the beginning of the play, Rome, suggests Hadfield, has reached a point at which "a workable and popular constitution under a leader who has the backing of the people" (471) may be established. Shakespeare thus chose the transformation of the Roman constitution from a hereditary to a representative system as a backdrop for the revenge plot of the play. The opening scene apparently generates an "anticipation of imminent political change" in the audience and presents us with a protagonist, Titus, who "has the ability to rule Rome and direct it towards a better and fairer state" (Hadfield 471). Disagreements thus exist with regard to the exact nature of Rome's constitution, and the trajectory of the political decline depicted in the play. A close reading of the opening sections of the play will shed some light on the issue.

The first two speeches of *Titus* instantly signal that the play will concern itself with different constitutional models. Saturninus and Bassianus establish their respective claims for the empery, and in the process the two brothers emerge as binary opposites: while Saturninus insists on a "successive title" and demands the empery on the basis of his being the first-born son, the younger sibling speaks of his

right to be crowned emperor in “pure Election.” In other words, *Titus* immediately draws the audience into a contemplation of two fundamentally different forms of government: first, hereditary monarchy based on primogeniture and, second, an elective, representative system in which *vox populi* determines the new head of government. This immediate juxtaposition of two diametrically opposed constitutional models generates the initial impression that Rome has reached a crossroads at which it has to decide between a hereditary or representative monarchy. That no such decision has to be made, however, becomes apparent in the announcement made by Marcus immediately after the brothers have stated their respective cases:

[...] the People of Rome for whom we stand
 A Party Interest'd, have by common voice
 In Election for the Roman Empire,
 Chosen *Andronicus* surnam'd *Pius*,
 For many good and great deserts to Rome. (1.1)²

Marcus's first speech establishes the existing constitutional set-up of *Titus's* fictional Rome in unambiguous terms: Rome is quite obviously a representative, meritocratic monarchy. The fact that Saturninus and Bassianus stand against one another and present their cases to the tribunes and senators suggests that they accept that Rome has to make a choice, that is, elect one of them to assume the empery; there is no automatic successor. Even Saturninus, whose claim to a hereditary title ought to exclude any thoughts of an election, canvasses Rome's representative bodies to curry favour with them. That the constitution of *Titus's* Rome rests on an elective system is, moreover, demonstrated by the fact that Rome intends to make Titus emperor. Importantly, no attention is paid to dynastic connections, which undermines Taylor's suggestion that we are looking at a hereditary monarchy. The fact that, in order to follow due process, a leading tribune, Marcus, urges Titus to act as an official candidate in the electoral process serves as further sign of an established representative system. It is certainly apparent, as Taylor highlights correctly, that “the formal power of

electing the emperor resides with the people via the tribunes" (133), but I cannot find anywhere "a suggestion that in the Rome of *Titus* it was customary to bestow the crown on the eldest son of the late emperor." There appears to be no evidence in the text for Taylor's contention that custom has overridden election in favour of primogeniture. In this context, it should also be noted that Parker's assertion that the audience witness a "rulerless interregnum" after the "collapse of the monarchy" (121) makes little sense. The opening scenes of the play describe the transitional period between the death of one head of state and the accession of the successor which is unavoidable in a purely elective monarchy—when else would an election take place? While Rome does indeed lack a head of state at the beginning of the play, it is not entirely rulerless, as the representative bodies are administering state affairs until a new emperor can be installed. There is, in fact, no collapse of the monarchy in *Titus*, nor does the play concern itself with "the consequences of a 'headless' state" (Parker 121). Rather, the tribunes and the senators are working towards the continuation of Rome's elective monarchy by following due process and allowing an election to take place, while the tragedy of *Titus* rests on the choice of an unsuitable, unelected head of state.

It is true that, as Hadfield suggests, the opening of the play generates in the audience an anticipation of political change—after all, the old emperor is dead and a new head of state must be installed. Beyond this, however, there is no indication that any wide-ranging changes are imminent. It is also not clear why Titus should guide Rome to become a "better and fairer state" (Hadfield 471), and why Romans should desire significant constitutional modifications, as there is no suggestion that the late emperor abused his power to rule the Empire in a tyrannical fashion. Indeed, the long list of military successes referred to in Scene One indicates that the Empire is in a generally prosperous condition, while Titus's assertion that "Upright he held it [the sceptre], lords, that held it last" (1.1) strongly suggests that the late emperor was a fair and lawful ruler. The play offers no evidence for a popular desire to alter the existing Roman constitution.

Consequently, there is no reason to assume that anything other than a system of “pure Election” is and has been the *modus operandi* for the determination of a new head of state in *Titus’s* fictional Rome. The choice of Titus “by common voice in Election”—an event which occurred before the beginning of the play—would have represented a rather pointless undertaking in the primogenital system insisted upon by Saturninus. In itself, Saturninus’s claim to a hereditary title does not constitute reliable evidence with regard to established constitutional practices. In fact, there is no reason why we should believe anything Saturninus says—facing defeat, he falsely claims to be in possession of the “people’s hearts” (1.1.211), even though it has become perfectly clear that the people wish Titus to assume the empery. If anything, the impression one gains is that Saturninus’s claim to hereditary right is his final desperate attempt to win a battle he has been losing from the start.

Similarly, it is difficult to see how Titus’s clearly misguided choice of Saturninus supports the notion that Rome has reached the point of transition from a hereditary to an elective constitution. It is precisely because Titus makes the wrong choice—a choice that destroys the political harmony Rome had hitherto enjoyed and one that essentially disregards *vox populi* (in Act 5, Scene 1, Saturninus admits that Titus ignored the voice of the people by choosing him)—that we have a tragedy on our hands. Given that the tragic cycle moves from order to disorder and back, it would be problematic to assume that Titus’s choice is not somehow disrupting an established system or order. His selection of the hereditary candidate undermines a previously stable governmental system and swiftly leads the state into tyranny. The implication is surely that, had Titus chosen Bassianus, the existing order would not have been disrupted. It is also important to note that Titus’s downfall begins not with the sacrifice of Alarbus, but with his decision to disregard Rome’s existing elective system, and with that to override the voice of the people. Bassianus, in the knowledge that the people will choose him over his older brother, attempts respectfully to intervene one final time by asking Titus to support his claim, but the

request is ignored entirely. In an unwise move, the people's representatives, the tribunes, grant Titus permission to select the emperor himself, but, as Taylor has rightly pointed out, apparently only to "gratify Titus for his great services to Rome, implying that such a delegation of power was highly unusual" (136). Thus, the tribunes certainly "must bear a measure of the blame for abdicating their constitutional responsibility" (Taylor 136), but the choice to disregard popular preferences and, in this sense, to abuse the people's trust, is solely Titus's own. In other words, it is ultimately Titus, who, by following his predisposition towards lineal succession, subverts the established electoral conventions of the play's fictional Rome.

By throwing into relief the particular events and choices that result in the creation of Saturninus as emperor, *Titus Andronicus* not only invites the audience to witness the very moment at which a previously sound governmental system declines into misrule and tyranny, but the play also asks us to explore the underlying reasons which set in motion this decline. As we have seen, the tribunes must be apportioned at least some of the blame for undermining the existing constitution by allowing an individual unilaterally to choose the new emperor, even if this individual is highly esteemed. Yet, while the failure of the tribunes and Titus to choose aright at crucial moments paves the way for a political decline that affects all of Rome, the particular horrors that befall the Andronici have their origins in the sacrificial killing of Tamora's first born son Alarbus. The structural importance of the passage is maintained in Ravenscroft's adaptation; here too it is readily apparent that while the misguided political decisions alone would have sufficed to cause the decline of Rome into tyranny, Alarbus's death is necessary to explain the localised amplification of the cruel tyrannical rule visited upon the entire nation. However, Ravenscroft made an important modification with regard to Titus's motivation for sanctioning the death of Alarbus. In Shakespeare's original, Titus and his surviving sons merely adhere to established Roman customs. The religious context of the event is highlighted by both Lucius and Titus, who state respectively:

Give us the proudest prisoner of the Goths,
 That we may hew his limbs and on a pile
Ad manes fratrum sacrifice his flesh
 Before this earthly prison of their bones,
 That so the shadows be not unappeased,
 Nor we disturbed with prodigies on earth. (1.1.99-104)

and

Patient yourself, madam, and pardon me.
 These are their brethren whom your Goths beheld
 Alive and dead, and for their brethren slain,
 Religiously they ask a sacrifice.
 To this your son is marked, and die he must,
 T'appease their groaning shadows that are gone. (1.1.124-29)

The overarching message of these two speeches is that religious and cultural beliefs demand the sacrifice of Alarbus. Indeed, Titus, with his hands apparently bound by this time-honoured ritual, even apologises to Tamora for his inability to show the mercy she begs. In this sense, the killing of Alarbus is a public, institutionally sanctioned act rather than an example of private revenge. This is not to say that revenge sentiments have no bearing on the action—the passage is clearly informed by the Old Testament notion of *lex talionis*. Nevertheless, the action occurs under the guidance of a higher authority. Thus, Titus is at least partially exonerated once again, as he “acts not as a private citizen, but as a public figure in an official capacity. His actions are those of the Roman state, and, if not fully enlightened, are statesmanlike” (Taylor 133).

There is no such institutional framework for the sacrifice of Alarbus in Ravenscroft’s adaptation. Here, Lucius and Titus’s motivation is simply to revenge the death of an Andronicus, who—and this is Ravenscroft’s invention—had not died in battle, but as a sacrifice to Gothic gods. Tamora’s plea for mercy precedes the following revised passage:

Titus My Son, whom Chance of War your Captive made,
 Was Born in Glory too, and for great deeds,

Adopted was the Eldest Son of Fame;
Yet fell a Victim to *Plebean* Rage.

Lucius Deaf like the Gods when Thunder fills the Air,
Were you to all our suppliant *Romans* then;
Unmov'd beheld him made a Sacrifice
T'appease your Angry Gods; What Gods are they
Are pleas'd with Humane Blood and Cruelty?

Titus Then did his sorrowful Brethren here,
These other Sons of mine, from me Extract
A Vow, This was the Tenor which it bore,
If any of the Cruel *Tamora's* Race
Should fall in *Roman* hands, him I wou'd give
To their Revenging Piety.
To this Your Eldest is doom'd, and dye he must.
Not to revenge their Bloods we now bring home,
Or theirs who formerly were slain in Arms:
For shew me now those Valiant Fighting *Goths*,
I'll kiss their Noble hands that gave the Wounds,
'Cause bravely they perform'd. This was no Cause
But a Sons groaning Shadow to appease,
By Priestly Butchers Murder'd on your Altars. (1.2)

There are several observations to be made about these lines. Inverting Shakespeare's original plot line, Ravenscroft has the Goths execute their Roman prisoner as part of a religious ceremony. Here, it is Tamora and her sons who commit sacrificial murders in the larger context of time-honoured Gothic rituals. Again, vengeance appears to play some role in the killings—both Titus and Lucius seem to suggest that the Goths' refusal to show mercy was due, in part at least, to their overpowering anger—but Titus's son was clearly not executed in an act of private revenge. Thus, where Shakespeare partially exonerated Titus by placing the murder of Alarbus in the framework of Roman religious conventions, Ravenscroft's inversion of the original achieves the same for the Goths.

Ravenscroft's alterations have important implications for our perception of the Andronici. Titus and Lucius attempt to claim the moral high ground by making a series of value judgements about Gothic religious practices and, by implication, Gothic culture as a whole. Lucius's rhetorical questioning of human sacrifice in the name of

religion strongly points to a view of the Goths as a barbaric and primitive people. Titus confirms this notion directly by referring to “Cruel *Tamora’s* Race,” and indirectly by implying that his son’s sacrificial killing was dishonourable and cowardly. The two men, it is apparent, consider the Goths to be culturally and morally inferior to Rome. Yet, it soon becomes clear that the Andronici’s words are not followed by any appropriate action that might suggest that these sentiments of Roman superiority are in any way justified. In contrast to the Goths, who sacrificed a Roman soldier according to their established cultural and religious conventions, and apparently soon after the conclusion of battle, the Romans merely seek to fulfil a long-standing vow of private vengeance. Alarbus is not killed in adherence to common Roman rituals, but, firstly, to satisfy the Andronici’s lust for revenge and, secondly, as Quintus points out, to teach the Goths a lesson in religion and morality: “Learn *Goths* hence, and after keep’t in mind, / That Cruelty is not the Worship of the Gods” (1.2). This moral lesson is, of course, a highly questionable one. The Andronici’s intention of righting a wrong by inflicting the same horrors on their enemies purely for personal satisfaction teaches one thing only, namely that cruelty is the worship of Rome. Indeed, Tamora says as much when she exclaims that “Intention made it [human sacrifice] Piety in us: / But in you this Act is Cruelty” (1.2). If, in Shakespeare’s text, Alarbus’s sacrificial killing and Titus’s failure to show mercy

blur the distinction between the supposedly civilized Rome and the barbarian Goths, showing the former to be as superstitious and pagan as the latter in their beliefs (Hadfield 471),

then Ravenscroft’s adaptation recasts this blurred distinction in a much clearer light. It is not Tamora and her Goths but Rome’s leading family, the Andronici, who appear morally reprehensible, at least at this early point in the play.

Ravenscroft’s new second scene thus offers a much clearer explanation for the subsequent decline of Rome into tyranny. While the high esteem in which Titus is initially held by Rome indicates his status as

a (formerly) outstanding public servant, on his return from the most recent battle Titus no longer acts the part of a public figure. His actions are clearly not those of an official of the Roman state, and his behaviour is not statesmanlike. Titus's personal desire to be revenged upon Tamora has obscured his view of Roman cultural and moral values to the extent that he fails to recognise that the sacrifice of Alarbus undermines the very civilisation he has sought to defend for forty years. Having witnessed the moral failure of the Andronici in Scene Two, it comes as no surprise to the audience that Titus fails to make the right political choice in the following scene. Here, he once again allows himself to be guided by his personal disposition toward hereditary government, instead of considering what is best for the nation.

In this sense, Ravenscroft's Titus is less of a tragic figure than he is in Shakespeare's original. The tragic focus has been shifted further towards the national political level: the aristocratic Titus, who is renowned for his ability as a general and celebrated for his unwavering loyalty to the state of Rome, has reached a point in his career as a military leader and political figure at which his ability to judge in the best interests of the state has diminished significantly. At the beginning of the play, Titus is shown to be a tired old soldier, who has become weary of military service. This is paralleled in his refusal to stand for election as emperor. Titus, of course, reasons that his relative old age would result in a further election in the near future, which could be avoided if a younger leader was selected. In other words, Titus declines office because he considers frequent elections to be undesirable. Given that the Rome of the play is based on an elective system, this seems a curious attitude to display for a 'senior official,' since infrequent elections effectively minimise, and thus undermine, the representative nature of the established system. Thus, what becomes apparent is that Titus's personal beliefs stand in contrast to established Roman values and systems. He is no longer able to act in a detached manner, to reach impartial and balanced decisions which are guided only by the national good. The Roman people, however, can-

not know this, as the misguided sacrifice of Alarbus does not occur in public. Ravenscroft thus enhances the dramatic irony of the early sections: while we realise that Titus is no longer fit for office, Rome remains oblivious to this and consequently continues to place its trust in the old general. Our knowledge that Titus is “absolutely lacking in political sense” (Hadfield 472) becomes obvious to Rome only after the dice have been cast. And herein lies the political tragedy of Ravenscroft’s *Titus*.

In her effort to demonstrate the thematic unity of Shakespeare’s Roman works, Parker highlights that “*Titus* encapsulates a political decline similar to that encompassed by the other four works, a decline likewise emanating from destabilized rule” (122). That *Titus* does chart the political decline of a previously functioning constitutional system is readily apparent, but, as we have seen, this decline is not triggered by destabilised rule; following the death of the old emperor, the senate and tribunal are in full control of the affairs of state, and there is no popular desire to overthrow the established constitutional system. The political decline emanates from Titus’s misguided and unrepresentative elevation to emperor of Saturninus, or, in other words, the decision to install an absolute, arbitrary and hereditary monarch to head an elective, limited monarchy. Moreover, in Shakespeare’s other Roman works, destabilised rule is a consequence of the abolition of monarchy in favour of eventual mob supremacy, which is clearly not the case in *Titus*; in this sense, the political decline charted in the play is nothing like the one depicted in the other Roman plays. The focus of *Titus* is not on the destruction of monarchy, but on the notion—and fact—of a state governed by statesmen whose private passions and inclinations determine the course of the nation. Nowhere is this more apparent than in Ravenscroft’s adaptation, which, by means of the altered Alarbus passage, emphasises as a central preoccupation of the play the corruption, political and moral, of the individual politician.

Titus’s central preoccupation may be readily related to the politics of the years around the play’s revival. Events such as the passage into

law of the Septennial Bill in 1716, the Whig Schism of 1717-20 and the subsequent emergence of a Country/Patriot Opposition in- and outside of parliament represent contexts which variously influenced an audience's perception of Ravenscroft's adaptation; after all, plays were not performed in a political vacuum. The issue which emerged over and over again in the debates concerning the above events was that of corruption. Thus, while the government's propagandists naturally praised the Septennial Act for reducing the frequency of disruptive election campaigns and the political corruption associated with these events, opponents of the legislation, which included both Whigs and Tories, "objected because the present parliament was to be lengthened without the mandate from the electorate" (Lease 43). Opposition politicians typically complained that "the voice of the people had been muted, and that since power came from the populace a basic principle of the constitution had been violated" (Speck 21). In other words, the Septennial Act represented a more fundamental form of corruption than, for example, offering and accepting bribes, as it had damaged the very foundation of the state; it was, as Hatton has pointed out, a piece of party political expediency, "passed for the convenience of a ministry which did not want to risk the election due in 1718" (211), since a Whig majority had seemed unlikely.

Late in 1716 news of another important development began to emerge, the so-called Whig Schism. A combination of the lack of a clear leader of the Whig ministry and disagreements concerning George I's foreign policy resulted in a split among the leading Whigs and of the party as a whole; Lords Stanhope and Sunderland supported the king's plans of pursuing an aggressive, expansionist foreign policy in the Baltic designed to curb the threat Russia posed to Hanover, while brothers-in-law Viscount Townshend and Walpole regarded these plans as not representative of British interests and opposed the policy. George finally ran out of patience and dismissed Townshend from government in April 1717, four months before the start of the *Titus* revival. Townshend was followed into opposition by Walpole as well as a number of other Whigs, and the two men made it

their business to inconvenience the ministry at every turn. Significantly, “although they had left office largely on a point of principle, they were not going to let party principle stand in the way of their return” (Speck 191) and, in a highly aggressive and opportunistic manner, blocked several policies which they had previously supported.

Those contemporary commentators who did not sympathise with the opposition naturally took a dim view of Townshend and Walpole’s actions. Matthew Tindal, for example, accused the two politicians of acting “a Part so inconsistent with all former Pretences” and of preventing the “doing of those very Things, they themselves declar’d to be necessary for the publick Safety” (5). The brothers-in-law, lamented Tindal, were “ready to sacrifice every Thing, Civil and Sacred” to their “Interest, Ambition, and Revenge” (29). Commentators who chose not to take sides highlighted the decline into corruption of the entire Whig party. Daniel Defoe, for example, reminded the Whigs of how they had previously “Upbraided the *Tories* with their corrupt Administration, their gratifying their Avarice, their Ambition, their Revenge” (37), and pointed out to them that they themselves were now pursuing the path of self-interested politics.

Soon after Townshend and Walpole returned to the fold of the administration in 1720, a new opposition led by William, 1st Earl Cowper, began to emerge in the Lords (Jones 310). These discontented Whigs and Tories collaborated in an organised fashion until 1723 and were held together by their

disgust at Sunderland’s handling of the South Sea Crisis, and the injustices subsequently perpetrated by the Townshend/Walpole ministry in response to the Jacobite conspiracy (316);

the banner under which they united was that of the long continuum of Country Whiggery, which emphasised an incorrupt pursuit of public interest. The tone employed by Cowper and his followers echoed the sentiments of seventeenth-century thinkers such as Algernon Sidney, James Harrington and Henry “Old Plato” Neville, highlighting the

threat posed to the realm's balanced constitution by corrupt ministers, who no longer possessed "the public spirit and civic virtue needed to lead the resistance to arbitrary power" (Dickinson 109). It is important to remember that the Country Whig notion of corruption did not merely refer to the crown's use of patronage in order to influence Members of Parliament, but in addition encompassed "the substitution of private for public authority, of dependence for independence" (Pocock 407). Unlike the rather more mercenary opposition of Townshend and Walpole of the preceding years, Cowper's opposition in the Lords once again revived the ideology of Old Whiggery in a highly vocal fashion. The well-known opposition group around Viscount Bolingbroke and William Pultney which emerged in the Commons in the mid-1720s was, of course, to continue Cowper's legacy of a Patriot opposition to Walpole.

The parallels between Ravenscroft's *Titus* and contemporary politics are readily apparent. Echoing the Whig ministry of 1716, *Titus* regards frequent elections to be undesirable. In an effort to avoid what he considers unnecessary elections, the old general disregards the voice of the people and thus sets in motion Rome's constitutional decline into tyranny. As we have seen, opponents of the Septennial Act described the ministry's act of political expediency in very similar terms. Similarly, contemporary assessments of Townshend and Walpole's actions during their time in opposition may comfortably be applied to the failings of *Titus*. The duo's strategy of continuously blocking governmental policies was motivated purely and explicitly by self-interest and a desire to establish themselves as the undisputed power brokers of their time. It is important to recall that contemporary commentators considered the brothers-in-law's move into opposition as an act of (private) revenge. In their efforts to assert their authority in the power struggle with Stanhope and Sunderland, Townshend and Walpole, Tindal tells us, were prepared to risk "every Thing, Civil and Sacred." Of course, *Titus* does exactly that, and more: he destroys everything civil and sacred by sanctioning an act of private and rather barbaric revenge, while his misguided political decisions, which are

strongly influenced by personal rather than public considerations, allow a tyrant to assume the empery. *Titus* thus mirrored, and brought to a logical conclusion, what opposition politicians and contemporary commentators identified as the shortcomings of the nation's political leadership. In this respect, Ravenscroft's adaptation may plausibly be described as a topical cautionary tale.

Country Whiggery did not exclusively deal in negatives, of course, and it is in the context of the most celebrated concept of country ideology, "virtue," that *Titus*'s status as an anti-hero becomes most apparent. It was the republican hero Cato who represented the ideal personification of virtue. It is to Cato, Addison tells us, that we need to lift our eyes if we want to

[...] see to what godlike height
 The Roman virtues lift up mortal man.
 While good, and just, and anxious for his friends,
 He's still severely bent against himself;
 Renouncing sleep, and rest, and food, and ease,
 He strives with thirst and hunger, toil and heat;
 And when his fortune sets before him all
 The poms and pleasures that his soul can wish,
 His rigid virtue will accept of none. (1.1.50-58)

The contrast with the tired old Roman general could not be greater. Although Cato's benevolence makes him sympathetic to those closest to him, he never loses sight of his role of servant to the Republic. Neither personal allegiances and bribes nor physical and mental exhaustion can sway Cato, as he stoically resists the temptation to substitute public with private authority. His "rigid virtue" protects his political independence, while his "steadiness of mind" gives him the necessary detachment to triumph "in the midst of all his sufferings" (1.1.79-80). A definition of "virtue" by two of the foremost country writers of the period, John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon, highlights *Titus*'s failings in a yet clearer light. The following passage appeared in Issue 39 of the highly influential periodical *Cato's Letters* in 1721:

There is scarce any one of the passions but what is truly laudable when it centers in the publick, and makes that its object. Ambition, avarice, revenge,

are all so many virtues, when they aim at the general welfare. I know that it is exceeding hard and rare, for any man to separate his passions from his own person and interest; but it is certain that there have been such men. Brutus, Cato, Regulus, Timoleon, Dion, and Epaminondas, were such, as were many more ancient Greeks and Romans; and, I hope, England has still some such. And though, in pursuing publick views, men regard themselves and their own advantages; yet if they regard the publick more, or their own in subserviency to the publick, they may justly be esteemed virtuous and good. (Vol. 1, 276-77)

Titus fails to adhere to this definition of the country ideal at a very fundamental level. Lacking Cato's stoicism and "steadiness of mind," the old general's revenge against the Goths is clearly motivated by his personal passions and interest; the sacrifice of Alarbus does not "centre in the public" nor does it "aim at the general welfare." If private interest and corruption represent the antithesis of civic virtue, then Ravenscroft's Titus is the antithesis of Cato. It is perhaps for this reason, in addition to dramatic considerations, that "republican" James Quin chose to act the part of Aaron rather than that of the protagonist. Despite Aaron's status as the play's obvious villain, it is actually the Moor who eventually "points the moral" (Bate 51) in Ravenscroft's adaptation, emerging as the unexpectedly humane counterpart to vengeful and infanticidal Titus and Tamora (Bate 53).

The textual and contextual evidence that has been presented in this article suggests that the seven-season revival of *Titus Andronicus* which began in 1717 had a political dimension. The available information concerning James Quin, the man responsible for the revival of the play, indicates strongly that he held Country Whig sentiments and that he had a special interest in Patriot plays. A careful reading of the text demonstrates that Ravenscroft's adaptation of Shakespeare's revenge tragedy represents a cautionary tale that was informed by Country Whig ideas and ideals, and it is likely that it was for this reason that Quin kept the play in the public domain for seven years. Moreover, the political and moral failings of Titus could be readily applied to contemporary Court politics and politicians, which suggests that the play held more than a merely aesthetic appeal for its audiences. Indeed, the oppositional character of the play and Quin's

own beliefs may also be reflected in the fact that the actor moved from the theatre in Drury Lane to Lincoln's Inn Fields in 1720, taking the play with him (*Titus* was performed for the first time at Lincoln's Inn Fields on 21 December of that year, see Avery 605). Interestingly, it is around this time that Drury Lane became associated with the "Walpole against the anti-Walpole Whigs, and Lincoln's Inn Fields [...] to some degree identified with the opposing groups" (Loftis 84). It might also be noted that Ravenscroft's adaptation was initially advertised as "Written by Shakespear. Revis'd with Alterations," thus deviating from the dominant trend of disassociating the play from the original author's name. Shakespeare's work, it seems, was being used in the services of Patriot politics somewhat earlier than has hitherto been assumed.

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NOTES

¹See also Avery 458-59, 499, 544, 605-06, 613, 634, 683, 766.

²References to Ravenscroft's adaptation will offer act and scene numbers only, as the text contains no line numbers. References to Shakespeare's original text are to the Arden 3rd series edition.

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The Tempest in the Trivium

DAN HARDER

To the delight of his audiences, both past and present, Shakespeare rarely created names of stubbornly obscure origin. In his last play, however, it seems he did just that. I refer, namely, to Sycorax—witch-mother of Caliban and, though absent, arch enemy of Prospero in *The Tempest*. Minor and unseen as she is, she is mentioned by name seven times and is a major topic of dispute between Caliban, her son, and Prospero, her rival. Over one hundred and twenty lines are devoted to Prospero's wrangling, first with Ariel then with Caliban, about the nature and effect of "this damned witch Sycorax."¹ She represents nothing less important than the island's other magician to whom Prospero is implicitly compared.

In naming his characters, Shakespeare typically either found a well-known historical and/or mythological precedent, used a clearly allegorical name, or coined a name from recognizable parts or sources. Such audience-friendly habits, however, seem to have been ignored when it came to the name "Sycorax." Far from common-knowledge, we are told it is Classical Greek for sow (*sys*) and raven/crow (*corax*),² heartbreaker (*psychorrhax*),³ fig (*sukon*) and spider (*rax*),⁴ "Go to Hell" (*es kórakas*),⁵ Arabic for "deceiver" (*shokoreth*),⁶ a thematically significant misspelling of Scythian⁷—and the list of recondite improbabilities goes on.

There is, however, a simpler, funnier, and more thematically pertinent solution and one that fits what Shakespeare was wont to do so often in his preceding plays: poke fun at pedants and pedantry. The target of his scorn this time is no less than the first 'trial lawyer' and the commonly acknowledged progenitor of the art of rhetoric. This

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magician of language, this witch of rhetorical exercise, was the fifth century Greek, Corax of Syracuse. Snip a syllable from one word, snap it on another and, quick and home, Corax of Syracuse becomes Sycorax, a portmanteau of significant jest.

Because Shakespeare got at least most, if not all, of a grammar school education, he would have studied the famous and inescapable Trivium (logic, grammar, and rhetoric all taught in Latin), the three subjects most basic to the “liberal arts”—subjects in which Prospero claims to have excelled “without a parallel.”⁸

The *Ad Herennium*, and the works of Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian were the principle sources for grammar school rhetoric and the latter three mention Corax, the Sicilian, as the sole founder, or, with his student Tisias, co-founder of the first ‘systematic’ rhetoric.⁹ He is also obliquely mentioned by Plato who, along with Aristotle, questions the logical soundness of the rhetorical ‘reasoning’ (the doctrine of *εἰκός*)¹⁰ Corax supposedly taught to various citizens of Syracuse who hoped to persuade the courts of their property rights after the fall of the Tyrants, circa 467 BCE. Not only would Shakespeare likely have known much, if not all of this, but much of his all-important audience would have known this, too. The name Corax of Syracuse, or anything significantly like it, reverberated with all sorts of recollections, and not all of them pleasant.

Such a reference, as well, enhances certain thematic concerns, especially in Act 1, scene 2. This entire scene is either exposition or verbal jockeying for position. When it becomes the latter, when, that is, Ariel asks for his liberty and Caliban asks for his land, it becomes a forum for Prospero’s oratorical wizardry. And this is precisely the moment of Sycorax’s ‘nominal’ entrance.

Much of the important business at the end of *The Tempest*’s long second scene deals with establishing who has the better claim to the island in a dispute over property rights, AND who can present that claim most persuasively. It is because of Prospero’s superior skill at rhetorical manipulation that he wins the argument. Clearly, his claim is based on his superior “nature”—he is the civilized one and brings

to the island superior qualities. And although it is not the possible cacophony of Sycorax's speeches ("terrible/To enter human hearing"¹¹) that bothers but the vile nature of her sorceries that is most offensive, it is, nonetheless, clear that some of the threads Shakespeare braids into his web of motifs explore the use and abuse of rhetoric and the magical/poetical art of language. The "nature" of good and evil may be the most important aspect, but its fundamental, inextricable relationship to the art of persuasion cannot be ignored.

Prospero reaches the pinnacle of rhetorical skill, and such skill is truly magical. He—and by extension, Shakespeare—bests the best, the very founder of one of the three liberal arts of the Trivium. In *The Tempest*, Corax of Syracuse, the 'inventor of rhetoric,' is unseated by the "upstart crow" on the Jacobean stage.

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NOTES

¹Stephen Orgel, ed., *The Tempest* (Oxford: OUP, 1998) 1.2.264.

²J. Madison Davis, and A. Daniel Frankforter, *The Shakespeare Name Dictionary* (New York: Garland, 1995) 472.

³Davis and Frankforter 472.

⁴Davis and Frankforter 472. This and the two preceding suggestions rest on assumptions that Shakespeare had to have been conversant in, or at least quite familiar with, Classical Greek, assumptions refuted by, among others, T. W. Baldwin in his two volume study, *William Shakspeare's Small Latine and Lesse Greeke* (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1944).

⁵Katherine Callen King, "Go to Hell, Sycorax," *English Language Notes* 27.4 (1990): 1-3.

⁶Davis and Frankforter 472.

⁷Stephen Orgel, "Introduction," *The Tempest*, ed. Stephen Orgel (Oxford: OUP, 1998) 1-87, 19. It should be noted that this, as well as some of the previous suggestions, rest, at least partially, on the supposed connection between Shakespeare's Sycorax and Ovid's Medea. There is, indeed, ample evidence in *The Tempest* that Shakespeare refers to passages of Ovid's *Medea* 7, particularly in Act 5. However,

there is no philological evidence to support such a connection between these two very different “witches.” Ovid uses the word *cornicis*, not *korax* or *corax*. *Cornicis* is the genitive form of *cornix*, meaning “crow,” which connects rather poorly with the name Sycorax. Or, had Shakespeare taken the 1567 Golding translation for his inspiration, as numerous scholars suggest, he would have read the word “crowe,” not “raven”—clearly no nominative connection here, either.

⁸*The Tempest* 1.2.73-74.

⁹Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 1402a; Cicero, *Brutus* 46; Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria* 3.1.8.

¹⁰D. A. G. Hinks, “Tisias and Corax and the Invention of Rhetoric,” *Classical Quarterly* 34 (1940): 61-69. Hinks goes to great lengths to point out the rough reviews both Plato in the *Phaedrus* (272D and 261B) and Aristotle in the *Rhetoric* (1354b and 1402a) give Corax and Tisias’ “eristic” approach to argumentation and truth. Numerous less damaging references to Corax can be found in the *Prolegomena*, ready-made introductions (*prolegomena*) to the study of rhetoric written by thirty-four different authors between the third and thirteenth century. See Stanley Wilcox, “Corax and the *Prolegomena*,” *American Journal of Philology* 64.1 (1943): 1-23 for a discussion of just how extensive references to Corax were in these works. It should be noted, however, that these were Byzantine authors, not European, and hence, their work may not have been well-known, if known at all, in Renaissance England. Nonetheless, the Renaissance—a period Heinrich F. Plett calls “eine rhetorische Kulturepoche” (“Rhetorik der Renaissance—Renaissance der Rhetorik,” *Renaissance-Rhetorik/Renaissance-Rhetoric*, ed. Heinrich F. Plett [Berlin: de Gruyter, 1993] 1-20, 14)—occasioned a fascination with all things Greek and rhetorical such that these *prolegomena*, written in Greek about Classical Greek rhetoric, may very well have caught the attention of various European scholars and even trickled into the teaching of the Trivium. Given the importance Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian accord Corax, however, such Byzantine references would hardly need to have been known to have given Corax of Syracuse an important place in the teaching of rhetoric in 16th century England.

¹¹*The Tempest* 1.2.264-65.

P. G. Wodehouse Linguist?¹

BARBARA C. BOWEN

One of the world's great comic writers, "English literature's performing flea" (according to Sean O'Casey), a linguist? Surely not. In the first place, we Brits have traditionally been resistant to learning foreign languages (on the grounds that English should be good enough for everybody); in the second place, PG received the then-standard English public-school education, which stressed Latin and Greek but certainly not any living foreign languages; in the third place the only foreign countries he visited, as far as I know, were France, Germany (through no fault of his own), and the United States, which became his home. Critics have not to my knowledge ever thought of him as a linguist; when Thelma Cazalet-Keir says "For me it is in his use of language that Mr. Wodehouse appears supremely," she is thinking of his highly literary style and "concentration of verbal felicities."²

But linguists are born, not made, and this article will contend that PG had a natural gift for language, both for the almost endless variations on his own, and for a surprising number of foreign and pseudo-foreign tongues. He also wrote in several letters to Bill Townsend that he thought of his books as stage plays, which means he was listening to his characters speaking as he wrote. In his first published book, *The Pothunters* (1902), we can listen to schoolboys: "That rotter, Reade, [...] has been telling us that burglary chestnut of his all the morning. I wish you chaps wouldn't encourage him" (ch. 3), gamekeepers: "Got yer!" (ch. 8), a Scotland Yard detective, the local aristocrat Sir Alfred Venner, Dawkins the gym instructor and boxing coach: "The 'ole thing ... is to feint with your left and 'it with your right" (ch. 1), and assorted other low-class characters. A mixture of upper and lower

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class speech, in fact, which will be characteristic of nearly all the books to follow. And also like most of its successors, *The Pothunters* contains a surprisingly large proportion of reported speech, as compared to narrative.

1. British and American English

PG's variations on British English are legion; to name the most obvious: Scottish (most notably in Lord Emsworth's gardener McAllister), Irish (as early as the school stories), and a great deal of Cockney. Cockney servants deform words picturesquely, like the housemaid Elsie Bean's "Dishpot!"³ and the valet Augustus Robb's "Brekfuss."⁴ Londoners in the street say things like "E's the bloke wot 'it yer, Bill,"⁵ or "Mordee! Cummere! Cummere quick! Sumfin' hap'nin!"⁶ In the course of a discussion at a coffee stall among London cabmen we hear this: "Yus, I do wish I wos in Russher ... Because yer can wade over yer knees in bla-a-a-ad there."⁷ Perhaps the gem of the Cockney collection is pageboy Albert's recitation of Tennyson's "Maud":

'Wiv blekest morss the flower-ports
Was—I mean were—crusted one and orl;
Ther rusted nils fell from the knorts
That 'eld the pear to the garden-worll.⁸

Occasionally, important characters are Cockneys, like Syd Price and Ma Price in *If I Were You* and the butler Chippendale (actually a broker's man in disguise) in *The Girl in Blue*.

We also recognise a number of English country speech patterns, not always easily identifiable except for the Yorkshireman's "Ba goom!"⁹ Situation rather than form leads me to identify as country dialect Ukridge's Hired Retainer's "The 'ole thing 'ere ... is these 'ere fowls have been and got the roop,"¹⁰ and Constable Butt's report to Wrykyn, the substitute for PG's Dulwich in the early school books: "'Wot's this all about, I wonder?' I says. 'Blow me if I don't think it's a frakkus.'"¹¹ And PG's versatility produced hilarious examples of stuttering, Made-

leine Bassett's baby-talk, the tautology of crossword addicts ("I'm so sorry," she murmured. "So very sorry, grieved, distressed, afflicted, pained, mortified, dejected and upset"¹²), pseudo-medieval English ("Ytte was suche a dam near squeake as I never wante to have agayne in a month of Sundays"¹³), Lord Emsworth's pig-man with no roof to his mouth ("Wah yah dah" means 'What are you doing?'¹⁴), and the grandiloquent periphrases of the imaginary kingdom of Oom ("If you know a superior excavation, go to it"¹⁵). PG has a keen ear for the comic distortions of lower-class speech, as in "Wodyer mean, you didn't tavvernaccident? ... You muster radernaccident,"¹⁶ or, à propos of a damaged hat: "Here's your rat. A little the worse for wear, this sat is ... You can't step on a nat ... not without hurting it. That tat is not the yat it was."¹⁷

This is already impressive evidence of PG's mastery of the English language(s), I think. But he spent most of his life in the United States, and probably gives us as many varieties of American as of English. As well as the gangsters Chimp Twist and Soapy Molloy, who crop up in at least half a dozen books published over a 50-year span, we meet many other criminal types ("Ah chee! ... Quit yer kiddin'! What was youse rubberin' around de house for last night if you wasn't trailin' de kid?"¹⁸) as well as prize-fighters, New York Irish cops, one Negro elevator man ("Misto' Jeeves done give me them purple socks, as you told him. Thank yo' very much, suh!"¹⁹), an American 'synthetic Westerner': "The West! Why, it's like a mother to me! I love every flower that blooms on the broad bosom of its sweeping plains, every sun-kissed peak of its everlasting hills,"²⁰ and a female private eye whose speech sounds to me like nothing on this earth ("Gladda meecher, siz Pett. Mr Sturge semme up. Said y'ad job f'r me. Came here squick scould"²¹). Perhaps the book richest in a variety of American voices is *Psmith Journalist*, set in New York, in which we meet the office boy Pugsy Maloney, who rescues a cat ("Dere was two fellers in de street sickin' a dawg on to her. An' I comes up an' says, 'G'wan! What do youse t'ink you're doin', fussin' de poor dumb animal?"), the cat's owner, Bat Jarvis, leader of the Groome Street Gang ("Pipe de collar

... Mine, mister"), Kid Brady the boxer ("I ups with an awful half-scissor hook to the plexus, and in the next round I seen Benson has a chunk of yellow, and I gets in with a hay-maker ..."), an assortment of low-life characters, and some New York policemen.

Numerous books put both Brits and Americans on stage, either because the characters travel or because Americans are imported into England. To take only two examples, in *A Gentleman of Leisure* the action begins in New York, and when it moves to London imports the Bowery burglar Spike and the crooked cop McEachern into the society of Lords and baronets; and in *Bill the Conqueror* a quiet London suburb is invaded by American crooks, one of them a small boy (who pronounces Burgundy "Boigundy"). According to Richard Usborne, PG does not always clearly distinguish English and American—for instance, in *A Damsel in Distress*, George Bevan the American speaks just like a Brit,²² and this may well be true. But I find quite convincing both the times when characters who have been wearing a mask are forced to revert to their natural American speech (Mrs. Gedge in *Hot Water*), and the occasional exchanges about English and American, trousers vs. pants or tomato vs. tomatto (see Tubby and Pru in *Summer Moonshine*, ch. 24).

2. Foreign Tongues

But a linguist worth his salt, we feel, should also be at home in a few of the planet's 5,000 or so foreign tongues, and PG shows some familiarity with a surprising number of them. Apart from the frequent Latin tags and the fairly frequent French words and expressions, of which more anon, he gives us samples of real or pseudo-German, American Indian, Italian, Swedish, Hindustani, Cantonese, and possibly Swahili, besides charming examples of foreigners speaking English, like the Russian golf enthusiast in "The Clicking of Cuthbert" who says things like "Goot-a-bye," "Zank you" and "My friend Cootabout." And let's not forget the ostensibly Filipino footman in *Laughing Gas*, whose

“Excuse yes possibly ... chap at door” (ch. 11) and “Excuse yes, you come no, please undoubtedly” (ch. 18) turn out to be fake—we’re in Hollywood, and he’s hoping for a movie role.

It is not always easy to decide whether PG is genuinely knowledgeable about languages, or making them up as he goes along. We may be fairly sure that his samples of American Indian are not authentic, e.g.: “Comrade Windsor was known to the Indians as Boola-Ba-Na-Gosh, which, as you doubtless know, signifies Big-Chief-Who-Can-Hear-A-Fly-Clear-Its-Throat,”²³ and I would have assumed the same of: “‘Svensk!’ exclaimed Mr. Swenson, or whatever it is that natives of Sweden exclaim in moments of justifiable annoyance”²⁴—had not a helpful colleague informed me that *svensk* simply means ‘Swedish.’

PG’s Italian can sound convincing, but was obviously minimal; he is a past master at creating the impression of authenticity, as with the exclamation “Casta dimura salve e pura!”²⁵ which in fact makes no sense. In *The Adventures of Sally* (ch. 16) we witness an argument between two Italian waiters whose speech is a hilarious mixture of Italian and Spanish with a few odd words thrown in: “Batti, batti! I presto ravioli hollandaise,” says the first waiter. The second retorts “La Donna e mobile spaghetti napoli Tettrasina”; the first comes back with “Infanta Isabella lope [sic] de Vegas [sic] mulligatawny Toronto,” to be countered with “Funiculi funicula Vincente y Blasco Ibanez vermicelli sul campo della gloria risotto!” This is another excellent example of PG’s ear for phrasing and cadence—it’s gobbledydook, but read rapidly it sounds very much like Italian.

We come now to the most intriguing case, which strikingly demonstrates PG’s linguistic virtuosity: the numerous foreign words and expressions pronounced (or thought) by the retired British Army Captain Biggar in *The Return of Jeeves (Ring for Jeeves)*. Since at the end of the book the Captain is heard humming a Swahili wedding march, the reader might assume that he is speaking Swahili, and some words are at least close to those in the Swahili dictionary: “Mun py nawn lap lao!” for instance (ch. 14), or “Chang suark!” (ch. 59). However, other dictionaries tell us that a *gin pahit* is a genuine drink offered at the

Malay Club, that a *baht* is (or was?) the basic monetary unit of Thailand, and a *tical* a coin used in Thailand and Burma.

And the plot continues to thicken ... An Indian colleague informs me that in Hindustani *Ghazi* means a crusader, *Havildar* is a low rank in the British Indian Army, PG's "the bimbo or tall grass" (ch. 5) is probably the Indian plant *bimba*, and that "Yogi Tulsiram Jaginath" (ch. 8) is the name of a yogi or holy man. More tentatively, another advisor suggests that several expressions are Cantonese, including "Meh nee pan kong" (ch. 5) and "Ai deng" (ch. 12; "Ai" means 'love'). So PG is apparently doing here exactly what he did with 'Italian': juxtaposing words of different origins, which astonishingly seem to make up a coherent language. But what are all the unidentified words? Perhaps readers of *Connotations* can help unravel this puzzle.

Turning now to the languages PG obviously did know, German is not as often found as we might expect, probably in deference to the events of World War II. In *Summer Moonshine* he gives the comic name of Princess von und zu Dwornitzchek to one of his most unpleasant characters, and the apparently spoof book title *Die Zeitbestimmung des Tragbaren Durchgangsinstruments im Verticale des Polarsterns*²⁶ turns out to be an authentic astronomical work by one Wilhelm Dollen, first published in 1863. We hear the pronunciation of at least two German characters, a German servant named Adolf²⁷: "In dze garten zis morning, I did zee you giss Violed," and a German waiter²⁸: "Der gendleman ... haf everything exblained. All will now quite satisfactory be." This last example combines pronunciation and sentence structure, and the latter is the basis of the psychologist Schwertfeger's comments about the jilted lover²⁹:

Having round the corner nipped and the good, stiff drink taken ... the subject will now all food-nourishment refuse and in 87.06 per cent of cases will for a long and muscle-exercising walk along the high road or across country, at a considerable rate of speed and in much soul-agitation go.

This sentence shows a keen ear both for rhythm (verb at the end) and for German compounds ("food-nourishment," "soul-agitation").

There are two languages with which we would expect PG to be thoroughly familiar. The first is Latin, in which he obviously had a thorough grounding at Dulwich, and which he uses less than we might have anticipated—for fear of being thought an intellectual snob, perhaps? The books contain a scattering of Latin clichés, used much as the French authors of the *Astérix* comic books use them: *nolle prosequi, carpe diem, tempora mutantur* ... and half a dozen others including Jeeves's favourite: *rem acu tegisti* (= 'you've hit the nail on the head'). Anything less well-known is translated in the text: *Archilochum proprio rabies armavit iambo*,³⁰ *Aequam memento rebus in arduis servoare mentem*,³¹ *Quis custodiet ipsos custodes*,³² and *Medio de fonte leporem surgit amari aliquid in ipsis floribus angat*,³³ obligingly translated by Jeeves for Bertie, who knows no Latin.

PG's insouciant rendering of these chestnuts shows the familiarity with Latin which we would have assumed (I leave aside the enumeration of the bacteria of milk in *Doctor Sally*, ch. 16: *Cavillus acidi lactici, Bacillus lactis acidi* and eight others, since no Latin is necessary to consult a reference work). All the more astonishing, then, is his first use of Latin, in the first book he published, *The Pothunters* (1902). This is a correct line and a half of Latin hexameter: *Conscia mens recti* ('a mind that knows what's right,') *nec si sinit esse dolorem* ('nor if it allows grief to exist') / *Sed revocare gradum* ('but to retrace one's path'; I am, as so often, indebted to the Classical expertise of my colleague Chris Brunelle), but there are two problems here.

First, this Latin quotation is attributed, not to any Latin author, but to "our friend Thucydides"—who wrote in Greek; secondly, it consists of a quotation from Ovid (the first three words), some words found nowhere in Classical Latin (the next five), and a quotation from Virgil. What is PG up to here? This first book is a school story and the speaker a schoolboy; in 1902 presumably a majority of schoolboys (the intended readers) knew Latin, so is this a puzzle intended to be solved? I confess bafflement.

Finally, let's come to the *bonne bouche*: PG's knowledge of, and use of, French. One of the early school stories already includes a French

boy whose English is problematic: "M'Todd, he is downstairs—but to wait? No, no. Let us. Shall we? Is it not so? Yes?"³⁴ and as early as *The Man Upstairs* (1914) there are three examples of characters using French.³⁵ Well over 20 books have at least a few words and phrases in French, usually of the basic kind ("faute de mieux," "joie de vivre," "noblesse oblige," "Mais oui, mais oui, c'est trop fort!"; the only French Bill Hollister knows in *Something Fishy* is "L'addition," and "Oo la la!"). PG was obviously familiar with French casinos, and fond of French food; I counted at least two dozen French menu terms ranging from *consommé aux pommes d'amour* to *ris de veau à la financière*, and not including some charming approximations ("le Bird of some kind with chipped potatoes").

As we might expect, PG has a very good ear for French people speaking English, especially Packy's friend the Vicomte de Blissac in *Hot Water*, and for characters pretending to be French, like Lord Biskerton in *Big Money*: "... is it that you could dee-reck-ut me to Less-esser Skervare?" He also rings variations on the Englishman trying to speak French, like Bingo in *Eggs, Beans and Crumpets* asking the hotel concierge: "Esker-vous avez dans votre hôtel ... un oiseau avec beaucoup de ... Oh hell, what's the French for pimples?" (The concierge, who no doubt speaks excellent English, supplies "boutons"). And *The Luck of the Bodkins* begins with Monty's attempt, mindful of the instructions of his fiancée Gertrude, to practice his French on a French waiter: "Er, garçon, esker-vous avez un spot de l'encre et une pièce de papier—note-papier, vous savez—et une enveloppe et une plume?" The waiter's fiancée, however, has told him that he must be sure to practise his English while working on the Riviera, so he returns to Monty with "Eenk—pin—pipper—enveloppe—and a liddle bit of bloddin-pipper." Later Monty rashly asks the same waiter if he knows how to spell 'sciatica,' which the waiter of course does—in French: "Comme ça, monsieur. Like zis, boy. Wit' a ess, wit' a say, wit' a ee, wit' a arr, wit' a tay, wit' a ee, wit' a ku, wit' a uh, wit'a a ay. V'là! Sciatique." While of no help to Monty, this once again shows up PG's phenomenally keen ear for language difference.

Bertie's Aunt Dahlia has a French chef, Anatole, to whose cooking Bertie is devoted, and who (alas, only once) is infuriated to the point of delivering a fierce tirade about the man making faces at him through the skylight of his room. Part of this tirade runs as follows:

Wait yet a little. I am not finish. I say I see this type on my window, making a few faces. But what then? Does he buzz off when I shout a cry, and leave me peaceable? Not on your life. He remain planted there, not giving any damns, and sit regarding me like a cat watching a duck. He make faces against me and again he make faces against me, and the more I command that he should get to hell out of here, the more he do not get to hell out of here. He cry something towards me, and I demand what is his desire, but he do not explain. Oh, no, that arrives never. He does but shrug his head. What damn silliness! Is this amusing for me? You think I like it? I am not content with such folly. I think the poor mutt's loony. *Je me fiche de ce type infect. C'est idiot de faire comme ça l'oiseau ... Allez-vous-en, louffier ...* Tell the boob to go away. He is mad as some March hatters.³⁶

This is only one of three superb paragraphs of French-flavoured English; later in the scene, after the man on the roof (actually Bertie's friend Gussie Fink-Nottle) has been let into the room, Anatole is so moved that he reverts entirely to French: "Words like '*marmiton de Domange*,' '*pignouf*,' '*hurluberlu*,' and '*roustisseur*,' were fluttering from him like bats out of a barn."

PG's preface to the 1974 reprint of *French Leave* tells us that in 1930-35 he lived near Cannes and tried to learn French in the local Berlitz school and by reading Colette, Courteline and *La Vie Parisienne*. He also says there: "I never succeeded in speaking French," but it's hard to believe that a man who could play with a language on the page with such a keen ear (Jerry Shoemith in *Frozen Assets* is addressed by the French police sergeant as "Zoosmeet") could not also speak it. *French Leave*, not surprisingly, takes place mainly in France; it contains many phrases in French and a protagonist named Nicolas Jules St Xavier Auguste, Marquis de Maufringneuse et Valerie-Moberanne, who has a mundane job in a ministry as "*employé attaché à l'expédition du troisième bureau* (which means clerk)" (ch. 2).

3. Conclusions?

So may Wodehouse be justifiably referred to as a linguist? Not that Noam Chomsky or George Steiner would so recognise him, but if a linguist can also be someone with a phenomenal ear who likes nothing better than to play with how language sounds, and how to transfer that sound to the page, then I believe he qualifies. He can reproduce the effect of the languages he knows, British and American English, German, Latin and French, either in the original or in fractured translation; he can create the impression that he knows Swedish or Italian by stringing words together into (actually nonsensical) phrases; and he can dream up an entire 'language' which sounds authentic, out of words taken from who knows how many different ones, as he does with Captian Biggar's 'African.' Of course his books are also about funny situations, funny objects, and funny characters, but readers have not paid sufficient attention, I think, to the almost endless varieties of English and to the quite numerous real, imaginary and mangled foreign languages spoken by those characters. Anyone, no doubt, could learn enough French to reproduce PG's clichés and menu items, but only a natural-born linguist could render the rhythms of a foreign language in English, or play so successfully with a smattering of a given language to create an effect of mastery. Writing this article provided me with two surprises: the (so far unresolved) 'African' language problem, and the mystery of his first published sample of Latin. But it is surely no surprise that PG wrote so much for the theatre; he is constantly listening to his creations as they talk, and they talk, as I hope to have shown, hilariously.

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NOTES

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²In her introduction to *Homage to P. G. Wodehouse* (London: Barrie and Jenkins, 1973) 5.

³*Uncle Dynamite*, ch. 9.

⁴*Spring Fever*, ch. 2.

⁵*Psmith in the City*, ch. 15.

⁶*A Damsel in Distress*, ch. 3.

⁷*A Gentleman of Leisure*, ch. 9.

⁸*A Damsel in Distress*, ch. 9.

⁹*Jeeves and the Feudal Spirit*, ch. 21.

¹⁰*Love among the Chickens*, ch. 9.

¹¹*Mike at Wrykyn*, ch. 9.

¹²*Meet Mr. Mulliner*, ch. 1.

¹³*The Luck of the Bodkins*, ch. 12.

¹⁴*Full Moon*, ch. 10.

¹⁵"The Coming of Gowf," in *The Clicking of Cuthbert*.

¹⁶*Summer Moonshine*, ch. 19.

¹⁷*Mr. Mulliner Speaking*, ch. 9.

¹⁸*The Little Nugget*, ch. 6.

¹⁹*The Inimitable Jeeves*, ch. 10

²⁰*The Small Bachelor*, ch. 2.

²¹Miss Trimble in *Piccadilly Jim*, ch. 17.

²²Richard Usborne, *Wodehouse at Work to the End* (London: Barrie and Jenkins, 1976) 82.

²³*Psmith, Journalist*, ch. 11.

²⁴*The Girl on the Boat*, ch. 2.

²⁵*The Small Bachelor*, ch. 16.

²⁶*The Old Reliable*, ch. 17.

²⁷"Out of School," in *The Man Upstairs*.

²⁸*Psmith Journalist*, ch. 3.

²⁹*Hot Water*, ch. 17.

³⁰*The Girl on the Boat*, ch. 8.

³¹*The Girl on the Boat*, ch. 17.

³²*The Code of the Woosters*, ch. 9.

³³*Much Obliged, Jeeves*, ch. 17.

³⁴*The Gold Bat*, ch. 10.

³⁵In "Rough-hew Them How We Will," "The Man Who Disliked Cats," and "The Tuppenny Millionaire."

³⁶*Right Ho, Jeeves*, ch. 20.

The American Carnival of *The Great Gatsby**

PHILIP MCGOWAN

I

To argue that F. Scott Fitzgerald's long-held masterpiece *The Great Gatsby* (1925) produces in the United States of the 1920s a replication of Bakhtinian forms of carnival excess and release is an interesting, and indeed productive, deployment of Bakhtin's carnival thesis in conjunction with the multi-textured nature of Fitzgerald's novel. However, while aspects of carnivalised reality undoubtedly populate the novel, there is more going on in this text than a simple one-to-one relation between Bakhtinian carnival theory and Fitzgerald's text might suggest. The social, political and racial issues specific to 1920s America as revealed in the novel require an interpretative frame more agile and more particularised than Bakhtin's explorations of the sixteenth-century French comedies of Rabelais. Bevilacqua's argument, while tracing interesting points of comparison, overlooks the particular consequences of an American variant of carnival form that is rooted in a culture of politicised vision and display initially propagated in an interlocking set of specifically American conditions: nineteenth-century World's Fair culture; the developing commodity culture of the early twentieth century; and the production of narratives of racial and social control within America's visual, entertainment and education cultures. To read *The Great Gatsby* solely in terms of European carnival theory evacuates the particular American politics of

*Reference: Winifred Farrant Bevilacqua, "'... and the long secret extravaganza was played out': *The Great Gatsby* and Carnival in a Bakhtinian Perspective," *Connotations* 13.1-2 (2003/2004): 111-29.

For the original article as well as all contributions to this debate, please check the Connotations website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debbevilacqua01312.htm>>.

Fitzgerald's novel, a politics specifically introduced on its opening page: Nick Carraway's apparently throwaway grievance at being "unjustly accused of being a politician" (7) at college should not be forgotten in a novel that raises a series of difficult questions about political machinations, race, and social exclusion. Moreover, *The Great Gatsby* makes a number of specific as well as implicit references to American variations of carnival form that, while possibly bearing some resemblance to European variants, require specific and careful examination.

While Bevilacqua opens an array of possibilities for comparative reflection on Fitzgerald's novel, her argument can be extended beyond a reading of *The Great Gatsby* that fits the frame of European carnival as outlined by Bakhtin across his works *Rabelais and His World*, *The Dialogic Imagination* and *The Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. Unlike European carnival events and festivals that can be readily situated within particular cultures in terms of yearly week-long events that may or may not coincide with dates in the Christian calendar, American carnival produces an ongoing definition of U.S. cultures through social and racial categorisation. Sited originally in the display halls of World's Fairs and the sideshow tents of freak shows and travelling carnivals, American carnival is, for the purposes of this article, presented as an interpretative and representative phenomenon: activated at both the conscious and unconscious levels, it facilitates a production of white American social control and of the alterity that it seeks to subdue. A fuller account would show the workings of this particularised and interconnected politics of American seeing, display and spectacle in a range of texts: for example Nathaniel Hawthorne's "My Kinsman, Major Molineux" (1832) or Stephen Crane's "The Monster" (1898) from the nineteenth century, or Saul Bellow's *The Victim* (1947) or Paul Auster's *Mr. Vertigo* (1994) from the twentieth.

To summarise the salient features of this form of carnival that are relevant to *The Great Gatsby*, American carnival connotes the capacity of U.S. culture to deploy methods of seeing and representation that

operate along the imbricated contours of race, ethnicity and Otherness. The opportunities and potentials outlined by Bakhtin for the overturning of social order, for a temporary equalising of social status, and for 'becoming' (the social, economic, and individual development that he outlines with regard to Rabelaisian carnival) are reformulated in the United States, repackaged in its variants of carnival form, and consequently restricted to the white audience members and viewers in the nation's display arenas and entertainment zones. Whether in terms of American minstrelsy, freak shows, or World's Fairs (in particular the 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago, and also the 1901 New York Fair), the displayed or carnivalised identities are constricted within a mode of imagery that maintains the absolute difference between spectacle and spectator, the individual subjectivity of the deemed Other overwritten, in particular cases literally blacked out, by a cultural recourse to generalised masks and stereotyped versions of identity.

The placing of the 'subversive' on display in American carnival forms from the 1850s onward produced a ready binary for reinforcing the dominance of white social ordering within the U.S. Certainly in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, America constructed a specific carnival culture that legitimised the white cultural hegemony by displaying Otherness as both monstrous and potentially subversive of white society. America's carnival spaces function as entertainment spaces in which the (white) spectator can, for a small fee payable on admission, witness carnivalised representations of Otherness. These socially and economically sanctioned territories replicate on a larger scale the politics of carnival seeing already alive in the wider culture. As a consequence, a symbiotic relationship of reinforcing belief systems was established between the more overt carnival zones in the United States (its freak shows, its World's Fairs, its travelling carnivals) and a more covert politics of seeing by which American society was continually categorized and interpreted.

II

Turning to Fitzgerald's novel, it becomes clear how American forms of carnival developed beyond the well-defined European variants that interested Bakhtin. Gatsby's house and his parties, on first encounter, appear to offer a duplication of European carnival release, allowing the guests access to a realm where bawdy flirtations and bootleg liquor are the currencies of exchange. The "swirls and eddies" (TGG 47) of Gatsby's partygoers form one homogeneous mass of temporarily equated identity in a carnival realm constructed purely for purposes of spectacle. The carnival land to which they are admitted suspends the social organisations, hierarchies, and prohibitions of outside America in a zone of whites-only leisure. The differentiated identities of these people merge under the influence of alcohol and within the highly coloured carnival environment of Gatsby's mansion, a "factual imitation of some Hôtel de Ville in Normandy" (11). This imported environment of political equality and democratization has its political dimensions obscured on a number of levels: by its use as a site of carnival excess; by its placement within an American culture that carnivalises its methods of seeing and reading identity; and, by its status as a replica of an unspecified French town hall. Gatsby's mansion is simultaneously an intrinsic part of America and is disconnected from it: the replication of influences from Europe (continued in the mansion's Restoration salons and Marie Antoinette rooms) is at odds with American patterns of architecture, but is very much part of an America that juxtaposes the pastiche with the colonial, the modern with the traditional, and the replica with the original.

Gatsby's house, then, is clearly a site of representation; but it is also one of carnival replication. Displacing its previous occupant, pointedly a brewer, the bootlegging Gatsby provides, at one level, a countercultural space for carnival excess beyond the constraints of a Prohibition culture outside its gates. A straight duplication of older European carnival forms could then be argued for, but only if Gatsby's house and its entertainments exist in a realm cut off from the rest of U.S. society, or indeed are subversive of its social and cultural catego-

risations. However, the house, because it functions in the novel as a space of representation, is very much in tune with an American culture and landscape that deploys carnivalised methods of seeing in its organization of social space and class position.

Gatsby himself is more than the self-made hero of Nick Carraway's fiction of memory, however; he is the circus master, the creator of the carnival, the Trimalchio in control of the spectacles and entertainments on offer and upon whose financial resources this whole palace and lifestyle of illusion is based. Gatsby functions as the would-be carnivaliser of reality, a man seeking to suspend, even reverse, time in order to reclaim the object for whom his world of images is constructed. He is the driver of a "circus wagon" (127), of a car that "mirror[s] a dozen suns" (70). His is a life dedicated to the image, to spectacle, to advertisements for himself. Gatsby is both the facilitator of carnival in the text and the central image of the novel's carnival representations. The "World's Fair" (88) of his house is the ultimate incarnation of a landscape dedicated to carnival, to showing the fantasies made possible by capital wealth. Moreover, defining carnival precisely in relation to American World's Fairs culture, Fitzgerald is marking its critical difference from European carnival forms: this is not a place producing a temporary suspension of reality; rather, it is one dedicated to the ongoing illusions of progress and American materialism made possible by Gatsby's own romanticised (by himself and his party guests) if nefarious dealings.

Richard Godden importantly notes how "to see in 1925 was to see through the stencil of the commodity" (78). Indeed, the methods of American seeing in *The Great Gatsby* are also passed through the stencil or prism of American carnival, a framing device controlled by the hegemonic interests of American society. At this time corporate and economic interest groups were intimately involved in the production and maintenance of a commodity culture within the United States. The manipulation of the image, the control of what is seen, and, more importantly, *how* it is seen, is rooted in the power base of America's ruling elite. Nick functions as our representative observer

at times; at others he is a liminal figure, both inside and outside, participant and observer, spectator but never the spectacle or the cause of spectacle. "I was unjustly accused of being a politician" (7); yet, he is undoubtedly a political viewer throughout the text, and his purported objective standpoint is necessarily called into question. By the close, he is tantamount to Gatsby's running mate, the supporting second narrative on Gatsby's dream ticket. As an observer, Nick functions as an ideal American viewer, attracted and repelled by the things he uncovers in the fantasy realms of the northeast coast of the United States.

Nick's house is located "on that slender riotous island which extends itself due east of New York" (10), another U.S. fantasy zone comparable to the nearby Coney Island. His house is advantaged by the views of "the water, a partial view of my neighbour's lawn, and the consoling proximity of millionaires" (11). Nick is a viewer from the outset then, a viewer in particular of the wealth of white America. Indeed, East Egg, the location of Tom and Daisy's colonial mansion, is figured by its "white palaces" (11), and white becomes the colour enduringly associated with this region and its identities. The colour coding of the text—white (Daisy), yellow (the hair colour of most of the characters), grey (the valley of ashes)—designates social and political space in the carnival realms of New York State. Both the homes in East and West Egg are sights of spectacle, Gatsby's "factual imitation" facing the "white palaces of fashionable East Egg," much as the exhibition sites of American World's Fairs, particularly Chicago in 1893, opposed the white structures connoting cultural and technological excellence and progress with the colourful and imported locations of the carnival midway. Tom's house is representative of settled colonial America, in stark contrast to Gatsby's fake palace of representation; Tom's is a house symbolizing the acceptable face of homogeneous white America, and Tom the physical force of white identity. He manipulates the (white) spectator Nick: "wedging his tense arm imperatively under mine, Tom Buchanan compelled me from the room as though he were moving a checker to another square" (17–18).

In this labyrinth of continual whiteness, Tom is the unquestioned master, the controller of the white spectacles of this location; outside of this zone, his power is open to question and subversion. Nick's own self-sufficiency and power to move and to see is dominated at this stage by the physical power of Tom: "his determination to have my company bordered on violence" (30). Moreover, Tom's social and economic power is placed in unequal comparison to Nick's. Nick is not the creator or manipulator of the sights of the East that he has entered and, as with his visits to Gatsby's house, in particular with Daisy on the day of the reunion, he functions in these spaces as a tourist or visitor at an amusement park or a World's Fair.

On his first introduction to Daisy and Jordan, Nick notes that their conversation is "as cool as their white dresses and their impersonal eyes in the absence of all desire" (18). This unfathomable whiteness that Toni Morrison speaks of frames Tom's ensuing diatribe concerning race in contemporary American culture. The combination of his minimal reading, eugenicist ideology, and racist discourse, in conjunction with his economic and physical power, pinpoints Tom as the text's representative of dominant whiteness. If his house is a location of information in the text it is one akin to the eugenicist stalls for fitter families at America's town and country fairs. Eugenicist displays and, by extension, those exhibits that twinned displays of Otherness with "factual" material about them, in America's carnival spaces were able to exploit these two modes of information and entertainment, blurring the boundary between the educative and the fantastical. Tom provides space for the exhibition and consideration of such attitudes. Housed in his predominantly white and enduringly colonial mansion, Tom's need to "nibble at the edge of stale ideas" (27) is satisfied by his control of this space and the activities that take place here.

The Great Gatsby is a text that straddles *the* carnival celebration of the United States: "It was a few days before the Fourth of July" (32). This is a novel mapping the opposed states of pre- and post-Independence America, both in its annual commemoration of the defeat of the imperial forces of Britain on Independence Day, and in its opposition of

carnivalised identities. If carnival is revolution (Eco et al. 3), then the Revolutionary War, and its annual commemoration, is America's main carnival event. Gatsby's house and Myrtle's apartment both contain images of pre-revolution France; these are two characters wishing to invert the realities of their lives as they are, one to gain the memory of his past in Daisy, the other the promise of a future in Tom. However, the retreats they construct speak essentially of un-American things and un-American times: images of Versailles and Marie Antoinette music rooms cut across the contemporary reality of the America in which they live. One possible reason that their dreams fail is that they wish to suspend a reality (figured in their pre-revolution home decor) that is already suspended in post-revolution America, the place where Tom, Daisy, and Nick all live. Here, such monarchical trappings have been discarded, and Gatsby and Myrtle's wishes are at odds with the new political and temporal codes of the day. Wishing to invert what has already been inverted, indeed removed, they are defeated by the realm of American politics. Moreover, the American landscape, viewed through the lens of carnival, becomes a *meta*-physical space: a landscape of the fantastical in which it is the essential unreality of things that captures Nick's imagination, honed as it is on the substantiality of the West. Gatsby and Myrtle are both out of their times and out of sync with the times, and they inhabit locations that predate the formation of an independent United States.

The mappings of New York in the novel alternate between a near-fantastical, wholly fantastical, or ultimately a distorted space of nightmare. It is an American territory populated by diverse carnival and carnivalised figures, and its delineations of white identity in particular highlight the social constructions inherent to this region. The gradations of whiteness in the book are manifold: Daisy and Jordan's performed white inertia; Myrtle's sister whose complexion is "powdered milky white" (36); the anemic, ghostly Wilson; Gatsby's tanned exterior; and Tom's brutal attempts at providing cohesion within his racial grouping. Nick's whiteness is unquestioned but noticeably aligned with a group at Gatsby's first party who "pre-

served a dignified homogeneity, and assumed to itself the function of representing the staid nobility of the country-side—East Egg condescending to West Egg, and carefully on guard against its spectroscopic gayety” (51). Nick is a trans-carnival figure, “within and without, simultaneously enchanted and repelled by the inexhaustible variety of life” (42). Spectator and participant at the same time, he gains access to both sides of America’s boundaries of seeing and spectacle. His reticence and natural slow thinking, however, prevent him literally from making a spectacle of himself; he holds a reserve unknown to Gatsby and Myrtle, the two victims of America’s politicized zones of seeing and being.

A narrowly Bakhtinian reading of this novel would focus on Gatsby’s party and identify its apparent provision of a suspension of social hierarchies as well as of the regular calibrations of time. However, Gatsby’s house and parties are not sites indicative of European carnival. As Nick notes, the correlation between Gatsby’s house and a World’s Fair is prevalent. This is a site of technological innovation and carnival excess: “There was a machine in the kitchen which could extract the juice of two hundred oranges in half an hour if a little button was pressed two hundred times by a butler’s thumb” (45). The machinery of America’s developing commodity culture is on display in this arena that shadows the multicoloured environment of the first World’s Fair of the twentieth century, also staged in New York State, Buffalo’s Rainbow City of 1901: there are “enough coloured lights to make a Christmas tree of Gatsby’s enormous garden” (45); “the halls and salons and verandas are gaudy with primary colours” (46). Although not the white sepulchre of Chicago’s 1893 Exposition, resonating in the white palace of Tom’s colonial mansion, Gatsby’s house is a variation on the American carnival theme. Even the food provided for the guests is entered into the spectacular realm of carnival. Conspicuous consumption is arranged as a feast of carnivalesque display: “On buffet tables, garnished with glistening hors-d’oeuvre, spiced baked hams crowded against salads of harlequin designs and pastry pigs and turkeys bewitched to a dark gold” (45).

The fluid identity of the crowd forms a brand of homogeneous whiteness in a space that matches another New York carnival location, that of Coney Island. The unrestricted entrance to all comers who “conducted themselves according to the rules of behavior associated with an amusement park” (47) figures Gatsby’s house as an alternative Coney Island. It is significant that in mooting a trip away from his own carnival space, Gatsby suggests that he and Nick visit Coney Island (88). White homogeneity exists as a social construct in opposition to the spectacles of carnival on display and realized through the opposition between an observing white elite and the performing white Others at Gatsby’s party. This is a land of “spectroscopic gaiety,” and the homogeneous whiteness to which Nick noticeably attaches himself stands at a remove from the carnival events occurring here. This is an altogether different remove to that of Gatsby; here he is the controller, the master of ceremonies, unknown to the crowd yet the central figure of the circus show. He controls a land of mutating spectacle whereas Tom dominates a land of static whiteness (for example, Daisy’s immobility and inertia, the deflating of Daisy and Jordan’s air-filled couch). Gatsby is the master of ceremonies in “a mansion where he dispensed starlight to casual moths” (85). As with the Coney Island theme park Luna Park for example, this is a place transformed at night, illuminated to provide an alternative carnival realm to those of American daylight.

Part observer, part journalist, part social historian, Nick records the names of the partygoers on a train schedule, “in effect July 5th, 1922” (67). This is a post-holiday timetable and a record of American identities after Independence. It signals alterations of time, the change in schedules after the date of political celebration in the American calendar. The fact that the trains begin again, possibly in a new routine after the fourth of July, indicates the return to order, or the renewal of order in the material world. The continuing suspension of this version of American ‘reality’ in the carnival and entertainment zones of Long Island is a marked distinction. Here, reality is the subject of deception and tricks of light. The politically coloured world of Long Island is a

carnivalised one open to constant manipulation and subterfuge: Nick detects something “sinister” (71) in what Gatsby tells him of his past, having earlier been struck by “the basic insincerity” of Daisy’s words leaving him “uneasy, as though the whole evening had been a trick of some sort to exact a contributory emotion from me” (24). Past and present become entities capable of manipulation in the distorting worlds of East coast carnival.

Fact and fiction in New York’s arenas are seemingly interchangeable. History is a mutable concept and this underpins Gatsby’s project to reclaim Daisy: “‘I’m going to fix everything just the way it was before,’ he said, nodding determinedly. ‘She’ll see’” (117; emphasis added). He is the carnival showman intent on manipulating time, to recreate the past in the present, to provide a space for repeating the past within the exhibition arenas of his carnival world. The ultimate carnivaliser, Gatsby dedicates his time to displays constructed solely for Daisy’s vision. The past functions in his mind as another exhibit capable of repetition and redisplay in the present. To be able to do this requires a site and a sight both capable of incorporating the past and present as well as indications of an innovative future, all of which are realized in the World’s Fair of his house.

However, Daisy does not see, at least not in the ways structured by Gatsby’s vision. The carnival and spectacle of Gatsby’s next party fail to win over this ultimate white viewer:

She was appalled by West Egg, this unprecedented ‘place’ that Broadway had begotten upon a Long Island fishing village—appalled by its raw vigour that chafed under the old euphemisms and by the too obtrusive fate that herded its inhabitants along a short-cut from nothing to nothing. She saw something awful in the very simplicity she failed to understand. (114)

Her response is an unconscious questioning of the reality and substantiality of West Egg, this offshoot of Broadway located outside the city. Broadway, the ultimate incarnation of the theatrical, vaudevillian impulse within American culture, has “begotten” this dubious realm of artificiality and “simplicity,” but she does not comprehend its

meaning. Daisy is not an active reader of social situations and hence her inability to read the carnival excess of Gatsby's party is unsurprising. She is out of place in this multicoloured realm, at one, instead, with the white worlds of her Louisville past and the house she shares with Tom. Daisy's locations in the text are those that are predominantly white: she understands this aspect of the colour-coded register of American society. The gaudy carnival of Gatsby's party is anathema to this pure white reader. Gatsby's versions of carnival, and the creation of his carnivalised zones of entertainment and spectacle, seek something of a Bakhtinian notion of carnival as a suspension of hierarchies. Moreover, at a time of national Prohibition, the ability of Gatsby's fair to include numerous drinks and cordials possibly unknown to his younger guests, provides a flavour of this suspension of hierarchical, legal, and political realities. To the conditioned white reader from America's highest class (Tom and Daisy), such a carnival is a by-product of contemporary American entertainment culture, a miniature Broadway or Coney Island; not a suspension of reality, but an alternative one all of its own.

Boundaries and tensions, emotional, racial, and geographic, divide the carnival and social worlds of the novel. On a ride through Central Park with Jordan, Nick comments how "[w]e passed a barrier of dark trees, and then the façade of Fifty-ninth Street, a block of delicate pale light, beamed down into the park" (86). New York is a space, urban and suburban, that is mapped and marked by distinct colour boundaries. Even the grass between Gatsby's house and Nick's is registered through difference, marking a division between Gatsby's maintained carnival world and Nick's one of "normality." The racial undertones that plot the colour codings of the United States shadow the interactions of Fitzgerald's characters. Brought to a head by Tom in the hotel confrontation with Gatsby, the subversive forces threatening Tom's hegemonic and civilized whiteness are amalgamated into a generalized category of Otherness, the invisible men Tom wishes to remain out of sight:

I suppose the latest thing is to sit back and let Mr Nobody from Nowhere make love to your wife. Well, if that's the idea you can count me out. ... Nowadays people begin by sneering at family life and family institutions, and next they'll throw everything overboard and have intermarriage between black and white. (136)

Tom's manifesto is rooted in Republican conservative American values and stands in sharp contrast to the aspiring independence, even democratic ethos, of Gatsby's position. Conventions are in danger of being suspended or even negated by the carnival interpretations of behaviour symbolized, for Tom, by Gatsby and his dealings with Daisy. The union of black and white is what Tom must resist at all levels. In this codification, Tom is white to Gatsby's "black" Otherness or subversiveness, all of whom are written within the same political register of difference.

Daisy is an emotional and figurative currency between the two men, a valuable prize, a "silver idol" (121), over which they battle for possession. On his first re-encounter with her, Gatsby is significantly clothed "in a white flannel suit, silver shirt, and gold-coloured tie" (90–91); he dresses in a combination of whiteness and of monetary designation, silver and gold, to regain the currency of his lost love, Daisy. He leads her on a guided tour of his house that begins by entrance through an official gate: "Instead of taking the short cut along the Sound we went down the road and entered by the big postern" (97). This is the ceremonial gateway into Gatsby's space of carnival. However, she is out of place here in a World's Fair of French decor and English tailoring. This is a world of illusion to which she is unaccustomed, beyond the white American "reality" that is her home. Gatsby's house is a fantasy realm dedicated to a culture of carnival and conspicuous display and he is the son of a materialist God, the gaudy showmanship of the new century's commercial culture. As with New York's other fantasy realms, Gatsby's dreamland fills out "a satisfactory hint of the unreality of reality" (106). The contingent and material base of the culture is itself based in a visual culture of malle-

able spectacle, and it is to these policies of inversion and replication that Gatsby dedicates himself.

The central opposition in the text is a contrast of standards: the whiteness of the Buchanan world set in opposition to the multicoloured variety of Gatsby's. The violent and aggressive white spectator Tom, and to a lesser extent his wife, recast the world of Gatsby's second party in a new light, through the condescending lens of a higher-class whiteness. The otherwise homogeneous crowd at this party—"There were the same people, or at least the same sort of people"—is added to by a "peculiar quality of oppressiveness" (111). Noticeably, Tom seeks to blend his whiteness with that of the other anonymous partygoers: "I'd rather look at all these famous people in—in oblivion" (112). He desires to hide behind a mask of white identity, the wished-for oblivion of the white homogeneous observer wanting to be nothing but a spectator in this realm where he does not control the spectacles. His inability to do so though, together with Daisy's failure to comprehend the organized spectacles on view, leads to the termination of Gatsby's "career as Trimalchio" (119): they are incompatible white viewers within a crowd of lower social standing at this temporary amusement park. Gatsby's carnival space closes down precisely because it attempts to be both World's Fair and amusement park simultaneously. It cannot satisfy the urbane white dreams and readings of Daisy nor, as a result, can it continue to meet the more populist needs of New York's urban masses.

With the loss of Daisy and the end of his dream, Gatsby wakes to "[a] new world, material without being real, where poor ghosts, breathing dreams like air, drifted fortuitously about ... like that ashen, fantastic figure gliding toward him through the amorphous trees" (168). Indeed, this has been the underlying situation all along: the characters move in an insistent material world in which "reality" is a questionable term open to manipulation. The formlessness of the physical world around Gatsby here matches the previously fluid, mutating world of his parties; except that now the fantasies have been turned into grotesqueries. Wilson's whiteness is that of another wrong

visitor to the now-closed amusement park. The assassination of Gatsby here in this multi-coloured carnival realm provides a textual bridge with the real-life assassination of President McKinley at the 1901 Buffalo World's Fair, activating memories within the cultural subconscious of the American nation. With Gatsby's death, the fantastical has been redefined, and is continually re-categorised by the perpetual mutations of American carnival and in the inauthentic reporting of the murder in the papers: "Most of those reports were a nightmare—grotesque, circumstantial, eager, and untrue" (170). For Nick, the East becomes an area synonymous with distortion: "Even when the East excited me most [...] it had always for me a quality of distortion. West Egg, especially, still figures in my more fantastic dreams. I see it as a night scene by El Greco: a hundred houses, at once conventional and grotesque" (183). West Egg is the main space of distortion where reality and grotesque fantasy simultaneously commingle. Indeed, reality is a constantly uncertain commodity in this realm of controlled and manipulated spectacle. The end of Gatsby's parties signals the "huge incoherent failure" of his house (187); with the parties over, this carnival location alters its exhibition status, becoming a museum, indeed a mausoleum, of images gathering dust.

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Bakhtin and History: A Response to Winifred Bevilacqua*

MICHAEL TRATNER

Winifred Bevilacqua provides a superb analysis of the overall plot of *Gatsby* as a Bakhtinian Carnival: the temporary enthroning of a carnival king and queen (Gatsby and Myrtle) replacing the authoritative king and queen of the noncarnival world, Tom and Daisy. This approach sheds considerable light on the peculiar ambivalence which has troubled critics of the novel: Gatsby is praised as embodying all the dreams that made and could still make America a great nation and yet he seems something of a buffoon. If Gatsby is a carnival king, he is of course a figure full of absurdity and even silliness, and yet he serves to remind us of the possibility of something greater than the mainstream structures of authority surrounding him. The chill that descends over the novel when Gatsby shuts down his parties to be alone with Daisy is not simply evidence that he has been pursuing impossible dreams: it is part of the inevitable slide of any carnival king into the orgy of destruction and dismemberment which ends a festival. The popular flavor of the novel also gains new dimensions: its role as a literary work is something of a carnival moment in the rise of Modernism, and as such may have much to reveal as a parody of other more canonically "authoritative" artworks.

Bevilacqua uses Bakhtin as a tool to uncover subtle formal structures in Fitzgerald's novel, but her analysis has larger implications if we add to it what Bakhtin describes as the basic function of a carnival: "Carnival is the place for working out, in a concretely sensuous, half-

*Reference: Winifred Farrant Bevilacqua, "'... and the long secret extravaganza was played out': *The Great Gatsby* and Carnival in a Bakhtinian Perspective," *Connotations* 13.1-2 (2003/2004): 111-29.

For the original article as well as all contributions to this debate, please check the Connotations website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debbevilacqua01312.htm>>.

real and half-play-acted form, a *new mode of interrelationship between individuals*, counterposed to the all-powerful social-hierarchical relationships of noncarnival life" (*Problems* 123). The word "new" is important in this phrase: the carnival is not merely an occasion for fantasizing an imaginary alternative to current social-hierarchical relationships; rather it is part of a process of actually developing something new, something that will eventually become a part of the social order. Bakhtin argues that the substitution of carnival figures for social authorities within a novel reveals that the discursive structures which support those authorities "are (in real life) doomed to death and displacement" (*Discourse* 312). In Bakhtin's Marxist framework, the crucial realm in which social structures die and new ones emerge is economics. We can then use Bevilacqua's analysis to see how *The Great Gatsby* rehearses the emergence of new modes of economic interrelationship in the early twentieth century.

Bevilacqua touches briefly on economic issues, noting that "Fitzgerald's narrative can be illuminated by the social and economic theories underlying Bakhtin's theories, especially his conviction that the modern novel carnival 'proved remarkably productive as a means for capturing in art the developing relationships under capitalism at a time when previous forms of life, moral principles and beliefs were being turned into «rotten cords»'" (118). Bevilacqua interprets the passage from Bakhtin which she quotes as saying that modern novels capture critiques of capitalism, and so she goes on to illustrate such critiques by citing comments contemporary with *The Great Gatsby* that decry the immorality which surrounds bond selling and the buying of automobiles on "installment" plans, practices which appear repeatedly in the novel—Nick and Gatsby sell bonds, while George Wilson tries to get Tom to let him buy and resell his car, presumably on credit. Bevilacqua describes the contemporary sense of immorality surrounding bond selling and buying on credit as evidence that the novel is revealing the "rotten cords" of capitalism, the corrupting effect of what is described in the novel as "easy money" (*TGG* 46).

I wish to suggest a different interpretation of these same economic elements in the novel, based on looking a bit more closely at what Bakhtin says in the quote Bevilacqua includes in her article. In that quote, Bakhtin says that the “developing relationships under capitalism” are turning “*previous* forms of life, moral principles and beliefs [...] into ‘rotten cords’”—in other words: what is being exposed as rotten is not capitalism but rather pre-capitalist forms of life. So what Bakhtin would point to as the “rotten cords” in *The Great Gatsby* are those elements which resonate with a pre-capitalist worldview. It is not hard to see Tom and Daisy as vestiges of an aristocratic style, a pre-capitalist style that somehow is continuing on within capitalism. They have money but they have no awareness of where that money comes from or what would make it grow; they just spend their money and presume that there will always be more. The economic practices of bond selling and buying on credit which Bevilacqua points to as emblematic of capitalism are not at all associated with Tom and Daisy or with any sense of an older, decaying order, but rather with Gatsby, George Wilson and Nick Carraway; those practices, I suggest, are images of the new “developing relationships under capitalism” being initiated by the carnival itself. The fact that contemporary social commentary found a kind of “immorality” in bond selling and buying automobiles on “installment” is not so much evidence that those activities are in general worthy of condemnation in a rejection of capitalism; rather the contemporary critiques of such practices as immoral is evidence that they embodied a challenge to older forms of morality which were dying out. And certainly in the decades after this novel, buying automobiles on installments lost all tinge of immorality, and bonds became if anything emblems of stolid, conservative financial dealings. Fitzgerald is thus capturing in his art a moment of transition, when a new economic morality within capitalism, a “new mode of interrelationship of individuals,” is replacing an older one.

Before we examine in more detail what new form of capitalism this novel might be signaling, we might consider a reason why this novel would appear a bit different from the works Bakhtin generally dis-

cusses: because it is written rather later, after the Russian Revolution; it could then be interpreted as representing the era in which, in a Marxist view, capitalism is dying out entirely. Bevilacqua gets close to suggesting something like this, describing Gatsby's death as "the kind of social control by which members of the upper class eliminate opponents of the lower classes" (127). In Bakhtin's theory, the destruction of the carnival king and queen as opponents of the old form of authority is only a temporary act: the "new modes" embodied in the carnival figures will later come into reality. In Bevilacqua's description, then, the novel foreshadows the triumph of the lower classes over the upper.

That of course did not happen in the U.S., and Bevilacqua provides some justification for not seeing this carnival as foreshadowing the end of upper-class rule in America: because the ending does not seem satisfying as a carnival ending at all. She finds in the novel little of "rebirth" or "renewal" because "Myrtle's and Gatsby's carnivalesque adventures are crushed from without rather than ceding of their own accord to an appointed limit." As a result, their deaths have no "dialogical significance vis-à-vis Tom and Daisy, who do not allow their lives to be affected by the deaths" (127). According to Bevilacqua, then, this carnival does not make any difference, does not bring about any "new modes of interrelationship": it is a failed carnival.

However, there is another way to account for the sense we have that the ending is not quite a satisfying return or renewal: the failure of "rebirth" or "renewal" can be seen as indicating that what is being played out in this novel is one of those moments when a carnival does not quite work because it occurs right at the very end of the historical tenure of a social structure. At such a moment, the restoration of the non-carnival king and queen could seem quite dissatisfying, more as an act of violence holding back the future than a renewal. And that is what the end of this novel seems. The non-carnival king and queen—Tom and Daisy—regain power, but their return does not seem a triumph: it is, as Nick puts it, a "retreat" which reveals that they are immoral, "careless people—they smashed up things and creatures

and then retreated back into their money" (*TGG* 187-88). In that summary judgment, Tom's and Daisy's "form of life, moral principles and beliefs" are revealed as thoroughly "rotten cords."

Furthermore, there has been within the carnival itself an element that suggests that the play here is much less fantasy and much closer to reality than in most carnivals: during the carnival, Tom and Daisy do not simply disappear to be replaced by the carnival king and queen; rather Tom and Daisy themselves take part in the revelry and in a sense merge with the carnival figures. Instead of a substitute royal couple, we get two substitute semi-royal couplings: Tom joins with Myrtle while Gatsby joins with Daisy; all four then participate in that fundamental activity of all carnivals: sex outside of the moral strictures of marriage. Moreover, the book makes it clear that Tom and Daisy are not just casually having fun as a supplement to their real lives: they need the excitement and energy of the carnival and of their non-marital sexuality because in their non-carnival lives, they are enervated, weak, impotent. Tom, though he has one of the "most powerful" bodies, has no motivation, no goals, so he just "drift[s] on, forever seeking for the dramatic turbulence of some irrecoverable football game" (*TGG* 10). He reads old books and passes through a series of mistresses, searching for something he lacks, "as if his sturdy physical egotism no longer nourished his peremptory heart" (*TGG* 25). Daisy does not provide the nourishment he seeks, because she, too, is in some sense empty. Her body is so light and delicate that she seems "buoyed up as through upon an awkward balloon"; when she first appears in her living room, she seems to have been "blown back in after a short flight around the house" (*TGG* 12). Daisy is passive and hollow. What Tom and Daisy both need and what they gain, temporarily, from Myrtle and Gatsby, is that core of self-directed energy which Fitzgerald calls "vitality." When Myrtle appears, she has an "immediate perceptible vitality about her as if the nerves of her body were continually smoldering" (*TGG* 30). She brings fire and nerve to get Tom's "hulking" body moving again. Similarly, Gatsby brings to

Daisy “the colossal vitality of his illusion,” which is so overwhelming that at times she “tumbled short of his dreams” (*TGG* 101).

In this novel, the rich have the means to do anything, but they just drift about, while the lower classes have colossal vitality but lack the means to make use of their vitality. Marx of course predicted that such a moment would arise and would foment the revolution, but instead this book presents in its carnival the emergence of “new modes of interrelationship” within capitalism, new forms of interaction between the upper and lower classes which merge the desires of the lower classes with the wealth of the upper. Such a transformation of capitalism is precisely what emerged in the early twentieth century: a new economic orthodoxy, replete with a new morality and new modes of relationships among individuals and among classes: the “Keynesian Revolution.”

Keynes’s theory focuses on a crisis in capitalism which is very much what afflicts Tom and Daisy: the problem that great stockpiles of wealth seem to be just sitting there, drifting along, no longer driving the engines of economic growth. And Keynes’s analysis of what is missing is very much what *Gatsby* and Myrtle bring: desire, or, in economic terms, “demand” (Keynes 23-25), the willingness to consume. Keynes predicts that capitalism is threatened by a lack of desire or demand because too much money has been stored up in the bank accounts of the rich: saved money goes to finance increases in capital and increases in production but it does not go into purchasing power, and so a clog appears in the economic cycles, the clog Keynes attributed to ‘oversaving’ and others called “underconsumption” (324). It might seem strange to see Daisy and Tom as exemplars of “underconsumption” but in contrast to *Gatsby* and Myrtle such a label becomes clear: what *Gatsby* and Myrtle bring into the world of Daisy and Tom is colossal consumption. Tom and Daisy have as much money as *Gatsby*, but, as Keynes says about the rich, they have a low “propensity to consume” (90-91)—they don’t want anything much as they drift about—and that gets in the way of the growth of capital. Keynes’s solution when capital is stalled because of a lack of con-

sumption, a lack of desire, in the economic system, is deficit spending, designed to put money in the hands of the lower classes, who have a much higher “propensity to consume” and thus increase “demand” for goods: given access to money, the lower classes bring the missing desires back into the economic system. We can see Keynes’s logic in this novel: when Myrtle and Gatsby have access to money, they are able to act on their large desires, which has the effect of providing energy or vitality to the rich.

Of course the Keynesian transformation of capitalism really occurred in the 1930s, due to the crisis that was the Depression. But the core values of a new system of economics were in place by the 1920s, and it is those new values which made Keynesian ideas acceptable in the 1930s. The historian of economics Lawrence Birken traces a shift from 1870 to 1914 that he characterizes as a move from the “values of production” to the “values of desire” (37). The novel rather precisely traces this shift in values, as Gatsby’s dreams—his strong desires, his demands—emerge at the end of the book as of much greater value than Tom’s vast accumulation of riches.

Furthermore, one of the key economic changes of the twenties—the explosion of consumer credit—also prepared the way for acceptance of Keynesian ideas. The reason consumer credit grew so rapidly was that automobiles were invented and presented a new economic problem which was very much the kind of problem Keynes analyzed: automobiles contained great value and were highly desired by nearly everyone but could not be sold to most people because of a lack of cash. Cars would have just decayed in sales lots without a new method of providing people purchasing power—and that new method was consumer credit, which prepared the country to accept Keynesian deficit financing.

Gatsby’s excessive consumption in the novel and his fabulous car are thus images of the economic future, not merely reflections of the wild, free spending of the twenties which was about to disappear in the Depression. The twenties revealed a new way for economics to run: driven by consumption, not by production. Without the power of

consumption, without demand, capital just sits there and has no energy to generate anything. Tom and Daisy are images of this kind of stalled capital, wealth unable to circulate.

During the “carnival” Tom and Daisy feed like vampires on the “demand,” the colossal build-up of desire, within the lower classes, and in doing so regain for a time the “vitality” which makes all their stored-up power able to act. The end of the carnival could have marked the end of this process, but the book hardly returns the reader to the world of Tom and Daisy or to the virtues of their ways of using wealth: rather we are left with a deep desire for more glorious dreams like Gatsby’s. The end of novel thus propels us into the new Keynesian economic system, in which those who are not rich (i.e., most of the readers of the novel) will be provided with numerous ways (such as reading and buying on credit) to satisfy our desires through consumerist sharing in the “goods” of the wealthy—the parties, the elegant clothes, the automobiles. In the new modes of capitalism which emerge after this novel, the lower and upper classes are locked together in a tight economic embrace. The lower classes are allowed to satisfy their immense desires by “consuming” the lifestyles of the rich and the powerful, and these lower-class acts of consumption provide the energy to propel into circulation the stockpiles of wealth of the upper classes which would otherwise drift about carelessly.

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A Modest Letter in Response to *The Great Gatsby*, Bakhtin's Carnival, and Professor Bevilacqua*

Dear Editors:

Many thanks for forwarding me this article and providing me with an opportunity to respond to it. I not only appreciate the print forum you have offered in *Connotations*, but also found myself highly engaged with the author's argument and my own response to it. Although I may appear highly critical of Prof. Winifred Farrant Bevilacqua's handling of this subject, she nevertheless managed to reawaken my own thinking about this subject. And when you consider that Mary Jane Dickerson and I first published our own Bakhtinian reading of *The Great Gatsby* no less than eighteen years ago,¹ Bevilacqua has accomplished some feat.

Bevilacqua in her essay demonstrates, I think, a solid understanding of Bakhtin's notion of carnival as a festival of misrule. She does so by examining the bond that exists in *The Great Gatsby* between images of subversion, masquerade, and illusion that are appropriate to Bakhtinian elements of carnival. Particularly insightful is Prof. Bevilacqua's attention to eating and drinking in *Gatsby* as "a form of play" (111) that also coincides with manifestations of the grotesque body described by Bakhtin. However, for Bakhtin, these aspects of eating and drinking—along with other manifestations of carnival—signal liberation, the moment when humanity is placed in the position to realize its potential in the act of freeing itself from the social and moral restraints that characterize the non-carnavalesque. *Gatsby*'s revelers, and Bevilacqua acknowledges this, descend into mere grotesques when

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alcohol unleashes their inhibitions. Certainly they exist in the comedy of misrule, but their behavior appears more objectionable than liberating, as drunks stare blankly into space or, worse, take the opportunity to fight, sing, and engage behavior, as Fitzgerald notes, more appropriate for an amusement park. I guess I would say the same thing about Bevilacqua's treatment of Gatsby himself as a figure from carnival; he appears less as a liberated figure of subversion than pathetic and desperate.

Prof. Bevilacqua acknowledges that "Gatsby's story contains a myriad of references to time, and details such as the broken clock that almost falls off the mantelpiece during his reunion with Daisy symbolize his desire to stop or even reverse the flow of time" (112). All of this is true enough, of course, but the author fails to explore to any real degree precise illustrations of where and why this occurs in the novel. There are, after all, a variety of *different kinds of time* at work in the novel—historical and mythological time, for instance, interfacing with narratological time to create heterogeneous histories, both personal and national.

Prof. Bevilacqua notes correctly that "the essential characteristic of carnival is 'carnival time,' a temporary, atypical removal from the normal progression of biographical or historical time which flows according to its own laws" (113), but she does little to demonstrate exactly how this distortion of temporal reality affects the novel itself, or to supply specific evidence of its occurrence. The fact that Gatsby's parties create a world where "disorder prevails and ordinarily inappropriate behavior is not only permitted but encouraged and expected" (114), is not the same thing at all; while true enough, this observation does not explore Bakhtinian conceptions of biographical or historical time.

While the author cites several interesting publications that deal with Bakhtin's use of carnival under the Notes section of her essay, precious little of this scholarship is used to support and advance Bevilacqua's insights into *Gatsby* per se. In our article, Mary Jane Dickerson and I have shown that the mantelpiece clock is not only an operative

symbol for time throughout the novel, but also a means for examining Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope in specific operation. Chapter 5, where the mantelpiece clock appears, and the point in the narrative cited by Fitzgerald himself as the most significant in the novel, is set in Nick's living room and contains, in Bakhtin's words, "the place where the major spatial and temporal sequences of the novel intersect [...] the place where encounters occur [...] where dialogues happen, something that acquires extraordinary importance in the novel, revealing the character, 'ideas' and 'passions' of the heroes."² At the moment when Gatsby's head makes contact with the broken clock, he has just been reunited with Daisy, giving substance to his belief that the advance of time can be altered or even halted. And this thesis is symbolically portrayed as Gatsby's head—the place where his memories of the past originate—is juxtaposed with the defunct clock. The scene thus becomes an illustration of Bakhtin's time-space relationship: Gatsby exists *physically* in one temporal arena, but he *mentally* inhabits another. However, just as Gatsby appears to have the past within his grasp, reunited with Daisy, Fitzgerald reminds us of the Bakhtinian awareness of just how ephemeral and tenuous our understanding of time really is. The very realization of Gatsby's dream, like the "trembling fingers" that catch the clock as it falls from the mantelpiece, highlights the ephemeral relationship that he maintains with time, "the dangerous [...] pressure of his head" literally juxtaposed against a broken clock falling through space. This is the sort of detailing that the reader often yearns for in Bevilacqua's analysis.

The one place where Prof. Bevilacqua does pause sufficiently within the text is in her discussion of Myrtle Wilson's identity and party pretensions. Discussing Wilson as a parody of eighteenth-century French salon culture is a masterful stroke of insight, especially when the writer interprets her affectation as an attempt to emulate "a woman of the leisure class, high above the life she leads in the Valley of Ashes" (121). This insight would seem to reflect the kind of social inversion Bakhtin celebrated in the various mock rituals associated with carnival. Surprisingly, however, Prof. Bevilacqua fails to capital-

ize on or complicate this connection; although it is appropriate to view Myrtle as a grotesque figure of parody and exaggeration, her link to Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque remains somewhat unclear, since she is only white trash *pretending* to assume the role of royalty. In this context, how can we then see her as representative authority figure whose power is undermined by the action of carnival?

Discussing Prof. Bevilacqua's interpretation made me realize how much more still remains to be said about *The Great Gatsby* and the meaning that Bakhtin imparts to it.

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NOTES

¹Mary Jane Dickerson and Tony Magistrale, "The Language of Time in *The Great Gatsby*," *College Literature* 16.2 (1989): 117-28.

²Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: U of Texas P, 1981) 246.

Waugh's Conrad and Victorian Gothic: A Reply to Martin Stannard and John Howard Wilson*

EDWARD LOBB

I am delighted that my article on Waugh, Conrad and Eliot has prompted such detailed, erudite, and thoughtful responses from Martin Stannard, Waugh's biographer, and John Howard Wilson, the editor of the *Evelyn Waugh Newsletter and Studies*. There is too much in their contributions for me to respond to point by point, so I shall concentrate on the major points of contention and the issues to which they give rise. Much of Dr. Stannard's response, in particular, deals with matters such as the relation of the novel to Peter Fleming's *Brazilian Adventure* and to the different stages of Victorian Gothic; while very interesting in themselves, these do not, I believe, affect my reading of *A Handful of Dust*, and I shall touch on them only in passing.

Dr. Wilson cites the first volume of Martin Stannard's authoritative biography of Waugh to point out that there is "no evidence that Waugh ever read *Heart of Darkness*" (207), and Stannard himself explains Waugh's reading habits in support of the same claim (185); both also point out that Waugh makes no mention of Conrad in describing his own African and South American travels in *Remote People* and *Ninety-Two Days* (191, 207). I read the two volumes of Dr. Stannard's biography with great pleasure when they first appeared, and should certainly have mentioned the lack of a clear line of connection

*Reference: Martin Stannard, "In Search of a City: Civilization, Humanism and English Gothic in *A Handful of Dust*," *Connotations* 14.1-3 (2004/2005): 183-204; John Howard Wilson, "A Question of Influence and Experience: A Response to Edward Lobb," *Connotations* 14.1-3 (2004/2005): 205-12; Edward Lobb, "Waugh Among the Modernists: Allusion and Theme in *A Handful of Dust*," *Connotations* 13.1-2 (2003/2004): 130-44. All three will be referred to parenthetically by page number.

For the original article as well as all contributions to this debate, please check the Connotations website at <<http://www.connotations.de/deblobb01312.htm>>.

between Conrad and Waugh. Dr. Stannard and others have done vitally important work in treating Waugh as a major writer about whom we should know as much as possible, including his reading, and I apologize for the omission. At the same time, I did not and do not regard the lack of this line of connection as damaging to my argument. First, the absence of evidence is not evidence of absence. Stannard himself notes scrupulously that "it is quite *possible* that Waugh had never read Conrad's novella" (185; emphasis added), which leaves the issue open, and I cannot think of any writer whose life is so well chronicled that we know everything he or she read. Second, Stannard acknowledges Waugh's statement that he was "not a devotee" of Conrad (184), with its implied admission of at least some familiarity, and draws attention to one specific, striking parallel between *Heart of Darkness* and one of Waugh's short stories (191). Third, the note by Robert Doyle to which Dr. Wilson alludes (208) seems not merely to imply but to confirm that Waugh had some knowledge of Conrad.

It seems permissible, then, to proceed on the assumption that Waugh had read *Heart of Darkness*. Even if he had not, Dr. Stannard himself brings up an ingenious way of arguing for Conrad's presence in *A Handful of Dust*. He mentions that Waugh might have developed "an aversion to Conrad's work without reading it," perhaps when he heard Conrad discussed by others (186). Stannard is talking here about Waugh's antipathy, not conscious use, but goes on to mention that Waugh did allude to Proust in *A Handful of Dust* without, by his own account, having read *A la recherche du temps perdu*. Two of the chapter titles in the novel ("Du Côté de Chez Beaver" and "Du Côté de Chez Todd") echo *Du côté de chez Swann*. In the first edition of *A Handful of Dust*, from which Stannard quotes, the titles were printed as "A Côté de [...]," a schoolboy error in French silently corrected in subsequent editions. We are therefore inclined to credit Waugh when he denies having read Proust, and it is open to us to imagine that he could have used Conrad in the same way. I prefer, however, the simpler and still tenable explanation that Waugh had in fact read *Heart of Darkness*.

The issue of Victorian Gothic architecture is complicated in a different way. Dr. Stannard discriminates among the stages of Victorian Gothic and points out that Waugh admired Pugin's work but despised the later style of Victorian Gothic, of which Hetton embodies the worst features (194). My own reference to Pugin was not intended to suggest that all Victorian Gothic was the same or that "'Victorian Gothic' in general was anathema to Waugh" (194); it was simply a reminder that the style was in fact popularised by Pugin (131). Stannard argues that "[a]esthetic and spiritual values [...] were linked in Waugh's mind" (193), and this is certainly true in the Ruskinian sense that architecture, for example, expresses the underlying ethos of a civilization. It does not follow from this, however, that aesthetic and moral *perception* necessarily go hand in hand, and I think Stannard places undue emphasis on Tony's inability to tell the difference between "the artistic vitality of early Gothic revival [...] and the fakery of Hetton" (195). If Tony had been aesthetically perceptive and remained as obtuse in all other areas of life as he is in the novel we have, the outcome would be the same. The point of Hetton in *novelistic* terms—as an image in an artistic narrative rather than an item in Waugh's own system of belief—is surely that Tony's great-grandfather tore down a genuine Gothic building and replaced it with a building in an artificial, synthetic style, and that Tony's way of life is similarly unauthentic. This would remain true if the second Hetton had been designed by Pugin himself. The grotesqueness of the great-grandfather's act of vandalism is underscored by making the house as ugly as possible, and Waugh carefully associates it with the Victorian sentimentality of Dickens, as I mentioned in a footnote (144), but the point would be the same regardless of the architect.

All of this matters, I believe, because Dr. Stannard's emphasis on Waugh's linking of European civilization with Catholic Christianity tends to limit unnecessarily the meaning and force of the novel:

Reality for Waugh [...] is the idea that the supernatural is the real—but only the supernatural as mediated by the Catholic Church. All other attempts to engage with the mystical [...] are lampooned: black magicians, fortune tellers, Moslems, Buddhists, Anglicans. (192)

In Waugh's work as a whole, including the travel books, this is certainly true, and it perhaps reflects the more combative side of Catholicism in general and of English Catholicism in particular from the time of Newman and Manning to that of Chesterton and Belloc. In *A Handful of Dust*, however, it is largely implicit, except for the pointed satire of fortune-telling, and rightly so: *romans à thèse* are seldom good novels, and Waugh himself would admit that there were genuinely spiritual people in other religions, and many spiritually comatose Catholics. The Reverend Tendril is an absurd figure, and may have represented in Waugh's mind an antiquated, tepid, and useless Anglicanism, but he seems remarkably like everyone else in *A Handful of Dust*, doing by rote what has long ceased to have any real meaning for himself or for other people; his sermons are no more ridiculous than Tony's unthinking attendance at church or the casual and passionless adulteries of Brenda and her friends. In a world where no-one takes responsibility for anything and "Everyone agree[s] that it was nobody's fault,"¹ Tony's problem is not his apathetic nominal Anglicanism, but his general passivity and obliviousness.

To this Dr. Stannard might well reply that the two are inseparable in Waugh's mind, and—since he knows as much about Waugh's mind as anyone alive—I would not argue with him. My point is simply that what finds its way *into the novel* is not an argument about the decline of Europe after the Reformation, but a critique of what I referred to in my essay as the unconscious lie. Stannard seems to agree that Waugh generally keeps his ideology out of his fiction: "He writes, as it were, Catholic novels by negative suggestion, describing the anarchy of a world attempting to maintain its sanity in ignorance, or in rejection, of the True Faith" (192). As an analysis of modernity, *A Handful of Dust* is as relentless and elegiac as *The Good Soldier* (another novel on which Dr. Stannard is an acknowledged expert), and it never fails to have a tremendous impact on students, most of them emphatically secular, who are confronted with their own unacknowledged assumptions and lies.

Both Dr. Stannard and Dr. Wilson speak at times as if I had attempted to diminish the originality of *A Handful of Dust* by linking it with Conrad. Stannard suggests that the “‘sources’ of that novel” are to be found not in Conrad but in a political Catholicism (190), and Wilson seeks to “dispel the impression that the novel is largely derived from other literature” (208). I certainly had no intention of diminishing Waugh’s originality; the novel is entirely fresh in conception and execution, like Eliot’s *Waste Land*, and, like Eliot’s poem, is enriched rather than diminished by its allusions. Later in his essay, Stannard writes:

Had Waugh never become a Catholic, Tony Last’s revelation that “there is no City” might legitimately be read alongside “Mistah Kurtz, he dead” as a statement of epistemological collapse. But there was only one epistemology for Conrad, that of Western scepticism, where for Waugh there were two: that of the rational world with its delusions of Progress, and that of theology [...]. (201)

I agree with this generally, setting aside the matter of Conrad’s much-debated later “affirmation.” My point about Waugh’s use of Conrad was simply that Waugh could admire and share the melancholy Pole’s analysis of the rootlessness of Western morality in our time and Marlow’s refusal to close his eyes to it. That Waugh found a way to move beyond despair is a biographical fact, but not part of the structure of *A Handful of Dust*. Faced with the only alternatives possible for him, Tony reverts to Victorian sentimentality and what Waugh saw as Dickensian dishonesty. His fate at the hands of Mr. Todd is condign.²

I do not feel, finally, that Dr. Stannard, Dr. Wilson and I disagree very much in our reading of the novel as such. I acknowledge their points about Waugh’s ideas and have been engaged and enlightened by their scholarship and sensitivity to Waugh’s words and ideas. As Martin Stannard concludes, the great virtue of all engaging criticism is its ability to stimulate discussion.

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NOTES

¹Evelyn Waugh, *A Handful of Dust* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1966) 121.

²I am grateful to Dr. Wilson for pointing out my error about Mr. Todd's race. I used the word "European" not as an indicator of Todd's actual origins, but as an admittedly careless synonym for "Caucasian." I did so because I remembered Tony's assumption that Todd was English (Waugh 239), presumably because of his appearance. It seems clear, when one reads the scene, that Todd is half-Caucasian and half-Indian.

How to Listen to Mamet: A Response to Maurice Charney*

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At the end of his reading of *Boston Marriage*, Maurice Charney asks: “Is Mamet parodying himself?” (87). It’s a good question, in part because it’s more than a rhetorical one—as the uncertainty of Charney’s conclusion implies. What Charney *is* certain of is the texture of Mamet’s dialogue:

There are certain stylistic tics in all of his works that occur both in serious and in ridiculous forms, things like the macho vaunting, the sudden bursts of slang and colloquial, the overwrought literary style, the excessive pauses, silences fraught with meaning (or with emptiness), endless repetition, fragmentary and unintelligible speech and syntax. (87)

Most readers would be hard pressed to add to this cogent précis of Mamet’s language—language widely acknowledged as both idiosyncratic and forceful. From such plays as *The Duck Variations* and *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* through *Glengarry Glen Ross* and *Romance*, and in films like *House of Games* and *The Spanish Prisoner*, Mamet’s language often strides front and center to take credit not as an extra or even a member of the supporting cast but as a primary character.

Not surprisingly, as a protagonist Mamet’s language is—like many of the characters who speak it—something of a trickster. Charney acknowledges this not only in his question about self-parody, but in his final paragraph’s hesitant phrases concerning Mamet and his style: “It seems to me ...”; “This may be teasing ...”; “He seems amused at having us on” (87). It may be that, even after his valuable survey, Charney isn’t sure how to take Mamet. But who could blame him?

*Reference: Maurice Charney, “Parody—and Self-Parody in David Mamet,” *Connotations* 13.1-2 (2003/2004): 77-88.

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How could we fault anyone, that is, for being tentative about these works? For Mamet himself makes it extremely difficult to know how to measure and judge what he writes.

Mamet does this in part by switching promiscuously between subjects and styles. Like a rebellious schoolboy, he refuses to accept the distinctions of place and position implied by elevated discourse. This, in fact, is a central conviction in his works: life is a game, no matter where it's played. Secondly, he knows how to pre-empt a conversation. In his impish pastiche *Wilson: A Consideration of the Sources*, for instance, he deftly inoculates himself against the flu of academic scrutiny by satirizing the exact kind of attention that the present essay is giving him. And the fact that, for better or worse, elements of his style have been adopted by a younger generation of writers means also that his language has become its admirers': not only a dialect but a commodity.

But what makes Mamet's recent work even more difficult to place than these things is the author's fascination with what we could call "linguistic costume drama." Mamet has always been interested in history, of course, but seems especially drawn to the period circumscribed by, at its beginning, the mythical Old West in the U. S. and, at its close, the 1933-34 World's Fair in his native city of Chicago. I give American bookends to this "Century of Progress" as a gesture to Mamet's nativism, but it should be pointed out that his interest in this period also embraces plays from England and the Continent. I am thinking of *The Voyage Inheritance* in particular; in 2005, Mamet published his adaptation of Harley Granville-Barker's script from exactly a century earlier. Before his nod to Wilde's *Importance of Being Earnest* in *Boston Marriage*, of course, Mamet had similarly adapted Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya* and *The Cherry Orchard*. And to this group of revivals and homages one could add his film *The Winslow Boy*, an updating of the Terence Rattigan play and screenplay that dramatize a resonant social scandal of pre-WWI England.

What most of these plays and dramas have in common is not only the fact that they precede Mamet's versions by approximately a cen-

tury, but also (and this is of course part of their historical moment) the quality of being *well made*. When we think of the “well-made play” we perhaps most often think of charming drawing-room comedies whose plots work themselves out like the gears of an intricate, bejeweled watch, and whose climaxes occur “right on time” at the end of the action. Such playwrights as Victorien Sardou, Georges Feydeau, and Arthur Wing Pinero, to name only these, left a legacy of finely crafted comedies which masters of the form like Ernst Lubitsch and Preston Sturges would draw on for their hallmark contributions to American film comedy. Although his movies are better known, Sturges’s 1929 stage play, *Strictly Dishonorable*, is a delightful instance of the well-made play in an American vein. Its title is also a curtain-line response to a query concerning the nature of a young man’s romantic intentions. Like the well-made play generally, this two-word phrase gives us in miniature not only personality and situation, but an entire world-view.

It is worth dwelling on this genre here because Mamet’s respect for it tells us a great deal about what he values and, by extension, how we can listen to his works. When Mamet published a short book of lectures *On the Nature and Purpose of Drama* (its subtitle), he called it *Three Uses of the Knife*. For Mamet, “Dramatic structure [...] is an organic codification of the human mechanism for ordering information”—or, in a more familiar group of terms:

Event, elaboration, denouement; thesis, antithesis, synthesis; boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy gets girls; act one, two, three. (73)

A crucial thing to realize about Mamet is that he is at heart a formalist, someone who treasures the shape and utility of well-made things. That this includes shotguns, cigars, and hunting-knives as well as sentences, poems, and plays is precisely the point: what matters is the craftsmanship that arranges working parts into an attractive, functional whole. Sometimes this whole is elegant, rising to the exquisite. Such quality, in Mamet’s eyes, is both the province of the artist and the artist’s gift to an audience.

To listen to Mamet's works means hearing his speakers engaged in functional dialogue that succeeds not in spite of unorthodox silences, repetitions, and awkward vocabulary, but because of them. Mamet writes collaborative speech even (perhaps especially) when his speakers engage in the most heated arguments. He seems always to have the greater whole in mind, with the apparent false starts and broken utterances of his dialogue actually working as pieces of a larger object. One could take *Glengarry Glen Ross*, for example. There an innocent conversation in a restaurant concludes, famously, with "Because you listened" (46). The resounding "click" we hear in Moss's line transforms everything heard before it, locking things firmly in place and convincing us even as it convinces Aaronow that their conversation has not been innocent at all.

In Mamet no conversations are innocent, of course. They are always crafted in such a way as to produce something: a laugh, an epigram, a cynical insight into the human condition. This craft has familiar contours, drawing on conventions of stage dialogue and on the rhythms of jokes and sales pitches. Earlier I pointed out how central the notion of "game" is to Mamet. And I would suggest here that to listen rightly to Mamet is to consider his dialogues athletic contests. A good comparison, in fact, would be to a tennis match. In Mamet's scenes, as in tennis, the game needs two to prosecute a point. Each point, in turn, has a beginning, middle, and end. Not every shot is a winner—nor should it be, if the game is being played properly. But the good shots put an opponent at clear disadvantage. In fact, the better a shot, the weaker the reply is likely to be. In Mamet, such temporary disadvantage is often signaled by fragmented or otherwise incomplete speech. For the audience, the joy of experiencing these exchanges comes not at the end or from the end but from the postponement of an exchange's end. Because that delay is drama.

Here is a sequence from *Boston Marriage*. Because it represents many of the stylistic features of Mamet's language and forms something like a complete play in and of itself, I reproduce it at length:

ANNA: Yes, you were saying that you were “in love.” As you phrased it.

You were, in midcareer, as it were, prating of this “Love.”

CLAIRE: And you, friend of my Youth ...

ANNA: ... what memory ...

CLAIRE: At the announcement ...

ANNA: Yes?

CLAIRE: At the announcement, grow if I do not mistake, *cold*. Can you say why?

ANNA: *Why?*

CLAIRE: Yes.

ANNA: I have redecorated our room in Chintz. In *Chintz*, a fabric I abhor, in your absence, do you see? To please you.

CLAIRE: In Chintz?

ANNA: You once expressed a preference for chintz.

CLAIRE: I

ANNA: For *Chintz*, which I have, oblivious to the verdict of the World, *fes-tooned* ...

CLAIRE: I ...

ANNA: I come into funds, I come into funds, and my FIRST THOUGHT, do you see? Is it for myself? It is for *you*. Do I expect thanks? I would be glad of mute appreciation. I receive nothing but the tale of your new rutting. *(Pause)* Oh how lonely you make me feel. How small. For how can one cherish, nay, how can one respect one, however dear, however well formed, who acts so arbitrarily—so cruel? But yes, the engine of the world’s betrayal, is it not? And we are sentenced to strive with the world. *(Pause)*

CLAIRE: I’m sorry, what? *(Pause)* Did I miss anything? *(Pause)*

ANNA: I poured out my heart blood.

CLAIRE: Oh ... *(Pause)* I’ve forgotten what I was going to say.

ANNA: Say something *else*. *(Pause)*

CLAIRE: How *practical* you are.

ANNA: For what *is* speech?

CLAIRE: I had often thought, it is as the chirping of the birds, minus their laudable disinterestedness.

ANNA: Oh what a vast, oh what a vast and pointless shithole it all is.

CLAIRE: What would that be?

ANNA: Our lives. (14-15)

Like so many sequences in Mamet, this is talk about talk. One could note, for instance, the frequent references to speech as both practice and object: “saying [...] As you phrased it [...] midcareer [...] prating [...] announcement [...] announcement [...] say [...] expressed [...]

verdict [...] thanks [...] mute appreciation [...] tale [...] sentenced [...] poured out [...] say [...]. Say [...] speech [...] chirping [...].” So interested is Mamet in talk that his characters frequently speak of little else. As Anna asks, “For what *is* speech?” Not content to leave Anna’s shot unreturned, Claire defines speech in a manner that blends Aristotle and Veblen: “I had often thought, it is as the chirping of the birds, minus their laudable disinterestedness.”

The arch vocabulary here—part of what I have called “linguistic costume drama”—will bear more examination in a moment. But for now, we should notice that the back-and-forth in this sequence asks to be read as competitive collaboration. In this paradox—two who are playing the same game but looking for an advantage—we have the basis of drama and marriage alike. If Anna’s taunting prelude temporarily gives Claire an opportunity to dictate the pace of play, Anna’s understated replies—“... what memory ...”; “Yes?”; “*Why?*”—gradually work to help her resume control. Then Anna escalates her thoughts, growing them like hot-house flowers until they bloom into her 95-word speech beginning “I come into funds [...].” To continue the tennis analogy, it is as though she purposefully interrupts a measured baseline rally (the back-and-forth of their earlier lines) to carve under the ball, floating it high and short over the net as a drop shot—a daring maneuver that risks a great deal in hopes of ending the point then and there. Commentators often say that such a brazen shot provides a window into a player’s soul, revealing character—and surely it is no accident that this description is appropriate for sport and theater alike. With Anna’s decision, everything about the point seems to change. Like an athlete seizing the moment for a display of her virtuosity, Anna takes over the pace and plot of the game, temporarily drawing all eyes (and, in this case, ears) to her.

All, that is, save Claire’s, for she refuses to let Anna win the point. Mindful that every speaker needs an audience—not to speak, of course, but to take confidence from control—she withholds what Anna’s exhibition demands. Claire deflates and defeats her oppo-

ment's virtuosity by offering the most effective reply possible: "I'm sorry, what? (*Pause*) Did I miss anything? (*Pause*)."

To describe this conversation as being like a point played in tennis may seem merely to include Mamet's dialogue in a long history of stage repartee in the West, from Jonson and Wycherley through Wilde. The volleys of wit here, in *Boston Marriage*, and throughout Mamet's work indeed ask to be considered in that tradition. But membership in this club is not a small thing. For it asks us to think about Mamet outside a common story. The tendency in criticism concerned with plays of our era, for instance, has been to describe a decline of dialogue, strictly constructed. The conclusion of the sequence above ("Oh what a vast, oh what a vast and pointless shithole it all is. [...] Our lives.") points up a line of interpretation that, focusing on plays from at least Beckett through Pinter and Orton to Mamet, has been too ready to focus on the existential directions of obscenity and seeming *non sequitur*. Speech, from this point of view, is selfishness incarnate. When Tony Kushner set out to parody Mamet language through Roy Cohn in *Angels in America*, for instance, he gave that character a snarling, obscene, and overwhelmingly self-concerned style of speech. Cohn barks language into telephone receivers and grows impatient when they talk back.

But what we see in Mamet's most recent work, *I would offer*, tells us something that contradicts Kushner's unflattering portrait, and reveals something important about Mamet's entire career: his scenes are much more eloquent than his characters' vocabulary and syntax—taken in isolation—would lead us to believe. Communication in his works occurs not in paired sentences but across many. Throughout his plays and screenplays, his characters labor to sustain the pace of the rhetorical game Mamet engages them in. The ellipses, repetitions, and artful obscenities in his scenes are the sounds of bodies striving in intellectual, emotional, and spiritual contests.

But if the notion of rhetorical contests helps us listen to Mamet, it leaves a final difficulty untouched. How are we to take the self-consciously "arch" dialogue in his plays? Charney has called this

“overwrought literary style” (87), and it is difficult to disagree with the characterization. This is especially the case where Mamet’s penchant for the era of Wilde and for what I have called linguistic costume drama leads him to adorn his dialogue with the veneer of historical speech. *Boston Marriage* is littered, for instance, with devastatingly high-register vocabulary, difficult words and phrases drawn from a literate age gone by. Just the sequence above offers “midcareer,” “festooned,” and “disinterestedness,” and these are hardly the most challenging words in the play. Anna’s self-important turn also elevates its register:

I come into funds, I come into funds, and my FIRST THOUGHT, do you see? Is it for myself? It is for *you*. Do I expect thanks? I would be glad of mute appreciation. I receive nothing but the tale of your new rutting. (*Pause*) Oh how lonely you make me feel. How small. For how can one cherish, nay, how can one respect one, however dear, however well formed, who acts so arbitrarily—so cruel? But yes, the engine of the world’s betrayal, is it not? And we are sentenced to strive with the world. (*Pause*) (15)

This speech moves from a long sentence (itself built on repetition) into short ones that then crescendo in another sustained query: “For how can one cherish, nay, how can one respect one, however dear, however well formed, who acts so arbitrarily—so cruel?” Anna’s register, it should be pointed out, benefits as much from formal rhythms (“how can one cherish [...] how can one respect”; “however dear, however well formed”; “so arbitrarily [...] so cruel”) as from what rightly seems, in context, arch vocabulary (“cherish,” “nay,” “arbitrarily”).

Mamet’s gleeful grafting of period diction (“I come into funds”) with a contemporary ethos (“the tale of your new rutting”) produces a hybrid that can be difficult to place. For when we listen to the characters speak in *Boston Marriage* we are in neither 1890s Boston (or London) nor 1990s Boston (where this play opened on June 4, 1999). Instead, we’re in a theater of the imagination and the body where artists of our time are clothing themselves partly in the costumes of another. In this speech we hear echoes of a verbal world we have lost, a world based in the book and in book reading. The friction between *what*

various Mamet characters say and *how* they say it thus makes up a conflict internal to the idea and practice of dialogue in his plays. It is as if Mamet, even as he writes meaningful conflicts on the level of plot, has in mind a metaphysical plane where the differences between book and voice, between then and now, play themselves out.

Listening to Mamet's plays involves hearing these two planes of conflict, in each of which a struggle for predominance depends on cooperation, on following rules that no one has the power to alter. That Mamet *likes* these rules, that he sees them as not hindrance but aid to the extension of art, is part of what I mean when I call him a formalist who both appreciates well-made things and strives constantly to hone his skills in such making. In the end, then, "parody" may not answer all of the questions posed by his plays (especially his recent ones). There *is* parody in the sense that we have a playwright and characters speaking language not their own, enjoying linguistic games that they did not invent. But I do not believe that Mamet regrets in any way the fact that these games were created by others. Nor do I think that he would like to (or believes one can) change their rules. As Mamet continues to clothe his characters' speech in historical costumes, in fact, he gives us reason to see his works as preservationist in nature.

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Stylistic Self-Consciousness Versus Parody in David Mamet: A Response to Maurice Charney*

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Defining parody as “a form of imitation for satirical purposes,” Maurice Charney in his essay “Parody—and Self-Parody in David Mamet” notes that it is an “acute, stylistic self-consciousness” such as Mamet’s that “makes parody, and especially self-parody, possible” (77, 78). Charney raises the fascinating question of whether in *Oleanna* and *Boston Marriage* in particular Mamet is parodying himself. Mamet’s “acute self-consciousness of style,” Charney argues, “involves elaborate and knowing parody, if not what we may call self-parody. Mamet is always and consistently Mаметesque” (81). I certainly would concur with Charney’s view of Mamet’s style. But I would also ask whether self-conscious style, while clearly containing the potential for self-parody, is always necessarily parodic? If not, at what point does self-conscious style become self-parody? And to what effect?

Of necessity, such questions as these pertain to the later works of writers, for self-parody cannot be recognized as such until a particular authorial style has become established. The above questions especially apply to *dramatists*, whose language is written to be spoken. Actors’ intonations, as Charney suggests, further underscore what is stylized in the spoken lines (81). In the later works of self-conscious stylists such as Mamet (or Pinter, also referenced by Charney) it can be quite difficult to distinguish between parody and the continuing use from play to play of a verbal style with which audiences and readers have become familiar and the characteristics of which critics have been at

*Reference: Maurice Charney, “Parody—and Self-Parody in David Mamet,” *Connotations* 13.1-2 (2003/2004): 77-87.

For the original article as well as all contributions to this debate, please check the Connotations website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debcharney01312.htm>>.

some pains to identify. Charney identifies salient characteristics of Mamet's style: "the macho vaunting, the sudden bursts of slang and colloquial, the overwrought literary style, the excessive pauses, silences fraught with meaning (or with emptiness), endless repetition, fragmentary and unintelligible speech and syntax" (87). To these characteristics, I would add others (some of them mentioned by Charney elsewhere in his essay) drawn from four earlier plays—*Sexual Perversity in Chicago*, *American Buffalo*, *Glengarry Glen Ross*, and *Speed-The-Plow*: frequent use of expletives (the Mametesque characteristic *par excellence* in the popular view); emphasis placed on particular words (in italics) in lieu of explicit explanation of the idea behind them; emphasis on phatic communication represented by repetitions of words relating to saying, understanding, etc.; characters' talking around a subject while each asserts that he understands what the other is talking about; clichés; misogynistic remarks; one-sided phone conversations.

Throughout his work Mamet demonstrates an acute ear for various kinds of professional discourse. In his critiques of corporate America (in plays such as *American Buffalo* and *Glengarry Glen Ross*), he walks a fine line between the kind of habitual stylization of dialogue (the style we have come to call Mametesque) that has allowed him to get at the corrupt power relations lying beneath various kinds of professional jargon and parody of the obliquities of such jargon. The result is dialogue that is comic as well as edgy, entertaining as well as subtly critical of its speaker, and, one can say, self-parodic as well as parodic. Through such parody Mamet is a moral satirist and cultural critic. Such parody, and indeed self-parody, serves Mamet well in *Oleanna*, but Mametesque style does not operate in the same way in the more problematic, and to my mind, not entirely successful *Boston Marriage*.

In *Oleanna* Mamet's stylistic quirks work, as they do in his earlier plays, to convey by implication his major themes. Just as *American Buffalo* and *Glengarry Glen Ross* take on American business, so *Oleanna* takes on higher education, addressing the damage that abuse of power, whether by the teacher or the student, can do to the educa-

tional process.¹ The play opens with a one-sided phone conversation in which John, a college professor, is talking to his wife about the house they are buying, ignoring a student, Carol, who waits for him to finish. Already the power relations between professor and student are established. (They will be reversed by the play's end.)

And what about the land. (*Pause*) The land. And what about the land. (*Pause*) What about it? (*Pause*) No. I don't understand. Well, yes. I'm I'm ... no, I'm sure it's signif ... I'm sure it's significant. (*Pause*) Because it's significant to mmmmmm ... did you call Jerry? (*Pause*) Because ... no, no, no, no, no. What did they say ... ? Did you speak to the *real* estate ... where *is* she ... ? Well, well, all right. Where are her notes? Where are the notes we took with her? (*Pause*) I thought you were? No. No, I'm sorry, I didn't mean that, I just thought that I saw you, when we were there ... what ... ? I thought I saw you with a *pencil*. (1)²

The monologue contains pauses, repetitions, stammering, unfinished sentences, words whose italicization indicates the extra meaning they are being made to bear, and, for so short an extract, a large number of words referring to the process of communication itself and its uptake: "understand," "significant," "say," "speak," "mean," "thought." This one-sided phone conversation, a typical set piece, may seem at first glance to be there primarily to allow Mamet to play all of his stylistic tricks for the gratification of an audience composed of the cognoscenti, that is to be simply self-parodic. And certainly part of the pleasure that this monologue affords its audience is that of recognition of Mametesque style. But the monologue also introduces in subtle form two of the play's themes: power and its relation to the determination of meaning. John exercises power not only over Carol by ignoring her but also over his wife by badgering her with questions and implicitly accusing her of paying insufficient attention to the house-buying process: "Where are the notes we took with her? [...] I thought I saw you with a *pencil*." The repetition of what John "thought" his wife was doing and the italicized "*pencil*" determine the meaning of his wife's behavior, carrying the weight of John's accusation of her fecklessness, especially as we are unable to hear her side of the story.

In the passage immediately following the phone conversation, which Charney quotes (80), John determines Carol's meaning in a rather similar way, informing her that she does not really want to know what a "term of art" (from his phone conversation) means but that she is in his office to talk about something else: "Don't you think?" (3). This arrogant, repeated question asserts John's linguistic control over Carol's meaning, bringing her to apologize for her own question. Throughout their conversations it is clear that the one in the superior position determines not only his or her own meaning but also the meaning of the less powerful individual, effectively rendering that individual inarticulate. At the beginning Carol stammers: "Did ... did I ... did I say something wr ..." (3). At the end of the play, however, Carol is in a position to determine John's meaning (concerning his hand on her arm, for example), and it is he who becomes inarticulate: "... wait. Wait. Wait a moment" (61).

The inherent corruption of the relations between professor and student is especially apparent in Mamet's acute rendering of the dialogue between John and Carol in conference. Like the real estate jargon in *Glengarry Glen Ross*, their dialogue sounds realistic, to many of us perhaps almost embarrassingly so, though because of its artful stylization, the dialogue also comes across as parodic. Take the following passage, for example:

JOHN: No. I see what you , it ... (*He gestures to the papers.*) but your work ...
 CAROL: I'm just: I sit in class I ... (*She holds up her notebook.*) I take notes ...
 JOHN (*simultaneously with "notes"*): Yes. I understand. What I am trying to
 tell you is that some, some basic ...
 CAROL: ... I ...
 JOHN: ... one moment: some basic missed communi ...
 CAROL: I'm doing what I'm told. I bought your book, I read your ...
 JOHN: No, I'm sure you ...
 CAROL: No, no, no. I'm doing what I'm told. It's *difficult* for me. It's *difficult*
 ... (6)

John points to the poor quality of Carol's paper and her misunderstanding of the course. Carol insists that she is doing as she has been told (taking notes, buying John's book), implying that her obedience

to his requirements deserves a better grade than she has received. John asserts his authority to “*tell*” Carol something, the italics standing in both for his right to teach Carol and his frustration with her inability to understand. Carol implies a veiled criticism of John as a teacher in her repeated, italicized “*difficult.*” The dialogue in itself reflects the discourse of student-teacher relations, but because it possesses a kind of Pinteresque superrealism (the excessive stammering and repetition), it also has a parodic edge. Mamet parodies student-teacher exchanges just as he parodies the discourse of real estate in *Glengarry Glen Ross* or business in *American Buffalo* or male discourse about women in *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* to expose the deficiencies of the systems in which the characters operate.

The following speech from *Glengarry Glen Ross*, for example, shows Mamet similarly manipulating real estate jargon to display satirically the underlying corruption of the play’s business relationships. Roma, the star salesman, speaking to Williamson, the office manager, stabs in the back the older salesman, Levene, for whom he has just expressed admiration and friendship:

ROMA: Williamson: listen to me: when the *leads* come in ... listen to me: when the *leads* come in I want my top two off the list. For *me*. My usual two. Anything you give *Levene* ... (107)³

Roma goes on to demand all of his own action and half of Levene’s. The speech contains Mamet’s characteristic repetitions, italicization, and words that refer explicitly to the act of communication that is taking place: the repeated command “listen” implies that Williamson, by “listening,” will also obey. The italicization of “*leads*” makes this word (used repeatedly throughout the play but never actually explained) bear the weight of all that is profitable about the real estate business and the means by which one makes that profit. The obsession of the salesmen with the “*leads*” makes all of them more or less Bergsonian jack-in-the-box figures. It is as if Roma cannot help betraying Levene. The parodic edge of the play’s professional discourse both entertains and enables Mamet’s satiric critique of American capitalist culture.

Curiously, despite Mamet's criticism of their corporate culture, the characters in his earlier plays are not only entertaining but also engaging. This is in part because Mamet's parody of various kinds of jargon is to an extent sympathetic even as it is critical. Thus Roma may be morally obnoxious, but he is excitingly vital as well. In this regard it is worth noting that Mamet himself once worked in a real estate office, enabling him to adopt both an insider's and an outsider's stance in writing *Glengarry Glen Ross*. The extended discussion of sympathetic parody that has taken place in the pages of *Connotations* is helpful here.⁴ For parody in many of Mamet's plays simultaneously satirizes and illuminates the appeal of what is being parodied. In *Oleanna*, however, Mamet's parody of academic discourse is not at all sympathetic; and John and Carol are not at all attractive. What makes watching and especially listening to them nonetheless entertaining, I would suggest, is the artistry or self-parody in Mamet's writing that Maurice Charney has identified. Mamet offers what might be described as a sympathetic parody of his own stylistic techniques, thereby engaging the audience aesthetically in the dialogue while leaving intact the play's satire and moral indignation. In *Oleanna*, then, Mamet engages productively in both parody and self-parody.

Boston Marriage, as Charney observes, parodies Restoration comedy of manners "as filtered through" Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* (82). In this play, set in a Victorian drawing room, Mamet focuses, unusually, on three women: two lesbian ladies, Anna and Claire, who are engaged in sexual intrigues with offstage characters, and a comic maid. (The focus on women rather than men, commented on by Charney and a number of theatre reviewers, may in itself be construed as a form of self-parody, showing that Mamet has, somewhat mockingly, taken note of criticism of the misogyny of his earlier plays.) Some of the lines in *Boston Marriage* are quite witty in their own right, in the style of comedy of manners, to be sure, but they are not inherently parodic: "Why would he require a mistress if he had no wife?" (6); "Have you taken a vow of *arrogance*?" (26).⁵ Mamet does, however, draw attention to what is parodic in the dialogue of Anna

and Claire. Anna and Claire themselves (and sometimes Catherine, the maid) undercut each other's superficially poetic discourse by responding to it, as Charney notes, with lines like "... kiss my ass" (84). The jarring introduction of unexpected contemporary expletives and crudities into the otherwise pseudo-Victorian high-flown literary language certainly reminds the audience that they are watching a play by David Mamet, raising the question of whether the mockery belongs solely to the characters or whether Mamet is parodying himself. Charney finds this question unanswerable (84). I would venture to suggest that while such inappropriate interpolations deflate and send up what has just been said and that the expletives are certainly Mametesque, mocking comments that puncture high-flown sentences and point to the parodic nature of those sentences do not in themselves constitute parody, as Charney seems to suggest.

Though Charney defines parody concisely and accurately as "a form of imitation for satirical purposes" (77), he occasionally in relation to both *Hamlet* and *Boston Marriage* uses the term in a less precise way. Beginning his essay with reference to *Hamlet*, Charney describes as parody Hamlet's mocking comment on his attempt to work himself up into the passion he has just admired in the Player's lament for Hecuba ("Bloody, bawdy villain! / Remorseless, treacherous, lecherous, kindless villain!"). "Why, what an ass am I!" Hamlet declares, going on to offer an incisive criticism of his outburst: "Must, like a whore, unpack my heart with words / And fall a-cursing like a very drab" (2.2.557-58, 563-64). It is not the scathing comment that is parodic, as Charney suggests, but rather the "rodomontade" (78) itself that mimics conventional tragic speech. The line "Remorseless, treacherous, lecherous, kindless villain!" sounds like a more sophisticated parody of the kind of "tragic" lines that are held up to ridicule in Bottom's audition speech in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*: "The raging rocks / And shivering shocks / Shall break the locks / Of prison gates" (1.2.24-27).⁶ Hamlet's mocking comment points to the parodic quality of his earlier lines but is not itself parodic because it does not imitate what it mocks. I think that we should similarly

distinguish mocking commentary that points to parodic excess from parody *per se* in *Boston Marriage*.

At times, however, in *Boston Marriage* Mamet does seem to parody himself. The following speech is a good example. Anna is complaining of Claire's ingratitude in loving another young woman in light of Anna's own generosity:

I come into funds, I come into funds, and my FIRST THOUGHT, do you see? Is it for myself? It is for *you*. Do I expect thanks? I would be glad of mute appreciation. I receive nothing but the tale of your new rutting. (*Pause*) (15)

Here are the Mametesque repetitions, capitalization and italicization of significant words, comment on the process of communication itself ("do you see?"), combination of "overwrought literary style" (Charney 87)—"mute appreciation"—and vulgarity—"rutting"—, the pause. But in the context, at once Wildean and purely domestic, that Mamet has created in this play, such Mametesque self-parody seems to be self-indulgent, pointless, and even an irritating reminder of the kind of play that *Boston Marriage* is not.

In comparison with Mamet's earlier plays, *Boston Marriage* is shallow. There are no cultural depths to be plumbed or mocked beneath the glittering surface. As Charney comments, the whole play "seems parodic in tone" (84). In a play that is already so ostensibly a parody of (particularly Wildean) comedy of manners, Mametesque self-parody can have no purpose; it can only distract.

The difficulty in figuring out what to make of the play that Charney draws to our attention is reflected in the variety of responses offered by theatre critics. Reviewers of *Boston Marriage*, while acknowledging the same distinctive Mametesque techniques, had wildly divergent opinions of the play. John Simon, reviewing the American production of 2002 in *New York*, loathed "the leaden preciousness of the text," the "insults whose flowery and stiltedly archaizing language is periodically littered with today's grossest obscenities"; by contrast, John Lahr, reviewing the (apparently superior) London production of the previous year in *The New Yorker*, thoroughly enjoyed the way in which

“Mamet’s idiom swings between the archaic and the contemporary,” his ability “to employ and to parody” the play’s Victorian language.⁷ This extraordinary difference of opinion seems to derive in large measure from whether or not the reviewer recognized, or at least how he responded to, the play’s parody. In the end, Charney is willing to rest his case with an acknowledgement of Mametesque ambiguity: “He seems amused at having us on” (87). That may well be the case. But, as I have suggested above, I believe that there is a fundamental distinction to be drawn between Mamet’s plays, including *Oleanna*, in which parody serves as cultural critique, and *Boston Marriage*, which is itself a parody for the fun of it. I am grateful to Maurice Charney for raising such interesting and important questions that deal not only with how we understand the stylized plays of self-conscious dramatists such as Mamet but also with how we may value them.

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NOTES

¹For a full analysis of *Oleanna* in these terms see my “Sex, Power, and Pedagogy in Mamet’s *Oleanna* and Ionesco’s *The Lesson*,” *American Drama* 5.1 (Fall 1995): 36-50.

²David Mamet, *Oleanna* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993).

³David Mamet, *Glengarry Glen Ross* (New York: Grove P, 1984).

⁴See *Connotations* 12.1, 12.2-3, 13.1-2, and 14.1-3.

⁵David Mamet, *Boston Marriage* (New York: Vintage Books, 2002).

⁶Quotations from *Hamlet* and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* are taken from *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt et al. (New York: Norton, 1997).

⁷John Simon, “Good-bye, Prof. Chips,” *New York* 2 December 2002: 78. 21 August 2007. <http://nymag.com/nymetro/arts/theater/reviews/n_8045/>; John Lahr, “Lust Be a Lady,” *The New Yorker* 2 April 2001: 94. 21 August 2007 <http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2001/04/02/010402crth_theatre>.

Mamet's Self-Parody: A Response to Maurice Charney*

DAVID MASON

In his article, Maurice Charney asserts that, whatever else David Mamet may be doing in his plays—and in *Oleanna* and *Boston Marriage*, specifically—he parodies himself. That is, Mamet's work is persistently self-referential: at every of their own dramatic moments, his plays have Mamet and his work in mind and on the tongue, and with a skepticism which transforms them(selves) into caricatures. The metatheatrical scheme Charney thus identifies is almost too convoluted to describe, as we find ourselves looking at Mamet, looking at himself, looking back, and laughing. While Charney offers an attractive way of reading Mamet (and some kind of strategy is necessary), his argument that Mamet's object of parody is himself fails to be wholly persuasive. Mamet may, indeed, be "pushing the envelope" in order to see "how far he can go without audience and readers rising up in protest."¹ But even if this is *true*, it is not necessarily *parody*. At least, Charney's argument does not conclusively establish Mamet as his own subject. Certainly, Mamet's style is "overreaching" and "hyperbolic."² But if, as Charney avers, when we reach the end of *Oleanna*, we do not "believe in the ending," are we necessarily sucked into a "morass of self-parody"?³ Which is to say: are we necessarily sucked into a morass of Mamet's parody of *himself*?

Following Simon Dentith, we identify parody as the artistic transformation of a discrete source, a hypotext, so as to communicate a polemical or critical position, either with regard to the hypotext itself or towards the world (or both).⁴ This understanding of *parody* sucks

*Reference: Maurice Charney, "Parody—and Self-Parody in David Mamet," *Connotations* 13.1-2 (2003/2004): 77-88.

For the original article as well as all contributions to this debate, please check the Connotations website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debcharney01312.htm>>.

critical theory into a catch-22. If we wish to identify Mamet's works as their own hypotexts, we must first find Mamet works which are not, already, as Charney says, *Mametesque*.

Nevertheless, Charney's introduction of *parody* to the discussion of Mamet, since *parody* is a distinctly metatextual device, productively redirects our consideration of the content and intent of Mamet's work. Even if we are uncertain whether Mamet takes a polemical or critical position against *himself*, certainly he critically and polemically considers the world. To the extent that his polemical and critical consideration of the world takes a metatheatrical form, his work implicitly critiques the activity of theatre, which is, after all, Mamet's own environment. Perhaps an effort to map the theatrical boundaries in Mamet's works, the lines between play and played, could identify a Mamet within the *Mametesque*.

A comprehensive map of this idea exceeds the space available here. Instead, I propose here to consider one specific element of one particular play, as an indication of the method which I am imagining, under Charney's inspiration. Charney himself is drawn to *Oleanna* as a representative text, and I have already made an attempt to identify its metatheatrical nature.⁵ Developing then, these two arguments, let me here consider in some detail one of the characters in this play, who might further substantiate Charney's approach to Mamet.

Can we characterize John as a parodical figure? Certainly, in Dentith's terms, John orients the play polemically towards higher education, and the degree to which his language and actions are grossly exaggerated, as Charney has noted, suggests that he is the transformation of a hypotext. John theorizes aloud, for instance, about choosing his profession:

When I found I loved to teach I swore that I would not become that cold, rigid automaton of an instructor which I had encountered as a child.

Now, I was not unconscious that it was given me to err upon the other side. And, so, I asked and *ask* myself if I engaged in heterodoxy, I will not say "gratuitously" for I do not care to posit orthodoxy as a given good—but, "to the detriment of, of my students."⁶

Surely, John is a parody of assistant professors at liberal arts colleges in the United States, who are on the cusp of tenure, and who have written a book. But this does not necessarily establish that John assists Mamet in parodying himself.

John is woefully incompetent as a teacher and as an interpreter of human behavior, as Richard Badenhausem has adequately shown.⁷ But besides his professional and interpersonal deficiencies, John is stupid to such a degree that he tempts us, the audience, to dismiss him as poorly written. Why, for instance, in the late twentieth century would anyone, let alone a college professor with several years of experience, not only invite a female student who has accused him of sexual misconduct to his office for a *private* meeting, but, then, having ended that meeting with the appearance of assault on the said student—an assault to which others are apparently witness—invite the same student *again* to his office for yet another *private* meeting? No one in John's place in the real world could possibly be that foolish. At the worst, John is a clumsy exaggeration of humanity. At best, he is a stylish parody of individuals which Mamet may have encountered in his own sorties through the halls of higher education. In either case, John is a metatheatrical character, who makes his own fictional existence explicit, and whose actions have significance only within the fictional world he inhabits.

What significance, then, does John's stupidity have within the world of this play? We derive the answer to this question, I think, from the airplane. The playwright calls special attention to John's aviation metaphor by focusing closely on a paper airplane passed between Carol and John while he speaks:

JOHN: A *pilot*. Flying a plane. The pilot is flying the plane. He thinks: Oh, my *God*, my mind's been drifting! Oh, my God! What kind of a cursed imbecile am I, that I, with this so precious cargo of *Life* in my charge, would allow my attention to wander. Why was I born? How deluded are those who put their trust in me, ... et cetera, so on, and he crashes the plane.⁸

In Mamet's film version, the same airplane reappears prominently in John's desk drawer when he declares to the phone, "Cost me my job?"

Fine. Then the job was not worth having," at which point he learns that Carol has accused him of rape and assault.⁹ If we read John's various expressions of distaste for higher education (not to mention his book which apparently regards higher education as a mechanism of oppression), his distrust of people holding his kind of authority, his eagerness to undermine the system in which he works, and the rhetorical gymnastics he does to mask his loathing for the material comforts which his job produces, beside the implications of his airplane speech (which Mamet's own film version, at least, regards as significant), we see quite clearly in John a metatheatrically tragic character. John, upon realizing he is not only what he despises but parodically so, does what is necessary. Oedipus gouges his own eyes out. John invites Carol to his office. Twice.

Once he confronts the possibility that he is an impostor, which may have happened even before the action of the play has begun, John assumes a place in which he is his own hypotext—the thing he transforms so as to emphasize certain (undesirable) characteristics. So, when John tells Carol that while confronting his tenure committee he has an urge to "puke [his] *badness* on the table," he may be speaking more truly than at any other time in the play.¹⁰ In fact, rather than suspecting Carol of setting John up, as many critics do, we might suspect that John has had his end in mind from the beginning—has, in fact, set himself up. John rejects himself once he confronts the possibility that he is an impostor, and Carol serves only as the "index of [his] badness [...]." ¹¹ John transforms himself. In this way, at least, Mamet's work parodies Mamet's work.

A final suggestion to complement Charney's helpful analysis of this play. Mamet claims to *believe* John. "If I didn't believe [the characters in *Oleanna*] the play wouldn't work as well."¹² Given Mamet's experience as a part of the higher education machine, at Goddard College, NYU, and Yale, among other places, we might speculate that Mamet not only believes John, but identifies with him and employs him as a parody of a world which Mamet distrusts. So much for higher education. But does Mamet believe (or identify with) John as far as John's

confessed self-loathing and his self-destructive ambitions? Is it possible that John is the index of the Mamet within the Mametesque?

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NOTES

¹Charney 87.

²Charney 81.

³Charney 82.

⁴See Simon Dentith, *Parody, The New Critical Idiom* (London: Routledge, 2000). Dentith's first chapter nicely summarizes several seminal works on this subject, including Linda Hutcheon's *A Theory of Parody* (New York: Methuen, 1985) and Gerard Genette's *Palimpsests* (Omaha: U of Nebraska P, 1998).

⁵See David Mason, "The Classical American Tradition: Meta-Tragedy in *Oleanna*," *Journal of American Drama and Theatre* 13.3 (2001): 55-72.

⁶David Mamet, *Oleanna* (New York: Vintage, 1992) 43.

⁷Richard Badenhausen, "The Modern Academy Raging in the Dark: Misreading Mamet's Political Correctness in *Oleanna*," *College Literature* 25 (1998): 1-19.

⁸Mamet 18.

⁹*Oleanna*, dir. David Mamet, 1 hr. 30 min., MGM, 1994, DVD.

¹⁰Mamet 23.

¹¹Mamet 24.

¹²Geoffrey Norman and John Rezek, "David Mamet: A Candid Conversation with America's Foremost Dramatist about Tough Talk, TV Violence, Women and Why Government Shouldn't Fund the Arts," *Playboy* (April 1995): 52-53.

“Anti-novel” as Ethics: Lindsey Collen’s *The Rape of Sita*¹

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When *The Rape of Sita* came out in 1993 it was immediately attacked by a group of fundamentalists and by the State.² The main objection, from people who had not even read the novel, was to the title itself, simply for its linking the Hindu goddess Sita, symbol of chastity and purity, to the word “rape.” As Vicram Ramharai notes in his review of the numerous reactions in the press, the novel was hardly ever treated as being literature (11), by articles that say more about their authors than about the novel itself (14). In other words, all these social, religious and political reactions to Collen’s novel were “extra-literary.”

Although Collen’s *engagé* stories focus around political struggles, literature—and this has to be stressed in this context—is definitely not politics.³ However, I shall argue here that literature can be a form of social action through its ‘ethical’ dimension, which is both pragmatic and subversive. I shall take ‘ethics’ to mean the search for the ‘good life,’ posing the crucial question ‘How *ought* a life be lived?’ It is this sense that prevails in the contemporary turn to ethics in literature and in literary criticism,⁴ strongly influenced by Levinasian ethics, which rejects totality and privileges openness based on an “ethical relation,” as an encounter with the other.⁵ Now, if it is true that the *ought* which lies “at the dead centre of ethics” (Harpham 18) refers to an objective obligation independent of the opinion of the speaker, the speaker nevertheless has to be implied in what he says for his discourse to have an ethical impact. The tone or voice in the text, far from being objective, actually corresponds to the content of what is being said: What is put forward has actually been experienced and calls forth the experience of the reader by the tone, by the way of saying, which is

For debates inspired by this article, please check the Connotations website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debwilliams-wanquet01513.htm>>.

the *ethos* of the text.⁶ Therein lies the pragmatic aspect of ethical discourse, namely making language a form of action. Ethics also has a subversive aspect.

Indeed, ethics differs from morality: morality is associated with deontology, with upholding an official system of rules of behaviour, whereas ethics is associated with the undetermined, with questioning. Morality is associated with a will to domination, whereas ethics “operates a kind of play within morality, holds it open” (Gibson 15); morality is associated with consensus and closure, whereas ethics introduces dissent and openness. Ethics privileges “the neither/nor, rather than the either/or” (Gibson 44) and is turned to the future, calling for change. Indeed, in her interview in *Triplopia*, Collen says she uses literature to reflect on concrete situations, to pose moral dilemmas, privileging “reciprocal” relationships rather than “cut-and-dried moral regulation” and as a way of “getting out of moral straight-jackets,” adding that literature is for her a way of sharing experiences and a mode of openness towards the “other.” Thus, literature itself becomes a “resignifying practice,”⁷ with the immediate pragmatic effect of re-describing the world from a different point of view.

I would like to suggest that *The Rape of Sita* is part of this postmodern turn to ethics, which uses language itself to make a political comment and suggest a new way of looking at history and at past events. To examine and review the story of rape, Collen re-writes an episode of the Hindu national epic poem, the *Ramayana*, which is re-contextualised in the secular and patriarchal Mauritian reality of the 1980s. In this re-contextualisation Sita is raped—contrarily to the Hindu goddess, who is saved by supernatural intervention. As Collen explains in *Triplopia*, it is the “patriarchal structure” itself with its rigid hierarchy that makes abuse of power possible:

what allows abuses like rape to exist at all [...] is something that is soaked in the whole fabric of society, and that when you add up all the insidious and often invisible aspects of patriarchy, then you end up with a balance of

forces between man and woman, which allows a man, if he wants to, to violate a woman, and to know that he can get away with it.

Intertextual relations with some of the famous literary texts of Western civilisation, especially T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922), are used to further challenge the established social order. But, *The Rape of Sita* not only reverses points of view as it re-contextualises an old story. It actually re-tells a story of rape differently, 'doing things with words' in the use of writing as a resignifying practice. This is the aspect I shall focus on in this article, examining how *The Rape of Sita* calls for a change of attitudes and of mentality through its very narrative structure and symbolism.

* * *

The chosen narrative technique, based on the oral tradition, is here significant. In addition to being introduced by a poem, the story is framed by a preface, in which the narrator, Iqbal, explains that the introductory poem is written by a woman called "Time." What follows is the written version of an oral account: Iqbal tells the story of the rape of Sita, the modern counterpart of the Hindu goddess. The narrative technique is thus inspired from that of the *Ramayana* itself, which was transmitted by several narrators before being fixed by writing, then translated, rewritten and reinterpreted by many poets and writers, resulting in countless versions of the same story. Nevertheless, as Collen explains in *Triplopia*, her narrative technique is also based on African traditions: "The tradition in which Iqbal is telling this story is the one I relate more to African traditions, both as I know them from my childhood in South Africa, and also as they live on in Mauritius." Indeed, the novel respects certain universal conventions of oral story telling.⁸

Iqbal's story is introduced by the characteristic formula: "Once upon a time," which is followed by "'Sirandann? Sirandann?' I sing out. [...] 'Sanpek!' comes the reponse" (RS 7). These ritual words, which open a session of oral story telling in Mauritius, are the equivalent of the

West-Indian "Crik, Crak." This opening formula is repeated and then immediately followed by the first again: "Once upon a time there was a woman called Sita" (RS 7). Such opening formulas have several functions: they introduce a break with the real world and invite the audience to enter into another world, into an imaginary universe; they announce the passage into another time and space, into an old story; they proclaim that this is a story *passed on* by others; they make sure that the audience is receptive, preparing the way for a dialogue between the story-teller and his audience.

Several narrative levels are present and the text keeps moving from one to the other.⁹ Iqbal's narrative of the story of Sita—as told to an audience—is regularly interrupted by accounts of the story-telling situation itself; Iqbal, the story-teller, typically enters into dialogue with his audience, who keeps interrupting and asking questions: "There is no limit to the interruptions allowed to my story. This is normal. It's a story. You have your rights. So now you want to know [...]" (RS 41). The written story is also interrupted by passages in which Iqbal, the narrator, directly addresses the reader to pose moral dilemmas in what could be termed 'asides'—"Here, dear reader, is the second dilemma" (RS 56). Thus, audience and readers are not mere spectators, but they become participants and players in the action. Moreover, Iqbal regularly explains to his audience that he is only telling stories told to him by others, situating himself in a chain of stories—"But it isn't my story. It's the story told to me by Jojo" (RS 70); or: "So Sita told me" (RS 99). In addition to moving in and out of Sita's mind, he sometimes hands the narrative voice over to another character, embedding another's oral story into his own narrative.¹⁰ The choice of such a multiple-levelled conversational method associated to the conventions of oral story-telling can be linked to the contemporary turn to ethics. As Andrew Gibson explains, such merging of story and narration, or of story and discourse, is the reverse of rhetoric, if it is understood to be linked to the will to totalize and master, and "closes off all possibility of dialogue with the other in her or his irreducible difference"; on the contrary, the dialogic structure

chosen “maintains the ethical relation with the other and the possibility of unsaying what is said” (Gibson 59), forcing the reader to cooperate.

Oral story telling, as an essentially dialogic form, is situated between creation and tradition, between memory and invention. A story is never perfect. The teller has to re-tell a true story anew each time. And it has to be different each time (cf. *RS* 8). Thus Iqbal incorporates the visions of others into his own to make a new story. He quotes what he told his audience: “I’m telling a very old story. Ancient. Only it is my duty, my bounden duty, to make it more true.” Then he further explains to the reader that: “For every one story-teller, as you and I know him, there are two trainees. One has to remember the story as it was, or as it is. And the other who has to retell it anew, and never the same. I am the second kind” (*RS* 8). Thus, in Althusserian terms, Iqbal is not only “interpellated”, or assigned a role—he can also “counter-interpellate.”¹¹ As a subject who is “constituted by the language” he speaks, and language is also the “condition of possibility” for him as a speaking subject (Butler 28). He thus “counter-signs,” adding to his ongoing subjection a “self-subjectification.”¹² Iqbal illustrates that to listen and read is to take place—not to subject oneself or the other to forceful allotment but to produce oneself or the other through replacement. He invites the reader to be active, to counter-sign in his turn, as he hands over his story at the end of the novel. The text he finally offers to the reader becomes an “unpredictable and virtual meeting point between the reading ‘I’ and the read ‘you,’ the meeting point of an ‘us’ [...] brought about by [...] a sudden, unexpected flow of boundaries.”¹³ The oral tale usually has a social and cultural function, being a way of transmitting values or of challenging accepted values. *The Rape of Sita* thus re-writes the story of rape differently, unearthing the secret functioning of patriarchy and calling for change.

Iqbal’s digressive narrative strategy, which he compares to a “bunch of grapes” (*RS* preface and 197), thus challenges traditional narrative methods in more ways than one, and corresponds to what Gibson

calls the "anti-novel," a form particularly suited to ethical questioning: "An ethics of the novel which emphasises multiplicity and the movement of the dissolution of cognitive horizons will tend logically to give a significant place to works in which the form of the novel itself seems to dissolve: anti-novels" (91). There is here no real source of authority, no real author, no creator, no fixed origin, only a chain of memories. There are no fixed answers, only an ongoing chain of questions. The hero is caught up in a chain of events, which he does not master. The implied spectator/reader, who is free to interpret and to pose questions, plays an active role and can influence the course of the tale.

Moreover, what Gibson calls an "ethics of dissolution" operates in the novel through "repeated and radical interruption of given horizons" (92-93). The form of the novel itself seems to dissolve as, "both text and reading are ceaselessly troubled by an irreducible alterity, an orientation away from the past and unity of being to the future and the multiplicity of becoming that nonetheless repeats a past in a certain way" (Gibson 99). The narrative movement forward is also a recoil back into the text, as Sita dives into her unconscious to recover the lost moment. In addition to the movement back and forth in time, there are constant deviations to the double mainstream story: that of Sita trying to remember her rape, and the actual story of the rape. These digressions serve to fill in information on other characters in relation to whom Sita herself is defined, e.g. her mother, Dharma, the Tarquin family, to pose moral questions and offer 'philosophical' comments about life,¹⁴ and to fill in historical details.¹⁵ Chapters are replaced by a proliferation of instances of varying length separated by typographical marks. Narrative summary alternates with signalled or unsignalled quoted dialogue and passages in traditional internal monologue or in stream of consciousness,¹⁶ all punctuated by short sentences and groups of words, generating a broken rhythm, both forward moving yet pulled back in time, as different voices and times merge. Italics are conventionally employed to stress particular words or to signal to the reader the alien origin of words (here quotations or

words in Creole), but all Iqbal's narratorial intrusions are also thoroughly italicized. As Frédéric Regard explains in his article on Jeanette Winterson, entitled "A Philosophy of Magical Rhetoric":

The italics simultaneously frame the character and forbid the reader to grasp his full existence. [...] a typeface of the sloping kind, the italics visually convey the impression that written language is [...] always in the process of becoming other. [...] The italics are eternally leaning towards an unknown future and, at the same time, towards an unknown past; [...] The italics magically produce the alien spirit in the very act of enunciation. (118-19)

Thus Iqbal's moral dilemmas gesture towards a new way of being, as his narrative stands against a fixed sequence in order to reenergize other ways of being, other styles of being. Indeed, he ends his narrative by calling for change: "Such are the hopes of Iqbal for another story. Another history. In the future" (RS 197).

Thus writing, like telling, becomes action. The performativity of the text—the words produce an effect, accomplish what they say—is enhanced by the *ethos* of the text, which is particularly obvious in an oral story, whereby the narrator calls for the reader to experience what is said. This also accounts for Iqbal in his narrative. Indeed, in addition to the moral dilemmas posed by him to the reader, the introductory poem—entitled "Time"—puts forward ethical questions and calls for action, directly appealing to the reader's sense of responsibility: "You oh human / [...] Are poised in eternal dilemma / What action for you / [...] Would be right? / What action for you / Would be wrong, / [...] Will this act / Make history progress / Or allow us / To slip back / Into the mud of the past?" In *Triplopia*, Collen explains that: "some of the assumptions about Time, about moral dilemmas, about life, lean heavily on what I see as an Indian perspective. [...] time and memory are central to the novel and its story of rape." She adds that Time acts as "a reminder of the human situation, our intense consciousness, our moral responsibility because of this consciousness, and we are situated in the eternal changes imposed by an amoral relentless Time." In other words, consciousness leads to the moral responsibility to act and ordinary people are urged to stop and pose the question as to what to

do in a given concrete situation, rather than simply unquestioningly remaining in a moral strait-jacket.

Furthermore, the narrator himself/herself actually experiences what is said. According to Aristotle, in classical rhetoric the tone of what is said is as important as the content of the speech. If an orator wants to be persuasive, he must adopt the attitude and tone of what he is saying (see *Rhetoric* II, 1377b). The *ethos* of a text belongs to the voice of the narrator. But, instead of being considered as a real person, as an essential human subject, source and origin of discourse, the narrator is a textual effect, what Dominique Maingueneau calls the "Locuteur-L" (*Éléments* 80-81). The "Locuteur-L" is the one who actually adopts the tone and attitude of what he is saying, who actually feels what he says. For example, he is the one who says "phew!" in sign of actually felt relief, rather than the one who speaks about himself by saying "I feel relieved" (and who may be lying). In *The Rape of Sita*, both Iqbal and Sita have a very strong *ethos*. Sita herself experiences the rape she writes about in her article. She becomes all the women she quotes, as she addresses "Mowsi" ("*moi aussi*" or "me too"): "Oh, Mowsi, Mowsi, you are Everywoman" (RS 194). She is herself a political activist, belonging to a long line of rebel women, thus adopting the attitude she calls for. As for Iqbal, he announces at the beginning of his story that he "must almost become the heroine," and undergo a "metamorphosis" or "reincarnation" (RS 8). Indeed, at the end of the novel he announces that the transformation has occurred.

Iqbal, the narrator, plays a key symbolical role in this ethical turn. Indeed, nicknamed "Iqbal the Umpire" by Dharma, he is both absent and present. In Collen's own terms, "he is the most 'insider' person in the novel, and yet an 'outsider' to the central myth. He is also an outsider to the sex war" (*Triplopia*). His role is fundamentally one of mediation between different peoples' realities—he says he "used to stand around a lot, [...], just watching and listening" (RS preface). He is named after Sir Allama Muhammad Iqbal (1877-1938), a foremost Muslim philosopher, poet, political leader and visionary, who preached a life of action—the sacrifice of one's ego for great causes—

rather than ascetic resignation and who insisted on the universality of human problems, which transcend all barriers of race, religion, etc. Iqbal also resembles *The Waste Land's* Tiresias, of whom Eliot says in his notes to the poem: "although a mere spectator and not indeed a 'character,' [Tiresias] is yet the most important personage in the poem, uniting all the rest" (note 218). In his poem, Eliot fuses characters into each other to give a sense of the oneness of all experience and the unity of all periods; he merges Christian symbolism, fertility rites and Eastern religions to call for spiritual renewal; and he ends on Sanskrit words which call for surrender to something outside the self.¹⁷ Such a reading invites a comparison of the role of Iqbal with that of Tiresias through his link with Ton Tipyer. Ton Tipyer, whom Iqbal describes as "the chorus" or "a wise man" (RS 41, 55), keeps cropping up in the story of Sita, whom he knows intimately; Ton Tipyer, Dharma and Iqbal are described as the "allies" of women by Sita (RS 193); Ton Tipyer was brought up and taught the *Mahabharata* by Hanumanjee, the watchman of a sand quarry—a metaphor for time (RS 63)—named after the monkey king guardian of society; he passed on his religious and political knowledge to Sita (RS 92-3), who in turn taught Iqbal to write.¹⁸ Ton Tipyer—in French: Tonton Petit Pierre—was a stonemason and was Iqbal's "god" when he was a child. Brought up in the sands of time, he is a carver of human destiny—"he meant transformation of nature [...] birth of new life out of rock" (RS 41). His name echoes that of the Biblical Peter—"Tu es Pierre et sur cette pierre je bâtirai mon Église" (Matthew 16:18)—and he is transformed into Krishna, as he changes clothes, discards bad drinking habits, begins playing the flute, is jokingly said to soon "be down at the stream watching the women washing and bathing" (RS 39) and looks "blue in the night light" (RS 196).¹⁹ Taking into account the belief that the legend of Krishna has its origin in the life of Christ, the religious symbolism of *The Rape of Sita* is linked to a call for openness to the other and, hence, implies the call for political action.

On a still deeper symbolic level, Iqbal, like Tiresias in whom "the two sexes meet,"²⁰ is both man and woman. The phrase, always in

italics, "*Iqbal was a man who thought he was a woman,*" is a leitmotiv in the text, being repeated no less than twenty-two times, with three slight variations—"who'd rather be" (RS 86); "who knew he was" (RS 88); "Wished he was" (RS 90). Iqbal tells the reader that his phrase, taken from the Beatles' song "Get back"—"*Jojo was a man who thought he was a woman*"—keeps running around inside his head (RS 8). It crops up when the events he narrates either make him feel ashamed of being a man or make him feel admiration for women. At the end of his narrative he stops singing it, explaining: "Progress has [...] been made. I am a man now. And I am a woman" (RS 197). This blurring of gender categories seems to be typical of a certain type of postmodern fiction,²¹ and the ethical emphasis on respectful non-violent encounter with alterity is embodied by the figure of the androgyne,²² i.e. by the narrator Iqbal.

According to Gibson, such "a destabilization of gender categories in the framing narrator is inseparable from a destabilization of narrational categories" (47), which, instead of being hierarchically opposed, are reversed, and then incorporated one into the other. Such privileging of "the neither/nor, rather than the either/or," counters the strategy of domination that pits the "I" against the "Other" (32). It moreover challenges the "logic of binary oppositions [that] is also a logic of subordination and domination,"²³ as the "ego is deposed [...] and enters into [...] dialogue" (25). When Iqbal, through sensibility as openness to others, reaches the conclusion, "We will all be man and we will all be woman. [...] And then we will be free. [...] And then we will become equal" (RS 197), she/he seems to echo Levinasian ethics, which "opens a breach in the present and looks towards the future" (Gibson 40).

* * *

Collen's re-writing of an Indian myth in a contemporary Mauritian context from the point of view of the underprivileged is also a revision of the patriarchal social structures that allow rape as abuse of

power to be possible in the first place. It moreover implies a plea for a change of attitude and of mentality. In Judith Butler's terms, "repetition [is] both the way that trauma is repeated but also the way in which it breaks with the historicity to which it is in thrall" (37). Consciousness may lead to moral responsibility, which, then, in turn leads to action. But the novel is not simply a political manifesto—it works as an act of language, which generates "another story" (RS 197). If rape is the "encoded memory of a trauma [...] that lives in language and is carried by language" and "if the subject who speaks is also constituted by the language that she or he speaks, then language is the condition of possibility for the speaking subject, and not merely its instrument of expression" (Butler, 36, 28), repetition with a difference can break free from the binary strictures of established power and from its traditional narrative methods, suggesting the possibility of reconfiguration and resignification.

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NOTES

¹Lindsey Collen was born in South Africa in 1948. Married to a Mauritian, she lives in Mauritius and all her novels are concerned with Mauritian reality. Collen is a political and human rights activist, founder of the left wing party, *Lalit* (which means "struggle" in Creole and "beautiful" in Hindi) and active in the *Muvman Liberasyon Fam* (Women's Liberation Movement). *Lalit* and *Muvman Liberasyon Fam* are both in Mauritian Creole and mean in French, respectively, *La Lutte* and *Mouvement pour la Libération des Femmes*. *The Rape of Sita* (1993) is Collen's second novel. She has also written: *There is a Tide* (1991), *Misyon Garson* (1996)—a novel written in Mauritian Creole—*Getting Rid of It* (1997), *Mutiny* (2001), *Boy* (2004)—an English adaptation of *Misyon Garson*, which won the 2005 Commonwealth Writers' Prize for the Africa Region. She is writing (April 2005) a new novel, *The Malaria Man and Her Neighbours*. *The Rape of Sita* won the 1994 Commonwealth Writers' Prize in the category of African literature and was long-listed for the Orange Prize. The Commonwealth Writers' Prize is divided, in a first stage, between four regions: (i) Africa, (ii) the Caribbean and Canada, (iii) Eurasia (Europe and Asia) and (iv) South-East Asia and the South Pacific. The final winner is selected from the four winners.

²See Vicram Ramharai's article on the reception of the novel for a clear and thorough review of reactions in the newspapers.

³Literature and politics do function according to different temporalities—the political has a far more immediate and tangible effect, as is illustrated by the immediate social effects of Collen's novel—, not only does literature hold in abeyance the convictions and certitudes which are so crucial to political functioning (see Gibson 5, 85), but literature indeed exists on a different plane to its object. As Jean-Jacques Lecercle points out in *L'Emprise des signes*, the link between literature and politics concerns neither the author's political action, nor the text's reflection of reality, but "it is deeper and concerns language" (244; my translation). The political is a disruption or reconfiguration of the order of what is visible or perceptible. Like politics, the act of writing is understood as the disruption of an established order that claims to be total. According to Rancière, literature breaks up consensus by "making an effect in reality," by "reconfiguring sensibility" (*Le Partage du sensible* 62; he writes: "Les énoncés politiques ou littéraires font effet dans le réel. [...] Ils reconfigurent la carte du sensible."). It does so by what Rancière calls an introduction of a "he/she" into the two "Is,"—the subject who writes and the subject who tells—"L'Inadmissible" 142; "La littérature [...] défait le consensus en faisant traverser le je qui consent, convient et contracte par un il."). It works through what Gibson in *Postmodernity, Ethics and the Novel* calls "the power to be affected," whereby sensibility is taken to mean "susceptibility or openness to the event" (164), i.e. to a concrete social context—rather than a return to a form of emotivism that is recalcitrant to the intellect—thereby "put[ting] sensibility back into sense" (167).

⁴See Martha Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*; Geoffrey Galt Harpham, *Getting it Right*; Andrew Gibson, *Postmodernity, Ethics and the Novel*; and Jane Adamson, Richard Freadman, and David Parker (eds.), *Negotiating Ethics in Literature, Philosophy and Theory*.

⁵See especially *Totality and Infinity* and *Time and the Other*.

⁶See Maingueneau, *Nouvelles tendances en analyses du discours* 31-33.

⁷See Butler, *Excitable Speech* 98.

⁸I have taken my definition of oral story-telling essentially from Nicole Belmont's *Poétique du conte: Essai sur le conte de tradition orale*.

⁹In *Figures III* (see 225 ff.), translated by J. E. Lewin as *Narrative Discourse* (see 212 ff.), Genette makes the distinction between story and discourse, between the contents of a story and the actual telling of the story (the enunciation or narration): "any event a narrative recounts is at a diegetic level immediately higher than the level at which the narrating act producing this narrative is placed" (*Narrative Discourse* 228). Genette regards "the transition from one narrative level to the other," for example the intrusion of the narrator into his diegetic universe, as a metalepsis (*Narrative Discourse* 234-35).

¹⁰For example, Jojo's story of Dharma, *RS* 71-75.

¹¹In his famous essay, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," Althusser provides an example of a scene of interpellation: as the policeman hails the passerby with "hey you there," the one who recognises himself turns around, thereby acquiring a certain identity. The address thus brings the subject into being.

¹²This may even be regarded as a form of "self-subjunctivication." As Frédéric Regard explains in "Autobiography as Linguistic Incompetence: Notes on Derrida's Reading of Joyce and Cixous," Jacques Derrida, speaking of H  l  ne Cixous in a conference at Cerisy, sketches his own line of approach. Derrida uses the French word *puisse*, the subjunctive of the verb *pouvoir*, to signify the magic of wishful thinking that he calls the "might of the may," which is brought about when one interprets a text. The subject is thus "subjunctified" at the same time as he is "subjected."

¹³Regard, "Autobiography as Linguistic Incompetence" 14.

¹⁴E.g., "They were separated. She got this information from Rowan. She remembered this discovery that they were separated very vividly now, and that it had alarmed her. Beyond reasonable measure. Shows how much we know and don't know what we know: otherwise why was she alarmed beyond measure. [...] *This may be the place, the very point where Sita made an error. [...] This may very well be the break-off point. Here may be the culpability. Inasmuch as there could possibly be guilt*" (132-33; emphasis in original).

¹⁵For example: "We now celebrate the organization's birth as having been 11th April, 1982. [...] It was a Sunday, and on Sunday, 11th April, at the Socialist Party's delegates assembly, we had announced our collective resignation from the Socialist Party, on the ground that we didn't agree with the leaders' politics of what they pompously but accurately called New Social Consensus with the bosses, nor with the allegiance that we had bitterly fought to prevent, with the right-wing populist party of Huriasing, the Social Democrat Party" (53-54).

¹⁶"he or she sita for there is no he nor she but only both sita all alone lying on sand-dune between sea and land in hidden hollow under sole *badam* tree hiding sun no cloud she sita lying naked half asleep shade from leaves caressing his or her body letting heat and cool dance on his or her tummy and hand of one side touches nipple of the other which stand up and hand of other side turns lips of yoni inside out for sun to see for sea air to breathe thereinto and to cause rivers to flow thereoutof and on wet the sand and like time ever to be born from the universal woman round and round the clitoris round and round and eyes closed she or he loves oneself fully and comes" (78).

¹⁷See Brooks 80-86.

¹⁸"[...] Sita taught me to read and write when I was only three, writing in the sand at Rianbel" (Preface).

¹⁹Krishna is a reincarnation of the god Vishnu, preserver of the universe. The mischievous pranks of his youth, related in the *Mahabharata*, include his taking away the clothes of damsels bathing in the river and climbing up a tree till they came to him naked to recover them. He is represented with a flute in his hand and

is associated with the colour blue, blue being the symbol of peace in Hinduism; see *Classical Dictionary of Hindu Mythology* 160 ff.

²⁰Cf. Eliot's note 218 to the poem.

²¹I.e. the fiction where "gender is increasingly emerging, [...] as an activity, a performance, a becoming, or a site where identities may intersect, proliferate and undo one another" (Gibson 42).

²²This idea is central to Levinas's thought and "finds its most potent illustration in the figure of the androgyne that refuses closure and in doing so vindicates the taking into account of the other" (Ganteau 236-37).

²³Benhabib qtd. in Parker 3.

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“OOOO that Eliot-Joycean Rag¹”: A Fantasia² upon Reading *English Music*

SUSAN ANG

Fathers, Sons and Vegetation Myth

In “The Relics of Learning,” his review of Peter Ackroyd’s *English Music*, James Buchan institutes a comparison between Ackroyd and a hypothetical postmodernist architect, who, asked to build a tool shed, would encrust it in “ornamental detail of unusual colour, unsuitable material and hallucinatory style, littered with self-consciously witty references to hammers or screwdrivers, and with no way in” (24). The last, at any rate, is unfair. Opening in 1992, the year of its own publication, the action of the novel is swiftly returned to the childhood of its narrator Timothy Harcombe “seventy years before” (1); this unobtrusive detail is the first of many pointers to a literary relationship which shapes an approach to the novel, and might indeed be argued to offer a way in. I refer to that relationship which lies between *English Music* and *The Waste Land*, this landmark in modern literature, published in 1922.³

This essay attempts a reading of *English Music* as a work whose enquiry into the nature and interpretation of texts, their relationships with author, reader, and other texts, and whose contemplations upon the state of art and culture draw on the Grail legend and Frazerian vegetation myths which underpin *The Waste Land*. *English Music* is, however, also a work about process and change, and within such a work, all structures, all frames, must exist in a state of perpetual jeopardy, always confronting their own provisionality, their own death. Part of this reading thus involves understanding *English Music* not as a static, but as a consciously and intentionally dynamic work, the text

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realised in negotiation with the reader, who is himself continuously being made and remade in his interaction with the text, which therefore must also be always in the process of becoming, and being differently understood. There are no termini. One never arrives; one is always arriving. Provisionality is thus the rubric which governs any act of reading or interpretation, and this reading begins with such an acknowledgement.

Eliot's *Waste Land* requires minimal introduction. Written in the aftermath of the First World War, a period in which "the older generation had lost its authority, and the younger had not found any way forward,"⁴ it is, in part, an elegy for that which has departed, a depiction of enervation and hollowness within contemporary society, and an attempt at cultural salvage. The wasteland manifests itself in terms of "spiritual bankruptcy" and "deracinated ardour"⁵; these, and the sense of cultural and social fatigue, are echoed in *English Music*, where the wasteland is signified both in the literal world inhabited by the Harcombes, and in the literary/artistic world which Timothy accesses in the dream sequences punctuating the novel. Timothy describes the time as a "period of privation and mournfulness" (8) and the lives of people as monotonous and anxious. The novel is peopled by the ill and handicapped, the lonely, the marginalised and dysfunctional of society, the sessions at the Chemical Theatre being attended by the ill and those whom death has, metaphorically, undone. Stanley Clay has a twitching mouth, Margaret Collins is a dwarf, Timothy's maternal grandmother shakes continuously, and his schoolfriend Edward is crippled. Margaret's house, "The Island," alludes to the isolation which Arnold saw as typifying the human condition, and which many of the novel's characters are held within.

More pointedly, the spaces within the dream sequences in which Timothy encounters authors, painters, composers, and characters from the books he reads, also show subtle signs of ravagement. In the first of these, the conflation of Lewis Carroll and Bunyan produces no cross between Wonderland and the Celestial City. Instead, there are continuous, if subtle, signs of the wasteland: plains, dark woods, the

Slough of Despond, the City of Destruction, the Valley of the Shadow of Death with its dried stream. The Dickens dreamscape opens in a ruined garden and moves through “ruined and desolate” places (80) with marshes, dark and polluted rivers; elsewhere, Timothy walks through “a true waste land of woe” (303), “The Wilderness” (305), grim Hogarthian London, and various other manifestations of the waste land too numerous to cite in entirety.

What this might suggest is that the wellspring of English art/culture may have run, or be running, dry; that English art is fatigued, sterile, waste, and in need of restoration. Gibson and Wolfreys have suggested that *English Music*, is, in part, a “performative critique of crisis, not in English culture *per se* [...] so much as in its reception, transmission, and dissemination” (139); their reading in part examines *English Music* as a critique of the “institutionalisation of English studies within a ‘national guise’” (142) and the Leavisite ‘Great Tradition.’⁶ This is interesting and certainly germane to the argument pursued here; the literary ‘wasteland’ with which *English Music* is concerned may however be argued to be more widespread than this, also designating the domain of modern (English) literature, or art, and possibly the space of (critical) reading itself. It may be used, variously, as a metaphor for culture, this text—any text—and even for the reader.

English Music, however, does more than merely critique the perceived crisis in English art. It also discusses the possibilities of restoration and the forms such restoration might take. In the pattern of two particular relationships within the novel, each illuminating the other, may be discerned the shape of certain vegetation myths to which *The Waste Land* is indebted. These myths posit the health and fertility of the land as linked to that of the king, who, in certain cultures, was ritually killed either after a fixed term or if/when he grew old or ill, a new king then raised to his place in an act of symbolic renewal. These patterns of displacement and the transference of power, necessary death and consequent restoration are worked out within two relationships: that between Timothy Harcombe and his father, Clement, and

that which lies between *English Music* and the infinitude of works forming part of its intertextual webbing.

In considering both relationships, the terms 'oedipal' or 'anxiety of influence' spring to mind. The myth of Oedipus, who kills his father and marries his mother, has become a convenient emblem of that love-hate relationship between child and parent. It is a fact generally glossed over or forgotten, that while Oedipus is the agent of his own blinding, it is his parents who first damage him, driving spikes through his feet and laming him. The antagonism runs both ways. Harold Bloom, speaking of the way in which writers attempt to find space for themselves, says that "[t]o live, the poet must *misinterpret* the father, by the crucial act of misprision, which is the re-writing of the father" (19). The tensions (between affection for the old and an impatience for the new, between affiliation and antagonism) common to both models are present in the text, although what *English Music* has to say about inheritance and cultural/artistic health has a greater complexity than either model might be able to do justice to.

From the opening sequences these various tensions are subtly brought into play. The "Chemical Theatre," where Clement Harcombe (spiritualist, healer and magician) and his son Timothy bring "the spirits of your past [...] in dumb show before you" (2), "was supposed to be have been built on the site of a Dissenters' chapel which had been destroyed during the East End riots of 1887" (2), the chapel then rebuilt as a community hall which has become a hall of "miscellaneous purposes." At one level, this suggests the dissolution and adulteration of purpose and direction, authority and form. The image of buildings destroyed, and others erected upon the site of their demise, however, also invokes that pattern of the (necessary) death of the old king and the rise of the new found in the vegetation myths, this complex of meanings also present in "palimpsest," the "new" word Timothy is given by Clement, who reminds him that there are plenty of new words and that one should not use up the old.

In the relationship of Timothy and Clement Harcombe the issues of influence and power are repeatedly sounded. During the dialogue in

which “palimpsest” is first mentioned, Clement Harcombe tells his son, that instead of calling him “dad,” he should

“[...] learn to call me father. It has more of a ring to it.”

“Yes, father. More of a ring to it.” I knew this was a habit he detested—my repeating what he had just said. But I could not help it [...] I could *not* help it and I said again. “A ring to it.” (12)

Timothy’s inability to avoid repeating his father’s words, and then only to reproduce them as fragments (echoes only partially recording what they echo) underscores the point about influence. Timothy, in a conversation with the Red Queen about echoes in the first dream sequence, wishes that his “dad were [t]here,” only to be told “I shouldn’t say dead if I were you. I should say farther” (29). This echoes the earlier injunction to use “father” in place of “dad,” while also distorting the original sentence, rewriting it. If “father” is seen to represent an authority which ‘dead-ends’ aspiration, development or movement, the echo—as distortion rather than mere repetition—translates as defiance of that authority and thus opens a way forward—as the mutation of “father” into “farther” suggests. The echo is both the tributary and the assassin of the original.

These patterns emblemise the larger textual relationships in *English Music*, and here, the question of ‘quotation,’ through which those larger relationships between text and text are often signified, might usefully be introduced. With *The Waste Land* in mind, it is tempting to sum up *English Music*’s citation of earlier works as a mere shoring up of fragments against ruin. Yet, to understand the function of both *English Music* and *The Waste Land* in relation to the works gathered within them as being merely elegiac oversimplifies the matter. For while the quote may serve as metonymy (and hence, economy), the part invoking the whole, it may have other—perhaps less generous—agendas. As guest within another work, a quote may be used to enhance and sharpen meaning, elucidating the work which hosts it—this is, for instance, frequently the case with epigraphs. That which is quoted might, however, conversely, be subverted and reconditioned by its new context. The tension inherent in the relationship between

citing and cited is pointed out by Plett, who writes, "A quotation is always embedded in two contexts [...]. As these contexts are *per definitionem* non-identical, every quotation means a conflict between the quotation and its new context" (11). As part of the fabric of another work, the quote has in any case been reinvented, endowing it with fresh life. At the same time, the act of quotation in effect fractures the original text as the quote is broken off from it, and may be regarded as challenging the authority of the original. A fragment may stand for, but is *not*, the whole; has less authority than the whole; and the failure of authority is both occasion for elegy and celebration. The ambiguities inherent in citation emerge in Clement's attempt to recite:

"When April with his showers sweet—" He stopped, unable to remember the next words. "Etcetera. Etcetera. Etcetera. Then do folk long to go on pilgrimages. That's what we are, Timmy. Pilgrims." (15)

The choice of work, of course, flaunts its point. Simultaneously invoking *The Canterbury Tales* and *The Waste Land's* transmuted, painful, 'quotation' of *The Canterbury Tales*, the recitation also recalls, through the device of the 'forgotten' lines ("the droghte of March has perced to the roote/And bathed every veyne in swich licour/Of which vertu engendered is the flour"), the wasteland from which, metaphorically speaking, that "licour" is conspicuously absent. Yet, while the quote gestures gracefully towards literary forebears, it may also function as a space-maker, as its truncation, its rendering into modern English, and the interpolation of the place-holding 'etceteras,' serves to point out.

English Music, however, does not unequivocally celebrate the triumph of the new. While the novel is shot through with the constant reminder of the necessity and inevitability of change, and although death and replacement are understood in the Frazerian vegetation myths as a function of continued fertility, the force and influence of the earlier works which shape the text are neither belittled nor negated: the spirits of the past do not just parade in "dumb show" before us. This is repeatedly stressed and given concreteness both in little

ways and large. Stanley Clay is told to give thanks for his cure to his (dead) father. "Palimpsest," that "new" word, is doubly freighted, a site simultaneously inhabited by both old and new. Defined as a "parchment or other [...] surface [...] in which later writing has been superimposed on earlier (effaced) writing" and something "still retaining traces of its earlier form" (*OED*), the palimpsest is thus both predicated upon the continuance of the old as well as its erasure. The dream encounters between Timothy and literary characters, symbolising the interaction of *English Music* with its literary ancestors, while rewriting those works/authors, also acknowledge continuity and heritage. Alice and Christian, conscripted into *English Music*, also find themselves *rescripted*: Alice falls into the Slough of Despond, Christian into the Pool of Tears. Belonging to different traditions in English literature, "the didactic and the moral, the subversive and the carnivalesque," to quote Gibson and Wolfreys (142), they are here symbolically immersed within each other's frames of reference, renewed and also reinvented. However, the chosen form of *English Music*, with its dream sequences, also places it within the 'tradition' or 'line' of works framed as dreams, a tradition stretching back to medieval texts (e.g. *Pearl*, *Piers Plowman*) and which significantly includes both *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *The Pilgrim's Progress*.

That acknowledgement of affiliation is significant, for in the end it might be argued that the novel shows true power as residing neither wholly in the parent nor the child, but in their relationship, the whole greater than the sum of its parts. This emerges in the shifting power dynamics between father and son. During the healing session-cum-seances in which both Harcombes are involved, the question of who it is in fact that the 'power' belongs to is at first ambiguously presented. Timothy appears to believe that it is his father who has it, while the reader is led to suspect that it is Timothy himself who is the vehicle of the power, and that Clement is a charlatan and fraud. Clement's theatricality casts doubt on the genuineness of his power, and the way he clutches and leans on Timothy suggests the predator, the father feeding off the powers of the son and passing these off as his own. As

Clement later says, “[...] it was never really me. It was you. You had the power” (345). This, however, is not the total truth either, for when Timothy is later stricken with a fever, Clement heals him. His father’s fingers pressed against his temples, Timothy feels “the passage of something which set up a breeze or a vibration”; it seems to him that “some form of heat passe[s] out of him and enters into [his] father’s body,” and he “remember[s] thinking, Yes, you have the power after all” (366). The moment of healing, marked by the recognition that power resides in the father as well as the son, is also a moment in which sweat is seen to be running down Clement’s face, the heat and dryness of the wasteland broken as the waters return. And Timothy later ponders over whether it is their “combined presence which created the appropriate conditions” and whether, in fact, the power “belonged to neither of us separately, but resided in the very fact of inheritance itself” (378).

In the closing chapters, Clement heals Timothy’s crippled friend, Edward Campion, losing his own life in the process. A vision follows whose commencement is marked by the falling of a volume of Malory from a shelf, the falling book a trope which has run through the novel, and a part of whose significance—had it been unclear before—now appears to emerge through its juxtaposition with Clement’s own collapse. It would appear that we are seeing the working out of the mythic imperative embedded in the vegetation myths: that health can only return to the wasteland through the death of the old king or father, or text: the old order must change, yielding place to new, lest one good custom should corrupt the world.

This essay began, however, with a caveat about the provisionality of structures in a work like *English Music*, and it is time to resurrect that proviso. As the parent is present but not replicated in the child, so *The Waste Land* and the myths which inform *English Music* are shown present but in modified form. Timothy’s final vision begins with Merlin telling the Maimed King that “[y]our fate is greater than yourself, and truly if you die for your son you shall get great praise and soul health, and worship to your lineage” (385). But what follows, as

the dying King's barge moves away from land, departs from the established mythic pattern:

Then following upon these things there was such wretchedness and darkness in the land that in truth fathers knew not their sons, and the sons knew not their fathers: for it is said that on the death of a great king the son shall not love the father and the father shall not love the son, but every man shall bear his own burden. And so there befell a great pestilence, and great harm to the realm; there increased neither corn, nor grass, nor fruit, nor in the water was found no fish and in the air was heard no music. Therefore men call it the Waste Land, because of that dolorous stroke. (386)

The logic of the description here suggests that the wasteland, rather than ending with the death of the king, is also a *consequence* of the death of the king—the “dolorous stroke” that separates father and son—as well as on another level being the emblem of the emotion born of that sundering. If so, then, what *English Music* is saying through its representation of the relationship between parents and children (literal/figural/textual), and about the way in which the dynamics of that relationship impinge upon the state of the “land” (however interpreted), has a far greater complexity than the mythic model is able to take account of.

English Music may in fact be suggesting that it is the tension between affiliation and antagonism *itself* which is necessary to artistic and cultural vitality. To work only under the shadow of the past and reproduce its works is to condemn oneself to stagnation; to cut oneself off from the heritage of the past altogether is to do a harm no less great, for, as Ackroyd's own epigraph, taken from Reynolds's *Discourses*, reminds us, “[i]nvention, strictly speaking, is little more than a new combination of those images which have been previously gathered and deposited in the memory: nothing can come of nothing.”

What has thus far been noted: the way in which a text's rewriting of another text both honours and abolishes, defines itself as well as (re)defines that other text, may perhaps be summed up in the words of another work which has shaped *English Music*. Certain of the arguments which *English Music* makes use of originate in “Tradition and the Individual Talent”:

No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead. I mean this as a principle of aesthetic, not merely historical, criticism. The necessity that he shall conform, that he shall cohere, is not one-sided; what happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it. The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them. [...] Whoever has approved this idea of order, of the form of European, of English literature, will not find it preposterous that the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past.⁷

In this way, works within *English Music* are seen to be engaged in a relationship which is mutually defining, and as Susana Onega observes, Ackroyd's concept of 'English music' rests on the conviction that "the power to transcend the limitations of this fallen world does not lie in the individual, but [...] is rather a question of transhistorical connectedness" (107).

It is impossible to consider all this without asking what the implications are with regard to how *English Music* sees and positions itself in relation to the body of works informing it. It may be that part of the answer is to be found in the conclusions to which the novel comes, and which have been hazarded above. Its relation to *The Waste Land* is fraught with all the complexities of the parent-child relation already spoken of. But where *The Waste Land*, as evident in its closing reference to de Nerval's "El Desdichado," sees itself as disinherited, *English Music* returns to lay claim to its own.

Quests, Questions, and Looking-glasses: Authors, Readers, and the Construction of the 'Fertile' Text

In the earlier part of this essay the role of vegetation myth, as used by Eliot and adapted by Ackroyd, in shaping the understanding and presentation of cultural inheritance, was examined. Both works, however, are also informed by the Grail legend, a brief summary of which

may be useful. In its variant forms, the Grail legend depicts a quest to restore fruitfulness to the wasteland whose desolation is in some manner connected to the sickness or disability of its ruler, in some versions known as the Fisher King, in others as the Maimed King. The quester, coming to the Chapel Perilous, has to enquire as to the meaning of the things shown to him there: the Grail and the Lance, and if he does so, the land will be restored, and the waters freed.⁸

Kenner, speaking of the Grail legend, writes:

The quester arrived at the Chapel Perilous had only to ask the meaning of the things that were shown him. Until he has asked their meaning, they have none; after he has asked, the king's wound is healed and the waters commence again to flow. So in a civilization reduced to a "heap of broken images" all that is requisite is sufficient curiosity; the man who asks what one or another of these fragments means—seeking, for instance, "a first-hand opinion about Shakespeare"—may be the agent of regeneration. (147)

What Kenner is suggesting is that the act of inquiry is important because it signifies the existence of the emotional and intellectual commitment necessary to any act of reconstruction (and (re)constructive reading). But Kenner is also saying something more complex: his words suggest that the act of inquiry in fact is that which *creates* meaning or is invested with it, and this in turn suggests that the text itself may be a wasteland which can only spring to full, rich life under certain conditions. A text goes through several stages of concretisation, first in the mind of its creator, then in its writing and printing which give it a materiality, and then finally, as it is read and reconstituted in act of reading, where it may either be enriched—by meanings brought to it by the reader which authorial intention had not originally endowed it with, or sometimes impoverished, as when a reader is unable, or unequipped, for whatever reason, to access its riches. To use a different metaphor: it may be energised and given more complex existence, or may be condemned to a largely dormant half-life, depending on the reader and the intensity/complexity of reading activity going on. The attitude of enquiry is in itself valuable, but the *act* of enquiry, as presented by Kenner, is in fact seen to be

crucial to meaning-making: and therefore to 'inquire' is to allow the wasteland (the as-yet-unmeaning text) to bear fruit.

The reader of *English Music* thus discovers himself to have been thrust into the role of quester with *English Music* as the Chapel Perilous. (And it is very perilous. It is full of traps-for-heffalumps.) With Timothy, the figure of the reader in the text, the reader of *English Music* must ask about the meaning of what he sees. In Timothy's final vision, grail and lance have been replaced by the book, and he asks, "What is this book before me?" (391), which is the same question as that which confronts the reader. In considering this apparently transparent question and its implications, a whole philosophy of reading is involved. That the reader enquires into, rather than assumes or imposes, meaning, is both courteous and modest as well as a renunciation of authority over textual meaning. Or if the question is differently inflected so as to land emphasis on *this*, it may suggest the recognition that inasmuch as books (and readers) exist in/as communities, all books are also individual and different. Therefore, perhaps, they need to be understood on their own terms, rather than subjected to identical regimes of reading and interpretation, put through the spaghetti machine of a particular theory.

What needs to be ascertained, then, is what *English Music* might be saying about questioning and interpretation, and the roles of reader, author and text in the fostering of fertility within the domain of literature or art. In order to begin considering these things, one may perhaps not do better than—as *English Music* is constantly suggesting—"go back to the beginning," in this case to that oft-mentioned first dream sequence. Timothy, who is faced with the book-as-grail whose meaning he must search after and enquire into, is, in the first vision, carrying one—the book which Christian has earlier dropped. Being asked to look his name up in the book, he finds that he cannot read it, only to be told:

"Of course you can't read it. It's a looking-glass book. You're only meant to hold it and *look* as if you've read it. That is the meaning of criticism." (31)

It is at this point that the trope of the 'book' begins to generate meaning. The grail (which in *English Music* is the book), as Jessie Weston says, has a correspondence with the cauldron of the Dagda, the cauldron of plenty, which no-one ever left, unsatisfied (73), and the evidence of just such an inexhaustible semantic wealth is displayed in the "looking-glass book," that brilliantly polysemous image.

The image conjures up notions of reversal, texts which cannot be read or understood in the usual way but which can be read with the aid of mirrors (other texts?) or backwards. We think, too, of seeing/reading through a glass darkly, a metaphor which self-reflexively comments on the reader's problematic engagement with textual meaning, but which seems to promise the eventuality of understanding, a coming face to face with the text. We might also ask if textual opacity is in fact there to induce 'reflectiveness' in the reader by encouraging active thought in place of passive and facile reading. The text, as a metafiction, is both reflective and self-reflexive, reflecting on its own writing, the role of the author, the process of reading, the validity of interpretive practices.

The mirror, or "looking-glass book," may render visible the invisible: things which could not otherwise be seen (e.g. our own faces, the back of our heads) may be viewed with its aid; one of the ways in which this metaphor might perhaps translate is as a rendering visible of our own hitherto invisible assumptions or blind spots about reading or anything else. (Only the vampire casts no reflection.) Of course, all this discussion of mirrors also reminds us of illusionists, of magicians, of which fraternity Clement Harcombe is one. They, too, do it with mirrors ...

What the preceding paragraphs demonstrate is the way in which *English Music*, that prototypical looking-glass book, enacts what happens when the reader-as-quester asks questions. Asking about the meaning of the (looking-glass) grail-book enables the grail-book to answer, to fulfil its function, to become the agent of restoration, the cauldron of plenty—it has been enabled to begin its process of signification.

Earlier, it was mentioned that one of the aspects of a “looking-glass book” might be its resistance to conventional reading practices. Gibson and Wolfreys repeatedly issue caveats against ‘conventional’ readings, ‘conventional’ interpretations, warning the would-be reader/critic of Ackroyd that in his work,

[figures] appear to take on a structural regularity, even while that regularity is itself irregular, and are recurrent enough to suggest a pattern of reiteration across the textual surface. It is precisely this recurrence, this frequency and reiteration, which the critic conventionally wrestles into a pattern of similarity, declaring it a theme, erasing and marginalizing the differences of context, the differences of use, the difference from one example to another, and the difference between texts. Ackroyd plays with the critical reception of his work ahead of that reception by tracing through his texts, in a manner which is simultaneously continuous and discontinuous, figures that provide the possibility for reading conventionally [...]. Ackroyd’s writing should be read without giving in to the wholly understandable and conventional temptation of trying to discern a route out of the maze so as to come away from the act of reading with certain ‘general’ meanings for Ackroyd’s work [...]. (13)⁹

The larger point is a good one, even if it is not altogether clear what the ‘general’ meanings are which one must at all cost avoid coming away with. The text which resists ‘conventional’ reading and thus forces the reader to alter or at least review his assumptions about the way in which texts work, and to change his reading habits, works against stagnation and revitalises the practice of reading itself. The Harcombes, living in Hackney Square, occasionally attempt to “get lost” (13), and to approach it from a different direction to the usual one; and as Timothy notes, “Yet this was the curious thing: whenever we approached Hackney Square from a new direction, or from an unknown congeries of streets, the appearance of the square itself seemed to be subtly altered” (15). This can work (as it is doubtless intended that it should) at the level of metafictional/metacritical comment: the author, reader or critic, approaching the familiar, the hackneyed, if he varies the approach—if he can deliberately “get lost” and forget the time-honoured, ‘conventional’ approaches—may happen upon new things, new meanings.

The repeated injunction to ‘begin at the beginning’ running through *English Music* might in fact be understood as an attempt to institute the same kind of renovation, not only because this suggests a pattern of reading which departs from the linearity of ‘conventional’ reading, offering in its place a circular, or looping, path, but also because the reader who begins a work again is a different person from the one who first read it. As Byrd says in the novel: “[...] a song that is well and artificially made cannot be well perceived or understood at the first hearing, no more than a book at its first reading, but the oftener you shall hear it the better cause of liking it you will discover” (220). Consider this in tandem with Iser’s *The Implied Reader*:

[T]he reading process always involves viewing the text through a perspective that is continually on the move, linking up the different phases, and so constructing what we have called the virtual dimension [...]. However, when we have finished the text, and read it again, clearly our extra knowledge will result in a different time sequence; we shall tend to establish connections by referring to our awareness of what is to come, and so certain aspects of the text will assume a significance we did not attach to them on a first reading, while others will recede into the background. It is a common enough experience for a person to say that on a second reading he noticed things he had missed when he read the book for the first time, but this is scarcely surprising in view of the fact that the second time he is looking at the text from a different perspective. [...] This is not to say that the second reading is ‘truer’ than the first—they are, quite simply, different [...]. *Thus even on repeated viewings a text allows and, indeed, induces innovative reading.* (280-81; italics mine)

To always ‘begin again’ is thus to keep enriching both reader and text.

English Music also resists ‘conventional,’ and encourages innovative, reading in other ways; one instance of this involves the substitution of pictures for the more standard form of chapter epigraph. These, although non-verbal in nature, are also ‘readable’ (albeit not ‘conventionally’) in ways which spark off new concatenations of meaning. The facsimile of the title page “An Essay concerning Humane Understanding” (118) for instance, while not specifically naming its author, Locke, may be found to resonate at many levels: for example with

Austin Smallwood, the *Sherlock Holmes* figure in the dream sequence which follows, the resonance foregrounding questions regarding the heritage of rationalism, etc. But *Locke* also resonates with other elements, for example the prominent trope of the key which is left everywhere—perhaps a little *too* conveniently—for the reader to find.

The point made by Gibson and Wolfreys regarding the way in which Ackroyd's recurring figures invite the reader to thematise or make glib connections may be reiterated here; this is one of the traps-for-heffalumps referred to earlier. From the first key which Clement Harcombe returns to the caretaker, portentously announcing, "The key" (12); to the key which the Mad Hatter takes from his bookcase (44) to get them into the garden; to the 'key' to the mystery desired by Smallwood (124); to the 'key' conversation in which Byrd asks, "What is a key" and is told

"A key is a thing, sir, composed of a letter and a voice. And, like as a key opens a door, so does the key open the song."

"How many keys are there?"

"Keys are twenty-two in number, and are comprehended in a three-fold order [...]" (214-15);

to Byrd's observation that there are musicians who make "no account of keeping their key" (219); to Hogarth's enquiry to Timothy as to whether he yet has the key (256), and so on, the reader is invited to interpret, to make Something Of It All. J. Hillis Miller, in *Fiction and Repetition*, has said that "[...] what is said two or more times may not be true, but the reader is fairly safe in assuming that it is significant" (2). The insistence of the tropes indeed suggests a commensurate significance, the particular form of the trope in this case encouraging that belief—keys are, after all, traditional metaphors for ways into things, or aids to deciphering. (The key, however, may also become a tool which, instead of opening doors, ends by locking them: "we think of the key, each in his prison/Thinking of the key, each confirms a prison.") In the brand of self-conscious, late Modernist, fiction to which *English Music* belongs, the significance of the iterated trope might well lie in its refusal to signify.¹⁰

Returning, however, to the contemplation of keys and locks: the naive reader, made a gift of such a tempting trope, is unlikely to resist it. If the reader searches *English Music*, with sudden suspicion, for complying locks to convenient keys, one finds Locke and Sherlock blandly presenting themselves. The detective Austin Smallwood says to Timothy in his vision, “[...] he [the author] has shown too much of his hand in every sense” (132), and we might say the same of Ackroyd. Smallwood feels the ‘shown hand’ to have given them the advantage of surprise. However, just as Timothy says his father always manages to anticipate him, so the author might well be anticipating the reader, and the apparently inadvertant display of hand could well be a feint, a display to distract the reader while the real sleight is carried out by the other hand. As already pointed out, this is also a novel about magicians and illusionists.

The oiled slickness with which key is found to slip into complying lock(e) leads one to wonder what exactly it is which lies behind the door. (In fables of the forbidden, setting key to prohibited lock might either disclose bloody chambers or the contents of Pandora’s box.) Iser, discussing the blatant nature of pop art, says something which might be useful to consider here: “[...] what pop art does is to confirm what the interpreter seeks in art, only to confirm it so prematurely that the observer is left with nothing to do if he insists on clinging to his conventional norms of interpretations.”¹¹ The flaunted tropes may be doing precisely this, and their over-obviousness (once one has considered the matter) leads one to ask if that blatancy may not be meant to signal the fruitlessness of pursuing such connections, and perhaps even of the kind of critical practice that caused one to read those connections as significant in the first place. This is more questionable, however, in the sense that in order to see *beyond* those connections, one had to arrive at them first.¹²

At the very least, the reader is being asked to consider the implications of such a pursuit, and the usefulness of the connections themselves, more attentively and sceptically—after all, the key belongs to the caretaker—or ‘care-taker.’ As Byrd says, “Does an author signify

his meaning for the idle or incurious? No, but it is stored up in time for those who approach it with care and patience" (221). I will return to keys and locks a little later in this essay, but the issues of critical approach and the validity of interpretation have been, however implicitly, touched upon, and it may be as well to clarify in some degree my stance on these things.

In suggesting that the reader may need to desist from pursuing interpretive connections, I am not making the same point as John Peck, whose article on Ackroyd speaks of the pursuit of connections as that which attempts to "pin [...] down" the text,¹³ the implication being that one should desist from doing so. This would seem to beg all manner of questions, for instance whether all reading does not in some degree involve interpretation, and whether *all* interpretation does not finally, in some manner, 'pin down' a text. We also have to ask whether the assumptions which are implied are in themselves valid ones: that to attempt to 'pin down' a text is necessarily to limit the scope of its signifying activities, to impoverish it,¹⁴ or somehow to assault a text's inalienable right to liberty. Criticism which honours resistance within the text—as Peck's does, and as Gibson's and Wolfreys's does—will find only genuine respect coming from this quarter. Nonetheless, it is, I think, possible to make connections without necessarily being guilty either of insensitivity towards the text and its author, or of ignoring Strier's exhortation "to resist the final turn of the screw, the moment when resistance in the text is overcome rather than acknowledged" (4). "Damyata," after all, or 'control,' is part of "what the thunder says," and, as that which presages and promises rain, the thunder must surely be held to speak with some authority. The boat, responding to the hand expert with sail and oar, responds gaily. This does not, however, equate 'control' with 'dominance.' Kenner speaks of the sailor as one who survives by cooperating with a nature that cannot be forced, the hand that directs also needing to be a hand able to 'read,' with sensitivity, the pulsation of wind through the sheet (152). "Datta" and "dayadhvam," 'giving' and 'sympathising,' are co-regnant with "damyata."

I do not think, therefore, that *English Music* is suggesting that the only truly 'fertile' reading is that which eschews 'control' or desists from what Bloom terms "strong" reading (3). And while Gibson and Wolfreys might offer the view that "ludic performativity creates undecidability and, with it, the possibility of the text's regenerative affirmation" and that, "[r]esistant to being pinned down by the location of a single meaning, writing is the chance of continuation, of inheritance and survival" (69), I do not think that *English Music* necessarily suggests that maintaining the 'undecidability' of meaning is necessarily a *sine qua non* of that same regenerativeness, although maintaining plurality may be. The two may appear similar but are not in fact the same beast—as Empson pointed out, there are (at least) seven types of ambiguity. Maintaining plurality need not entail choice between meaning and excluding the others—it is possible to yoke multiple meanings without violence together and have them pull evenly in the same direction. Maintaining undecidability, however, results in the reader going nowhere.

We might perhaps refer the issue to *English Music*, whose titular concern with 'music' may perhaps lend the sequence involving Byrd—*Brittanicae Musicae parens*—a particular significance. (The paternal allusion problematizes, though, the exact degree of authority this is meant to accord Byrd, 'fathers,' as we have seen, in part being required to give place to their children.) The complexities of musical polyphony, of which Byrd's masses are asserted to be the finest achievements (195) and of which Byrd speaks at various points to his students, telling them in one instance that "the closer the parts, the better the harmony" (217), appear to beg consideration in conference with *The Waste Land's* doing of "the police in different voices" and even perhaps the Bakhtinian idea of 'polyphony' in the novel. Bakhtin's 'polyphony,' it should be pointed out, does not by definition necessarily connote conflict; he speaks of how they may stand alongside or "opposite one another," be "consonant but not merging" or "hopelessly contradictory," emerge "as an eternal harmony of unmerged voices or [in] their unceasing and irreconcilable quarrel" (92).

Thus, while the voices may indeed run counter to one another, the Bakhtinian concept of 'polyphony' can accommodate unmerging but harmonious strands of difference. Tudor polyphony likewise; there is room within its remit for discord and difference, even though these tend in the end to find harmonious resolution, and it may also be noted that while *English Music* is certainly a novel of many voices, many styles, those voices often find a common theme, polyphony then becoming homophony: "Must every part maintain that point where-with it did begin, not touching that of other parts? I think not'" (219). The point of all this is that *English Music* might be argued, then, to endorse the idea of plurality, the elements of which may be able to find common cause.

Returning then to the matter of over-obvious tropes (I am keeping my key): while their prominence and frequent recurrence may beguile the reader into an initial belief in their ability to shed light on the mysteries of the text, it becomes clear that whatever significance they might have is either already on surface display, so deeply buried as to remain inaccessible, or utterly absent. The dream sequence with Austin Smallwood (the heir of Locke) serves to demonstrate this. Looking at the footprints on the ground, he notes that they have been made by a "child, a heavily built man in his twenties and a female dwarf" (122). Timothy, however, points out that he has already told Smallwood these things; there is no kudos in interpreting signs whose significance has already been made obvious. (At quite another level, while not necessarily debunking it altogether, this might also perhaps point to the limitations inherent in any Lockean rationalist-empiricist mode of understanding; as the form of *English Music* itself suggests, the visionary and imaginative¹⁵ mode is at least equal to—if not more equal than—the rational.) Or again, when Smallwood asks the cab driver whether he has been directed to his destination (there is no mystery here; we have been told he has), Smallwood claims to be "convinced that [he has] found the right locality" (125). Not only does this again point up the fatuousness of analysing the self-evident, but it may also be noted that in fact, the hall to which they were going, the "right

locality" to which they have been 'directed' (like the reader), is in fact not there. Or rather, it does not—yet—exist, only the ruins of an older building being present. It is unnecessary to belabour the multitude of points being made here.

But if we are indeed being shown tropes which are all surface, then that excess of surface may yet serve to deflect attention in more profitable directions; instead of contemplating them in themselves, we may consider what is being pointed out regarding their use. The final vision involving the Chapel Perilous, for instance, resolves itself with Timothy following the figure of his father, and finding "no gate nor door, but the hall was open. And at the last he found a chamber whereof the door was shut, and he beset his hand thereto to open it, but he might not" (392). The chamber door, however, then opens of itself. By analogy, the text may have halls without doors, where one may freely wander, and doors without locks, which cannot be forced and whose intransigence must be respected, although the text may then choose to open itself. The purpose of the key is to unlock doors; but in one instance at least we find Smallwood using a picklock instead of a key (137), and then, pointedly, on a door which was, a few pages ago, found to be unlocked. Not only might this raise an ironic eyebrow at over-elaborate critical methodology painstakingly directed at already-open texts (and yes, I am always and infinitely aware of all the potential for irony which lies waiting to ambush the writing of this essay), but it also serves to raise the issue of illicit or forced entry, returning to the fore the issue of interpretation as a form of possible coercion (even rape) which the reader must at least be made aware of, and also the question of whether all critical approaches to, or means of entry into, a text (or postmodernist toolshed) are equally justified, or licensed.

This is a question which I cannot claim to answer with any great degree of confidence. Ackroyd's *Notes for a New Culture* suggests that he finds criticism of the kind written by Leavis and Raymond Williams, which he puts under the general heading of "humanist" criticism, and which understands the value of literature to reside in its

relation to human values, the didactic function and its use-value within the human world, to be ultimately reductive, and responsible for the decline he perceives as having happened within the English departments of the universities.¹⁶ Yet, if we look to *English Music* itself to provide us with proof of its reluctance to be read along humanist lines, such evidence may prove to be less forthcoming. It is possible, on the contrary, to point to aspects of the text which permit, even if they do not exclusively invite, a 'humanist' interpretation.

It might be argued, for example, that if the novel is, in part, 'about' the way in which the understanding of texts is constructed, and thus in effect a novel concerning 'human understanding,' it is also, at least by implication, a work 'about' the understanding subject, the human being as the site within which cognition occurs. At an entirely another level, it might also be arguable that it is about 'human understanding' in the sense of being 'about' the understanding which lies, or should lie, between humans.

This last emphasis, on the need for connection and understanding, is conveyed in the image of the island, which first appears as the name of Margaret Collins's house; it is itself an intertextual reference to *Robinson Crusoe* which provides the framework for one of the dream-sequences and which, while connoting independence, also connotes loneliness; Margaret reads *Robinson Crusoe* to Timothy, but "she always stopped at that point where the castaway sees the savages upon the shore and realises for the first time that he is not alone" (142). As mentioned earlier, in another intertextual cross-reference, Arnold's "Marguerite" poems take this up, representing the—human—condition as one in which the individual is "enised" in the sea of life, "[w]e mortal millions [living] *alone*," and once being "[P]arts of a single continent" (124-25). Perhaps significantly, that isolation is, albeit temporarily, erased by the music of the nightingales which pours from shore to shore, which sets up other resonances with 'birds' (and Byrd) and 'music' in *English Music*, as well as perhaps nodding in passing to Keats. Donne's famous "No Man is an Island" is invoked

by both Arnold and Ackroyd, a meditation which reflects on the intrinsic indissolubility of links between man and man.

Arnold's poem "To Marguerite—Continued," as its intertextual play with 'islands' demonstrates, is a declaration of independence which is undesired, the divorce between himself and the mainland of the earlier English poets (he, like Eliot, feels himself 'disinherited'). The use of Ackroyd's geographical intertextualities, on the other hand, would appear to affirm his connection to that tradition—and this links up with an earlier section of this essay. The second resonance set up by invoking Donne involves the question of critical approach itself, although it resurrects the tension between Ackroyd's views of humanist-oriented criticism and the elements within the text that lend themselves to such a reading. Ackroyd, in *Notes*, writes that in England, "[t]here has been none of that formal self-criticism and theoretical debate which sustained European modernism; [...] it has been the creative discovery of theory which has enriched the quality of French culture" (148); the point here being that England's perceived insularity, her isolation from the mainstream of European thought and critical thinking, has resulted in a form of intellectual and literary impoverishment, which the recognition of mutual dependence—and a consequent cross-fertilization of ideas—might serve to address.

All this should not to be taken to mean that I am un-ironically arguing for a 'humanistic' reading of *English Music*. What I am pointing out is that it is possible to find within it elements that offer such an approach something to chew on. However, it might conversely be argued that to undertake a humanist reading of *English Music* would result in a number of problems. One such problem would arise in the attempt to reconcile the value which the text implicitly assigns to the principle of human inclusivity, with the fact that *English Music* is a work whose enjoyment may in some sense be said to be predicated upon a principle of readerly exclusivity (which some might also consider to be mappable as social and educational exclusivity). However little attention one might wish to draw to the fact, it remains that there are good readers and bad readers, more informed readers and their

less-informed brethren—Ackroyd's acknowledgements page itself distinguishes between 'alert' readers and the merely scholarly. And while a reader of a lower calibre will still come away from *English Music* with something (which would not be true for a work like *Finnegan's Wake*), a good and more informed reader will have a greater capacity to enjoy a text, and to enrich and be enriched by it, than will one less well equipped. Perhaps the question of the viability of various critical approaches in respect of *English Music*, in the end, needs to be referred to in relation to a criterion of usefulness, or 'fertility' (that is, its potential for generating creative reading) rather than authorial mandate.

I would like to return, finally, in this discussion of 'fertility' in a text whose implicitly stated project is to restore it, to a figure whose role has not so far been touched on in this essay: that of the author. In much of this reading, questions of authority and plurality of meaning have emerged as having a significant part to play in that project, and the freedom of the text to signify plurally, and perhaps freely, is to a large extent, in the gift of the author. And the figure of the author, in the second, Dickensian, vision, is a man with bandaged eyes (74), in his cecity at once Tiresias, the blind seer who has foresuffered all, the blinded father Gloucester who in his blindness is reconciled to his son, perhaps even Samson who, though blinded, yet has the power to topple constructions, also the self-blinded Oedipus, and perhaps even the Maimed King, who in the final vision, is also Clement and King Arthur. Blindness may at one level be indexed to insight, the seer's ability to see and tell truth, but the bandaging of the author's eyes may also be seen to represent an act of humbling courtesy and generosity in its self-limiting. (And how much this generosity would be magnified if the work recording the death of the blind, clement, Maimed King Arthur were to turn out to be the *Morte d'Author*.) Miss Havisham's assertion that "[h]e wants to control everything" (77) is refuted by that election to blindness which paradoxically both confers power and helplessness on the author and which speaks of an abdication of control. (Not, in the end then, *damyata* but *datta*.) The gorgon or

basilisk power of the gaze to petrify and fix in formulated phrases is silenced by the blindfold, and in that pause, the reader may read more commodiously, and the text may sing.

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NOTES

¹“Rag”: from “ragtime”: music characterised by a syncopated melodic line and regularly accented accompaniment; a piece of old cloth, especially one torn from a larger piece or the remnants of something (hence “these f(rag)ments I have shored against my ruin”); to rebuke severely.

²Fantasia: “[...] when a musitian takes a point and wrests or turns it as he likes, making either much or little of it according as shall seem best in his own conceit [...]. This kind will also bear any allowances whatsoever tolerable in other musick, except changing the air and leaving the key, which in fantasy may never be suffered.” Ackroyd, *English Music* 209.

³1922 also saw the publication of Joyce’s *Ulysses*. *English Music* also plays with the *Ulysses* connection, but to do justice to that connection would require the space of another essay entirely.

⁴Ackroyd, *T. S. Eliot* 107.

⁵Kenner 136.

⁶Ackroyd, in *Notes for a New Culture*, observes: “It is clear that, now, England is a dispirited nation [...]. The ‘humanism’ which the universities sustain, and which our realistic literature embodies, is the product of historical blindness. It has been associated with a sense of the ‘individual’ and of the ‘community’ which stays without definition, except in the work of some literary academics who appeal to a literary ‘tradition.’ [...] The humanism which we take to be our inheritance and our foundation [...] has turned out to be an empty strategy, without philosophical content or definitive form.

It is a paucity that, with certain few honourable exceptions, manifests itself in English creative writing. Our own literature has revealed no formal sense of itself and has sustained no substantial language. Our writing has acquiesced in that orthodoxy which has already been described, resting as it does upon a false aesthetic of subjectivity and a false context of realism. And it is this conventional aesthetic which has been reified into the English ‘tradition’” (11).

⁷T. S. Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent” 41.

⁸Cf. Jessie Weston’s *From Ritual to Romance* (1933), especially chapter 11, “The Task of the Hero.”

⁹The reader of Gibson and Wolfreys's study is provided with practice in *not* reading conventionally by the half-dozen or so blank pages which punctuate the study in order to disrupt any reading rhythms which might somehow inadvertently have been set up, or else to shift the reader into Zen mode. An enquiry to the publishers, made in order to ascertain the truth of the suspicion that this was intentional and not the result of some mere printing error, met with the confirmation that this was part of the "ludic performativity" of the work in question.

¹⁰In point of interest, the visual epigraph preceding the section on Byrd (200) focuses on a book entitled: *A Collection of Emblems Ancient and Modern*, above which is a scroll which reads "Vanitas Vanitatum et Omnia Vanitas," from which juxtaposition one may either confirm the 'vanity' of emblems, or not, if the connection be considered invalid. As a further set of twists, one might wish to consider that the latin tag is itself a 'quote'—with all the functions and limitations attendant on this, although the consideration of context: that the source of the quote is *Ecclesiastes*, a 'wisdom' book, might lend it authority ...

¹¹Iser, *The Act of Reading* 11.

¹²In the context of a discussion on 'fertile' reading, the thought occurs that Weston sees cup and lance as related sexual symbols (75), and that one might, were one so minded, see lock and key as permutations of those symbols. English art, according to Byrd, has brought to completion the "art of the virginal" (210); the *double-entendre* which suggests chastity, also suggests—in the normal way of things—a *de facto* inability to reproduce. Is the setting of key to lock the means by which to restore fertility? Or does it merely lead to 'barren' reading?

¹³Peck 447. The observations which follow seem to follow the same general tenor: he writes that "it would be hard to think of anything more unhelpful than showing off one's familiarity [with other texts] [...] as a way of establishing critical control" (447-48).

¹⁴Apropos of which might be mentioned Iser's discussion of James's "Figure in the Carpet," in which he says, "If the critic's revelation of the meaning is a loss to the author—as stated at the beginning of the book—then meaning must be a thing which can be subtracted from the work. And if this meaning, as the very heart of the work, can be lifted out of the text, the work is then used up—through interpretation, literature is turned into an item for consumption. This is fatal not only for the text but also for literary criticism, for what can be the function of interpretation if its sole achievement is to extract the meaning and leave behind an empty shell?" *The Act of Reading* 4-5. The argument, as Iser implies, teeters on the 'if' in the first sentence; but I would argue that the first premise is itself debatable: a critic may of course choose to take that ungenerous point of view, but this is not to say that it happens.

Consider A. S. Byatt's comment: "Mistrust of the author began with Wimsatt and the Intentional Fallacy and progressed to Barthes and the Death of the Author, and to the deconstructionists who read texts looking for what they can see that the writers did not see, did not 'foreground' and ipso facto miss what writers

can see that *they* do not foreground" (7). This certainly suggests that from an author's point of view, there may be less 'useful' forms of interpretation, even though Byatt does not even then rule absolutely against deconstructionist readings, extending to those critics a courtesy which she would appear to think they do not extend to writers. What she says, however, may also perhaps be taken to suggest that a critic's 'revelation of meaning,' if it run in tandem with what an author *can* see, might not be taken by author as 'loss' to him/herself.

Sontag, incidentally, in "Against Interpretation" does say that interpretation does constitute impoverishment: "It is the revenge of the intellect upon the world. To interpret is to impoverish, to deplete the world [...]" (7). Her comments, however, need to be read in context of the larger argument; her stricture, as I understand it, referring to interpretation which refuses to deal with a work on its own terms, but attempts to 'translate' that work's meanings into other terms.

¹⁵ ... and even the irrational, as evidenced in the Hogathian sequence, may have its proper place in the scheme of things.

¹⁶ See the chapter on the "Uses of Humanism." Also see Gibson and Wolfreys's study, already cited, in which there is an interesting and extended discussion of the matter.

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