

Connotations

A Journal for Critical Debate



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Editor's Note

With great sadness, my co-editors and I recently learned that S. K. Heninger, one of the founding members of the Editorial Board of *Connotations*, passed away in February 2008. We are grateful for having been able to profit from his learning and advice in the early years of our journal.

The Editorial Board has been joined by Lothar Černý and Michael Steppat, who have been actively involved in the editing of *Connotations* since its beginnings in the 1990s. Special thanks are due to Christiane Lang, who for a number of years served on the staff of *Connotations* and has now concentrated on her career as a teacher.

Matthias Bauer

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Connotations wants to encourage scholarly communication in the field of English Literature (from the Middle English period to the present), as well as American and other Literatures in English. It focuses on the semantic and stylistic energy of the language of literature in a historical perspective and aims to represent different approaches.

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.

Articles and responses should be forwarded to the editors. Articles should not exceed 12,000 words and follow the MLA Handbook. Responses should be limited to 4,000 words. All contributions should be submitted by e-mail; they should be in English and must be proofread before submission.

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Resurrection as Blasphemy in Canto 5 of Edmund Spenser's "The Legend of Holiness"

ÅKE BERGVALL

" ... and so, who are
you, after all?
—I am part of the power
which forever wills evil
and forever works good."
(Goethe's *Faust*, as used as epigraph to
Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*)¹

Journeys to and from the netherworld are common occurrences in "The Legend of Holiness," Book 1 of Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*. From Archimago awaking Proserpina and Gorgon as he calls out of "deepe darkness dredd / Legions of Sprights" in canto 1 (FQ 1.1.37-38) to Redcrosse reenacting Christ's death and resurrection in the dragon fight of canto 11, the world of the living is in constant contact with the realm of the dead. As has been well-documented in Spenser scholarship, this interaction is fraught with literary echoes. Matthew Fike's *Spenser's Underworld in the 1590 Faerie Queene* (2003) is just a recent example of scholarship that elaborates on the connections between Spenser's epic and both Christian and classical descents, in particular Christ's harrowing of hell and Aeneas's and Theseus's journeys to the underworld, to name some prominent models.²

However, my contribution is neither a study of sources, nor of the historical setting. Instead I am offering a reading of a problematic section of "The Legend of Holiness," the second half of canto 5, in which Duessa meets with Night and then descends into the underworld to "save" Sansjoy (as the Argument to the canto puts it). I shall argue that Duessa's act of salvation is blasphemous and (conse-

For debates inspired by this article, please check the Connotations website at
<<http://www.connotations.de/debbergvall01613.htm>>.

quently) ineffectual. The starting point for my reading is a useful suggestion by Elizabeth Jane Bellamy, Patrick Cheney and Michael Schoenfeldt. In the introduction to their excellent collection of articles, *Imagining Death in Spenser and Milton*, they point out that “Spenser seems attracted to narratives in which characters miraculously survive death” (5). While death is everywhere present in *The Faerie Queene*, the epic, they argue, is defined rather by “Spenser’s notorious dragoness Errour,” making the “Spenserian narrative [...] error’s thriving terrain, where the finality of death is often deferred indefinitely” (4-5). That certainly seems to be the case in the story at hand. Duessa’s attempt to find healing, and thus life, for the dying Sansjoy leaves the Saracen in a limbo: ever recovering from his wounds he is denied closure by never again being mentioned in the epic. A relevant question is whether he is in fact dead or alive. After all, to find healing Duessa does not bring him *up* from the kingdom of death, but *down* into hell, a realm from which, as Spenser clearly states, no one “back retourned without heauenly grace” (FQ 1.5.31). The consequences of Bellamy, Cheney and Schoenfeldt’s pronouncement that “the finality of death is often deferred indefinitely” seems to be that Errour, for all her power and deviousness, may in fact be biting her own tail (or, to use Spenser’s own image, is having her own “scattered brood” suck up her lifeblood [FQ 1.1.25]).

Like the powers of evil in both Goethe and Bulgakov, Errour, for all her textual havoc, may in fact be willing evil but working good. The contention of this paper is that Duessa and her “mother” Night, even as they bring linguistic confusion and stage a blasphemous mock-imitation of Christ’s harrowing of hell, may be suffering the same fate. Blasphemy, like “*Errours endlesse traine*” (FQ 1.1.18)—which includes both Archimago and Duessa—is “textual” and “linguistic” (Nitisor 70). That linguistic profanation can be felt in the semantic confusion of canto 5, first felt as a threat to the salvific status of Redcrosse, the putative hero of the whole book.

The closer one studies canto 5 the stranger it gets. According to the canto’s Argument, it seems a straightforward enough story:

*The faithfull knight in equall field
subdewes his faithlesse foe,
Whom false Duessa saues, and for
his cure to hell does goe.*

The four lines of the Argument divide the canto into its two main components: the daytime joust between Redcrosse and Sansjoy that occupies stanzas 1 to 19, and a second nighttime part, stanzas 20 to 44, that describes Duessa attempting to find a cure for Sansjoy, defeated but miraculously protected from Redcrosse's coup de grace by a "darkesome clowd" (FQ 1.5.13). The rising and setting of the sun balance the two main parts of the canto. In stanza two "*Phoebus* fresh [...] hurld his glistring beams through gloomy ayre," thereby waking Redcrosse, who puts on his "sunbright armes" (FQ 1.5.2). In the "euentide" of stanza 19, Duessa leaves the wounded Redcrosse to seek out Night, "That *Phoebus* chearefull face durst neuer vew" (FQ 1.5.20). The canto concludes with the return of "*Phoebus* pure" (FQ 1.5.44), and with "The false *Duessa* leauing noyous Night, / Returnd to stately pallace of Dame *Pryde*," if only to find Redcrosse gone.

The joust itself is presented in clear-cut moral terms, a matter of light against darkness. Stanza 1 portrays Redcrosse as a virtuous knight in shining armor:

The noble hart, that harbours vertuous thought,
And is with childe of glorious great intent,
Can neuer rest, vntill it forth haue brought
Th'eternall brood of glorie excellent:
[...]. (FQ 1.5.1)

Accordingly, it is twice repeated in stanzas 8 and 9 that "So th'one for wrong, the other striues for right." However, the word used to name virtue's offspring, the "brood of glory," had earlier in the book been used to describe Error's "scattered brood" (FQ 1.1.25). If the Spenserian narrative is "error's thriving terrain," then that is never more so than in this canto. The initial stanza just quoted exemplifies what Harry Berger, Jr.—in line with several earlier scholars—persuasively claims is a "specular intimacy between Archimago and the narrator.

The [Archimago] virus is most effective when it infiltrates the narrative voice [...]" (46).

In this instance, despite occurring in the clear daylight, the whole setup of the joust is deeply suspicious, as it takes place in the House of Pride and has Duessa as its prize. Within the House everything is open to error's attack, even Queen Elizabeth herself in the specular vision of the prideful "mayden Queene, that shone as *Titans* ray" (FQ 1.4.8). By implication, the very genre that Spenser is working within, the heroic epic, is tainted at the beginning of canto 5. When Redcrosse, ready for the fight, enters "the commune hall" of the House of Pride, he is met by minstrels, bards, "And many Chroniclers, that can record / Old loues, and warres for ladies doen by many a Lord" (FQ 1.5.3). It is surely no coincidence that these lines, describing the activity of misled poets that have entered the prideful House on the proverbial "broad high way" (FQ 1.4.2), provide a dark counterpoint to Spenser's Virgilian statement of purpose in the Proem to Book 1: "Fierce warres and faithful loues shall moralize my song."

This kind of reading could easily be taken to nihilistic heights, questioning the core values of Spenser's heroic epic. However, the confusion does not only attach itself to the poem's putative hero. The interpretative vortex seems to fall back on its duplicitous originators, affecting as much the characters associated with the House of Pride. As the supreme example, take the reason for Redcrosse's victory over Sansjoy. The Saracen, enraged by the sight of his dead brother's shield, is about to kill Redcrosse when Duessa intervenes:

Therewith vpon his crest he [Sansjoy] stroke him [Redcrosse] so,
That twise he reeled, readie twise to fall;
End of the doubtfull battaile deemed tho
The lookers on, and lowd to him gan call
The false Duessa, Thine the shield, and I, and all. (FQ 1.5.11)

In the notes to his edition of the poem, A. C. Hamilton glosses the "him" in the penultimate line of the stanza as follows: "the Red Cross Knight assumes that he, not Sansjoy, is addressed." From the way this note is phrased one can perhaps infer that Hamilton for his part as-

sumes that Sansjoy is the intended recipient, quite likely a common enough interpretation among most readers of the poem. Why would Duessa otherwise go to such length to "save" him for the rest of the canto? The stanza itself, however, gives us no clue since the "him" in line 8 may refer back to either of the pronouns in line five: "*he stroke him so*" (my emphasis). Certainly, when Duessa repeats the phrase once the battle is over—"The conquest yours, I yours, the shield, and glory yours" (FQ 1.5.14)—the recipient is clearly Redcrosse. The confusion, I believe, is intentional. Not only is the interpretation within the poem open-ended, as both combatants are able to take Duessa's encouragement to heart (even if Sansjoy does not appear to respond to it), but the narrator leaves the choice open to the readers of the poem as well. In fact, there is no conclusive evidence which of the two knights Duessa is actually addressing, or indeed, if she is rather hedging her bets. The adjective "false" that attaches to her name as she calls out can go more ways than one.

It would be easy to assume that all the evil characters in the book are united, and that since Duessa enters the scene together with Sansjoy's brother Sansfoi, she and the three Saracen brothers form a well-rehearsed team. We do find out later in the canto that they are in fact related through Night, who is "the mother [...] / Of falshood, and root of *Duessaes* race" (FQ 1.5.27) as well as the aunt of the three brothers (FQ 1.5.22). Yet their relationship to each other is far from straightforward. Duessa, for example, does not reveal her true identity to the brothers any more than to Redcrosse, but maintains the false alibi of "Fidessa" throughout her encounters with all the males, from Fradubio and Redcrosse to the Sans brothers. As we shall see, she even hides her true identity for most of her conversation with her own "mother," Night. Duessa is not beyond lying to any of them. For example, in stanza 47 of canto 4 she is not telling Sansjoy the truth about her past relationships with his brother, or with Redcrosse; indeed, she seems more than happy to exchange lovers depending on their luck in the jousts. Whether she is more "true" to any one of them is a moot question.

This brings us back to the Argument for the canto, and the epistemological status of the “false” in its third line: “Whom false Duessa saues, and for / his cure to hell does goe.” Without its adjective, the statement is quite extraordinary, even moving, with Duessa described as a Christ- or Theseus-figure as she “saves” and finds a “cure” for Sansjoy through a descent into hell. This reading is further strengthened by Spenser using the phrase “so fowle forlorne” in 1.5.23 and 1.8.39 to describe both Sansjoy’s and Redcrosse’s plights before being “harrowed” by Duessa and Prince Arthur respectively. Yet what are we to do with the “false” that accompanies Duessa’s name? That she is false to Redcrosse we know, but is she performing a false harrowing of hell, a blasphemous inversion of the literary sources, and of the rescue operations enacted in the book: Redcrosse saving Una’s parents from the dragon, and Prince Arthur and Una saving Redcrosse from Orgoglio’s dungeon and Despaire’s cave? More provocatively, is she thereby as “false” to Sansjoy as to Redcrosse, performing an ineffectual mock rescue that leaves the Saracen in eternal limbo while she, seemingly forgetting him, returns to make love to Redcrosse (as she does in canto 7)? May she even in some sense be “false” to herself in that she is drawn into a vortex of her own and Archimago’s making, from which she cannot extricate herself?

In my reading, the vortex of Duessa’s falsehood has its center in the middle section, stanzas 14 to 27 of canto 5, forming a bridge between the two main parts of the Argument, the joust and the descent into hell. In this section Duessa, after dealing with Redcrosse, seeks the help of Night. At least since Judith Anderson’s influential article, “Redcrosse and the Descent into Hell,” it has been customary to interpret the vortex as Redcrosse’s dark dream,³ a “sickness within, a despair of which Redcrosse will not be fully conscious until he meets the actual figure of Despair in canto ix” (Anderson 482). Anderson does a great job at tracing the futile attempts at recovery from this despair when Sansjoy as a stand-in for Redcrosse is brought to Aesculapius, and at interpreting the story of Hippolytus in psychological terms, with Redcrosse taking “all the major roles” (488). What I would

like to do here, however, is to exchange a strictly psychological reading for a more epistemological and existential one.

To do so I want to focus not on the descent itself, but on what leads up to it, the meeting between Duessa and Night. What is striking about their first encounter is how Duessa confuses not only Night (the character), but the canto's neat moral dichotomy of night and day. As with Lucifera, the virgin queen of the House of Pride "that shone as *Titans ray*" (FQ 1.4.8), Duessa's light is pure deceit:

Who when she [i.e., Night] saw Duessa sunny bright,
Adorn'd with gold and iewels shining cleare,
She greatly grew amazed at the sight,
And th'vnacquainted light began to feare:
And would haue backe retyred to her caue,
Vntill the witches speech she gan to heare,
Saying, Yet O thou dreaded Dame, I craue
Abyde, till I haue told the message, which I haue. (FQ 1.5.21)

Most telling is the fact that Night, despite being Duessa's kin, for six stanzas does not even recognize her "daughter." She finally has to ask the shining apparition, "But what art thou, that telst of Nephews kilt?" (FQ 1.5.26).

When Night finds out that the bright figure "that do seeme not I, *Duessa* ame, [...] the daughter of Deceipt and Shame," she first acknowledges her own confusion:

In that fayre face
The false resemblaunce of Deceipt, I wist
Did closely lurke; yet so true-seeming grace
It carried, that I scarce in darksome place
Could it discerne, though I the mother bee
Of falshood, and roote of *Duessaes* race.
O welcome child, whom I haue longd to see,
And now haue seene vnwares. (FQ 1.5.27)

The power of negation has certainly reached its zenith when even the "resemblaunce of Deceipt" is "false." This, in my reading, is the very center of a vortex whose spirals stretch from the introduction of Er-

roure and Archimago in canto 1, and the division “into double parts” through Duessa in canto 2, all the way to Despaire’s cave in canto 9. The House of Pride of cantos 4 and 5 gives the vortex a local habitation and a name, but it is stanza 27, the midpoint of canto 5, itself the midpoint of the first nine cantos, that pinpoints its epistemological and ontological center, the place where even the mother of falsehood and “root of *Duessaes* race” acknowledges that she has been deceived.

Here also the blasphemy has its center. In words that echo Anna’s (and Simeon’s) Messianic delight at seeing the newborn Savior in chapter 3 of the Gospel of Luke, Night acknowledges the “child, whom I haue longd to see” (FQ 1.5.27). This recognition situates her and Duessa’s rescue operation to save Sansjoy even more strongly as a confused parody of the main themes of the Legend of Holiness, centered in the practice and teaching of the House of Holiness in canto 9, and symbolically reenacted by a reformed Redcrosse in the book’s final two cantos. The vortex of course has its antithesis in Una, yet throughout the Book her truth is veiled and, with the single exception of canto 10, constantly threatened and thwarted. Only within the House of Holiness is the confusion gone as all the book’s false images have their true counterparts. Indeed such is its power that it confounds the very center of the vortex by revealing a way out even in the midst of its obfuscating power.

That both Night and her “daughter” Duessa are deceived by their own deceit can be seen in the preceding two stanzas, 25 and 26 of canto 5. Night, oblivious to the deeper truth of her statements, in words that seem to foreshadow both Goethe and Bulgakov, delineates her revenge on Redcrosse for killing the Saracen brothers:

The sonnes of Day he [i.e., Jove] fauoureth, I see,
And by my ruines thinkes to make them great:
To make one great by others losse, is bad excheat.

Yet shall they not escape so freely all;
For some shall pay the price of others guilt:
And he the man that made *Sansfoy* to fall,
Shall with his owne blood price, that he hath spilt.

As Hamilton points out in his notes, the "some" of line two of stanza 26 include both Christ and Arthur, to which I would also add Redcrosse himself.

Duessa's descent to the underworld that follows, for all its pathos and all its blasphemy is as ineffectual as Night's pronouncements on payment and guilt. As critics have long established, while the joust between Redcrosse and Sansjoy may have blurred the moral boundaries between the two, making the Saracen a specular image of Redcrosse's spiritual downfall, their healing (or lack thereof) again differentiates them. Where Redcrosse is brought by Una to the House of Holiness for both his body and soul to be healed through the ministrations of "seuen Bead-men" (FQ 1.10.36), Sansjoy is brought down to hell and left there in the limbo of materialist medicine, as Douglas Trevor explains in his essay "Sadness in *The Faerie Queene*." The Saracen's state is not unlike that of "thrisy *Tantalus* hong by the chin" (FQ 1.5.35), whose fate Spenser sums up in canto 7 of Book Two: "He daily dyde, yet neuer throughly dyen couth" (FQ 2.7.58; see Krier 53).

I want to end by returning to Bellamy, Cheney and Schoenfeldt. In their introduction to *Imagining Death* they link Milton's description of Death as a psychological state to Spenser's Despair (19). I would like to add the further, perhaps obvious link to Sansjoy, whose fate is not unlike the plight of the sick in the Lazar-house shown to Adam in Book 11 of Milton's *Paradise Lost*:

Immediately a place
Before his eyes appeared, sad, noisome, dark,
A lazar-house it seemed, wherein were laid
Numbers of all diseased, [...]

Dire was the tossing, deep the groans, despair
Tended the sick busiest from couch to couch;
And over them triumphant death his dart
Shook, but delayed to strike, though oft invoked
With vows, as their chief good, and final hope. (PL 11.477-93)

Duessa's descent may appear a harrowing of hell, but leads in fact to a state worse than death. If Duessa, like Faust and Woland, "forever

wills evil and forever works good," the opposite is also true: to her own kind Duessa forever wills good and forever works evil.

University of Karlstad
Sweden

NOTES

¹For a discussion of this quotation in relation to the theme of blasphemy, see Nitisor 75.

²For additional discussion and references, consult "hell" in Hamilton.

³Berger's article on Archimago is one example.

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Echo Restored: A Reading of George Herbert's "Heaven"¹

INGE LEIMBERG

The history of this talk began with Matthias Bauer telling me, some time ago, about a lecture of his on the discovery of childhood in English seventeenth-century literature. The question that most intrigued him was (as it seemed to me), did the poets attribute to young children a special re-view of the eternity they have only just left to live in the world of space and time? This theme made me think of the complementary one: do the poets attribute a special pre-view of eternity to old men who are soon to leave the world of space and time?

While I was still discussing this question with myself I was asked to give a lecture on Herbert, and thus I had found a text in which death and spiritual insight go together. Herbert did not live to have an old man's outlook on death, but he suffered from a mortal disease and knew that he had not long to live. An awareness of death is clearly displayed in *The Temple*. While the whole cycle of poems is not a progress from childhood through life to old age but a grown man's Augustinian monologue, the last part is dominated by the nearness of death. This is clearly shown by titles like "The Forerunners," "Death," "Dooms-day," "Judgement," and "Heaven."

When we began to discuss the theme of the *Connotations* Symposium, "Restored from Death," I again felt drawn to my old cluster of questions and to that last sequence of poems in *The Temple*. It now appeared in the widened perspective of death and being restored from death, which is exactly Herbert's perspective. "The Forerunners" of death have come, but "The Rose" follows at once. The speaker's "answer" to physical decay is "a rose," for Christ the Lord is arisen, and in "The Banquet" death and resurrection are blended with each

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other and with the transformation of blindness into seeing: "[...] I wipe mine eyes , and see [...]."

But that is not all. Focusing, in this final sequence, on death, resurrection, and spiritual vision, the poet weaves into this religious triad of themes a fourth, to which he has confessed from the very first stanza of "The Church-porch," i.e., the art of poetry and its devotional value. Nearing death, he refers to the poet's art in titles like "The Posie" and "A Parodie," and when he reaches "Death" and "Dooms-day" he urges us to realize that, thanks to Christ's crucifixion, death has learned to sing, and he urges God to "Come away" and restore the dust of mortality to its pristine condition of *musica humana*: "Lord, thy broken consort raise, / And the musick shall be praise."

In Herbert the three themes of death, being restored from death, and spiritual vision are closely bound up with music and poetry (which to Herbert are one and the same).² Like many another baroque conceit, this combination of themes, which may seem highly individual and abstruse, is in fact traditional and typical. Death, restoration from death, spiritual vision, and the music of poetry are personally united in the iconographical pattern of Christ crucified regarded as a stringed instrument.³ This is clearly expressed, for instance, in Herbert's most rigorously formalized poem, "Aaron," where Christ is apostrophized as "My onely musick, striking me ev'n dead." Herbert obviously takes up Sir Philip Sidney's aesthetic formula "music, the most divine striker of the senses"⁴ and transforms it into a religious confession, which does not cease, however, to be a confession to poetry and music. Christ crucified is Herbert's divine Orpheus, his poetry and music. Thanks to his cross that teaches "all wood to resound his name" ("Easter"), the music heard in this world, too, restores the hearer to life by making him die. Herbert said so, very early in *The Temple*, in "Church-musick":

Comfort, I'll die: for if you poste from me,
 Sure I shall do so, and much more:
 But if I travell in your companie,
 You know the way to heavens doore.

In "Heaven," the last poem in *The Temple* spoken by a man living on this earth, it is again the music of poetry that keeps him company on "the way to heavens doore."

The initial question, "O who will show me those delights on high?", points out a deficit that has been discussed before in "To all Angels and Saints." There Herbert, the Anglican pastor, expressed his regrets that he must not appeal to either Angels or Saints or the Virgin Mary. Jesus Christ is the only mediator between him and God, and he has asked him, for instance, in "Home,"

O show thyself to me,
Or take me up to thee!

This is, to use Herbert's own categories, clearly the refrain of a *sacred poem*, whereas the first line of "Heaven" sounds more like a *private ejaculation*.⁵ The question "O who will show me those delights on high?" is not a Christian's earnest prayer for the presence of his Saviour but rather a modern man's, and a Protestant's, appeal for some personal guidance across the enormous gulf between man and God, of which the speaker of *The Temple* complained so bitterly in "The Search." Now he is nearing death and his heavenly home, and yet, for all his trust in the good tidings of the New Testament,⁶ heaven still is to him an "undiscovered country." This seemed different when, in the two sonnets on "The H. Scriptures," he apostrophized the Bible as the Christian's sure guide to the delights of heaven, "Thou art joyes hand-sell; heav'n lies flat in thee," and when he assured himself and his readers that "This book of starres lights to eternal blisse." But now, using the same words as in "The H. Scriptures" (*joy, heaven, light, bliss*), he does not reach for the Bible but asks for an eye-witness; his question makes a decidedly personal demand: "O who will show me [...]"

What kind of a personage could he have in mind? Someone roughly like Bunyan's Interpreter?⁷ Critics have gone so far as to subsume "Heaven" under the catechistical endeavours of *The Temple*.⁸ But notwithstanding the pseudo-etymological relation between *echo* and

catechism⁹ I beg to disagree. In *The Country Parson*, Herbert speaks favourably of the parson's catechising, but *The Priest to the Temple* and *The Temple* are two essentially different things. In the poems the words *catechism* or *catechise* simply do not occur, nor do catechists specialize in showing "delights on high."

Milton's Urania would be a more likely addressee; there are good reasons for expecting enlightenment about "those delights on high" from the Muse of astrology exalted as a poet's "heavenly Muse."¹⁰ But if we join the poet in that kind of sublime expectation we are in for a disappointment. Not Urania but Echo answers the speaker's question. And of all the possible Echoes in the history of world literature the "Echo" of "Heaven" is clearly Ovid's poor little wood-nymph, who was condemned by Juno to keep silent except for repeating the last syllables of people's words, and who suffered "the pangs of disprize'd love" for Narcissus.¹¹

The speaker of "Heaven" is indeed disappointed when he is answered by Echo, and he tells her so quite openly or even brutally: "Thou Echo, thou art mortall, all men know." But she very rightly rejects that half-truth, answering "No." No, indeed. Echo does of course die, and her bones are turned to stones,¹² but when Narcissus dies it is Echo's voice that, thrice, laments his death.¹³ Her mortality is only a part of her immortality. She is metamorphosed and survives. Not as a tree like Daphne, or as a flower like Adonis, or as a bird like Philomela, but as a sound:

sonus est, qui vivit in illa.¹⁴

I wonder whether that lovely phrase did not sound like an Anglo-Latin paronomasia on *Son* to George Herbert, and I also think it most likely that he had musical associations when he made Echo answer his speaker's questions concerning the "delights on high." The echo effect had become very popular in sixteenth-century music. It was used in madrigals as well as in purely instrumental music, and there also was the echo organ, a subsidiary chest encased within the main organ.¹⁵ An outstanding example of a musical composition including some

echo effects is Emilio de' Cavalieri's *Rappresentatione di Anima, et di Corpo*, performed in Rome in the Holy Year 1600 in the Oratorio of Filippo Neri, as a substitute for the usual masquerades of carnival (in the same February when Giordano Bruno was burned as a heretic on the nearby Campo dei Fiori).¹⁶ *Anima e Corpo* was not performed in England in Herbert's time, but it was published already in 1600, and why should not a rumor of it have reached Herbert and his Salisbury musical friends?

Here is the sequence of Anima asking heaven for an answer to Corpo's doubts concerning worldly pleasure:

Vo dimandarne al Cielo,	
Ch'il ver mai non asconde;	
Vediam cuel, che risponde.	
Ama il mondan piacer l'huom' saggio, ò fugge?	
<i>Risposta.</i>	<i>fugge.</i>
Che cosa è l'huom, che'l cerca, e cerca i vano?	
<i>Risposta.</i>	<i>vano.</i>
Chi da la morte al cor con dispiacere?	
<i>Risposta.</i>	<i>piacere.</i>
Come la vita ottien, chi cita brama?	
<i>Risp.</i>	<i>ama.</i>
Ama del mondo le bellezze, ò Dio?	
<i>Risp.</i>	<i>Dio.</i>
Dunque morrà ch'il piacer brama è vero?	
<i>Risp.</i>	<i>vero.</i>
Hor quel, ch'il Ciel t'ha detto,	
Ecc io raccolgo intiero:	
Fuggi vano piacer, ama Dio vero. ¹⁷	

Herbert's "Heaven" resembles this sequence not only in the echo effect but in nearly every respect of poetic invention¹⁸; some of the questions and answers are identical, and in the end Herbert's speaker, like Cavalieri's Anima, summarizes Echo's answers.¹⁹ But the strongest link between the two dialogues is their musicality; an explicit, vocal and instrumental one in the *Rappresentatione*, and an implicit, metaphorical and spiritual one in the poem.

Echo was born "among the trees and leaves" of the forest. She was a wood-nymph. And when her answers to Narcissus remained unan-

swered by him she felt ashamed and covered her face with leaves²⁰; furthermore, Echo's metamorphosis is a story about leaving. Narcissus leaves her alone and she leaves life, as the speaker of "Heaven" is about to leave this world. In the poem, the word "leaves" is repeated five times:

Wert thou not born among the trees and leaves?	
<i>Echo.</i>	Leaves.
And are there any leaves, that still abide?	
<i>Echo.</i>	Bide.
What leaves are they? impart the matter wholly.	
<i>Echo.</i>	Holy.
Are holy leaves the Echo then of blisse?	
<i>Echo.</i>	Yes.

Echo was restored from death the moment she died. Her metamorphosis is her birth. And her covering her face with leaves for shame is the climax of her tragedy. Herbert seems to have been deeply moved by the idea of those shame-covering leaves.

"Leaves" is the keyword of "Heaven," and it is also the word which links "Heaven" to the poem that precedes it, "Judgement." Here the "leaves" belong to "ev'ry mans peculiar book" that must be presented on the day of judgment. Very shortly before "Judgement," in "The Banquet," the speaker used the word "lines" instead of "leaves" to describe the single entries in his book of life:

Let the wonder of his pitie
 Be my dittie,
 And take up my lines and life. (49-51)

The speaker's "dittie" is his "song," his "music," his "posie," his "verse," his "rhyme," his "lines." If the speaker's "lines" are coupled with his "life," they connote the author's *Sacred Poems and Priuate Ejaculations*, his "peculiar book" with its many different leaves, his spiritual autobiography, and, indeed, his life.

In "Heaven" the speaker first seems to refer to the leaves of trees, which are so notoriously prone to wither and fade, and which are, therefore, emblems of mortality. But, since it is Echo who gives the

answers, the poetological meaning of the question "Wert thou not born among the trees and leaves?" is obvious. Ben Jonson's poems entitled *The Forrest* and *Vnder-VVood* come to mind, and perhaps even his short preface to the latter, which begins with a pun on "leave": "*With the same leave, the Ancients call'd that kind of body Sylva [...]*."²¹ We moderns think of Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* and of the *Album Leaves* written by Schubert, Beethoven, Dvorak, and many others.²² Surely, the "leaves" among which Echo was born (or rather reborn) belong to Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, and the leaves of that book "still abide."

But the speaker wants to hear more about this strange phenomenon, leaves that do not wither but abide. "What leaves are they? impart the matter wholly" he says, turning out an oxymoron and getting the ambiguous answer he deserves. Echo replies: "Holy." "Holy" can be a noun denoting *holly* (meaning the plant, the spelling was still identical)²³ as well as an adjective denoting *holy* (meaning sacred). And both meanings fit perfectly well into the context. Holly leaves are evergreen and, therefore, abiding,²⁴ and they are indeed an "Echo [...] of blisse" in the echo-like refrain of an old Christmas carol: "The holly and the ivy, / When they are both full grown, / Of all the trees that are in the wood, / The holly bears the crown." Bliss is echoed, too, by the identical third line of all the four stanzas of the carol: "And Mary bore sweet Jesus Christ" (I associate "sonus est, qui vivit in illa"). Thus the "holy" leaves of "Heaven" suggest some of the oldest and most enduring and best loved leaves in the book of carols.²⁵

Last but not least, the *holy leaves* which *abide* for ever, and which, indeed, *impart all matters wholly* and are the echo of *heavenly bliss* denote the leaves of the Holy Bible. This has been noted by some critics, but the musical or poetic implications of this relation have not been referred to.²⁶ The trees and leaves of the forest are metaphors in God's book of nature, and the words of the Bible resound with the music of his poetry. Clearly the Psalms do, and so does the Song of Songs, and the Song of Moses,²⁷ quoted by Shakespeare as proof that "The quality of mercy is not strain'd,"²⁸ and quoted by John Donne as proof for the preferment of verse (meaning *song*) to all other forms of writing:

Vouchsafe to call to minde, that God did make
 A last, and lastingst peece, a song. He spake
 To *Moses*, to deliuer vnto all,
 That song: because he knew they would let fall,
 The Law, the Prophets, and the History,
 But keepe the song still in their memory.²⁹

"And are there any leaves that still abide?" asks the speaker of "Heaven," and Echo could not be more right when she answers "Bide," for this does not only mean "endure" but also "[t]o remain in expectation."³⁰ Herbert has told us in "Hope" that abiding in expectation is not his strong point. And what he wants now is not to be referred to hope again but to get a glimpse of the "delights on high," here and now: "O who will show me [...]" But he is not shown them. He only sees a voice, and if he rightly sees or hears it, "[he has his] answer home."³¹

It does not matter much whether the words "I see a voice" are quoted from the Book of Revelation or from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*,³² for the two works, however different, have a common denominator, poetry. The borderline between sacred and profane is fluid, and Herbert frequently crossed it. In "A Parodie" he did not satirize secular love poetry.³³ He only borrowed its form and with it the warmth of its passion. In "Clasping of hands" he adopted an old pattern of love poetry throughout: "thou art mine, and I am thine."³⁴ Herbert never ever said a word against great love poetry; he only criticized the mediocre kind for its lasciviousness, or triviality, or over-ornamentation.³⁵ His own objective was to write a kind of religious poetry at least as beautiful and formally perfect and, what is more, at least as sincere and passionate as the very best love poetry. When he felt near the end of his life and work, he confessed to poetry (no matter whether sacred or profane) in "The Flower," in what is perhaps the most undisguisedly personal remark he ever made in a poem or elsewhere:

After so many deaths I live and write;
 I once more smell the dew and rain,
 And relish versing: O my onely light,³⁶

"relish versing" is the most striking phrase in these lines. Versing goes together with dew and rain and light and the poet *relishes* it. To Herbert "relish" could still mean *to sing*. Shakespeare used it in that way: "to relish a love-song, like a robin-redbreast."³⁷ But "relish" also means *to taste a flavour*; it is a nourishment, "lawful as eating."³⁸ Having quoted from *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* and from *The Winter's Tale*, we may proceed as well to *Henry VIII* where Queen Catherine listens to some very musical words concerning music:

In sweet music is such art,
Killing care and grief of heart
Fall asleep, or hearing die. (3.1.12-14)

Shakespeare here treats the biblical dictum "music rejoice[s] the heart"³⁹ in a manner faintly foreshadowing Herbert's frequent coupling of music and death.⁴⁰ Sacred and secular poetry participate in an age-old exchange of forms and themes. In the Gospel of John Jesus says, "In my father's house are many mansions" (14:2), and Herbert paraphrases these words when he thanks "Church-musick" for having assigned him "A daintie lodging" in her "house of pleasure"; surely he was not the less enchanted with some especially lovely piece of church music because a sacred text had been adapted to the melody of a love song.

When the speaker of *The Temple* is nearing death and the promised resurrection but still seeing "in a glass darkly"⁴¹ and eagerly wanting to be shown a glimpse of heaven, he writes a poem that contains a homage to the music of poetry. He has given the holy Eucharist its due in "The Banquet," and he will do so, finally, in "Love (III)," but now transsubstantiation is reflected in poetic metamorphosis, and for some moments *The Temple* reverberates with the voice of the poet who wrote the words "sonus est, qui vivit in illa," and who also said of poets "Est deus in nobis, et sunt commercia caeli."⁴² Thanks to this commerce, the speaker's question "O who will show me those delights on high?" does not remain unanswered. From far away and in a voice that is "soft, / Gentle and low,"⁴³ Echo reminds him of what he already knows. As long as he lives in this world, death and being

restored from death will remain a mystery to him. But there is a secret code, the music of poetry, which, mysterious itself, metaphrases life's mysteries into an idiom which human beings can understand.

In "Love (III)" Christ, inviting redeemed man to the heavenly Eucharist, says: "you must sit down [...] and taste my meat." In "The Flower" the poet says: "I relish versing." The literal meaning of *sapere* is not *to know* but *to taste*. As soon as bread and wine are tasted they are changed, and so is the taster.⁴⁴ Similarly, as soon as the music of poetry is relished, its sounds and signs, denoting various kinds of metamorphoses, effect a metamorphosis in the hearer.⁴⁵ Then the commonplace that Echo is mortal falls to pieces. The leaves by which she is covered are evergreen and, in their own way, holy. "Est deus in nobis, et sunt commercia caeli," says the poet, and Echo is an agent in his commerce with heaven. In the poem she does not "show [...] those delights on high" to the speaker, but she *tells* him what they are like, and he obediently summarizes her answers and finally gives her the cue for a last one. For Echo, of course, must have the last word. By this she assures him that the "Light, joy, and leisure" of heavenly bliss will endure for "ever." They are eternal. But so are the lines and life of poetry, for, in the music of poetry, time, meaning *tempus edax*, is metamorphosed into *time* meaning musical *rhythm*,⁴⁶ and it is only one step from that to *thyme* meaning the name of a medicinal herb that derives from Greek θυσία, to burn sacrifice.⁴⁷ Thus the commerce of poetry and music works like an alchemy that, thanks to its great elixir,⁴⁸ can distil eternity from time, "And turn delight into a sacrifice."⁴⁹

Westfälische Wilhelms-Universität
Münster

NOTES

¹All quotations from George Herbert's poetry and prose will be from F. E. Hutchinson's edition, *The Works of George Herbert* (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1945).

²For Herbert's identification of his poetry with music cf., e.g., "Thanksgiving" 39, "My music shall finde thee [...]," "Christmas" 34, "Till ev'n his [the sun's] beams sing, and my music shine," and "Vertue" 11, "My music shows [...]." Cf. Helen Wilcox, "Countrey-Aires to Angels Musick," *Like Season'd Timber: New Essays on George Herbert* (New York: Lang, 1987) 37-58, especially 49: "The music of Herbert's verse is what Sidney termed the 'secret musicke' of poetry." This statement is substantiated in Wilcox's note 29. In a further essay, "'Heaven's Lidger Here': Herbert's Temple and Seventeenth Century Devotion," *Images of Belief in Literature*, ed. David Jasper (London: Macmillan, 1984) 153-68, Wilcox quotes several instances of Herbert having been called a "sweet singer" (157) by admiring readers during the seventeenth century. As to this appellation as well as to the attribute "Holy" (154), I share William Empson's opinion that "Herbert would not have meant that he himself expected the halo of a saint, and would have thought it very bad taste in an interpreter to say that he did." *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1953) 119n1.

³Rosemond Tuve discussed the idea of "crucified Christ as a lyre, Love as music" in her study *A Reading of George Herbert* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1969); see 145 and plates. See also H. Neville Davies, "Sweet Music in Herbert's 'Easter,'" *Notes and Queries* 15.3 (1968): 95-96. John Donne combined the ideas of Christianity, death and music in his "Sermon of Commemoration of the Lady Danvers [...] 1 Iuly 1627," which George Herbert, Lady Danvers' devoted son, is most likely to have heard: "She expected this, that she hath received; *God's Physicke*, and *God's Musicke*; a *Christianly death*." *The Sermons of John Donne*, ed. Evelyn M. Simpson and George R. Potter, 10 vols. (Berkeley: U of California P, 1984) 8: 91.1028-29.

⁴Sir Philip Sidney, *An Apology for Poetry*, ed. Geoffrey Shepherd (London: Nelson, 1965) 122.7-8.

⁵I refer to the subtitle of *The Temple*, i.e., *Sacred Poems and Priuate Ejaculations*.

⁶Cf. "Judgement" where the speaker gives the NT to God instead of his own book of life, saying: "There thou shalt finde my faults are thine."

⁷Cf. John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, ed. James Blanton Wharey, 2nd ed. Roger Sharrock (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1967) e.g., "Then said the *Interpreter*, come in, I will shew thee that which will be profitable to thee" (28).

⁸See Stanley Fish, *The Living Temple: George Herbert and Catechising* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1978); Janis Lull, *The Poem in Time: Reading George Herbert's Revisions of The Church* (Newark: U of Delaware P, 1990) 133-36, and Glenn Klopfenstein, "Herbert's 'Heaven,'" *Explicator* 51.1 (1992): 10-12.

⁹Fish, *The Living Temple* 17 and n34, mentions the pseudo-etymology. I only object to catechising as a kind of master key to *The Temple*; used as one category among others it can be very helpful.

¹⁰See John Milton, *Complete Poems and Major Prose*, ed. Merrit Y. Hughes (New York: Odyssey P, 1967) *Paradise Lost* 1.6, and the editor's note to 1.6-17 with reference to 54-57 of the Introduction.

¹¹Publius Ovidius Naso, *Metamorphosen*, ed. and trans. Erich Rösch (München: Heimeran, 1968) 3.359-510. The quotation is from *Hamlet*, ed. Harold Jenkins (London: Methuen, 1982) 3.1.72.

¹²Cf. Golding's translation of *Metamorphoses* 3.399: "Hir bones they say were turnde to stones [...]," *Ovid's Metamorphoses: The Arthur Golding Translation*. 1567, ed., intr. and notes John Frederick Nims (New York: Macmillan, 1965) 3.497.

¹³Cf. *Metamorphosen* 3.493-510.

¹⁴*Metamorphosen* 3.401. See Cooper's definition of *sonus*, which supports the identity of poetry and music: "A sowne: a voyce: a noyse: a word: a tune." Thomas Cooper, *Thesaurus Linguae Latinae et Britannicae* (1578; repr. Hildesheim: Olms, 1975).

¹⁵See Murray Campbell and Mary Terey-Smith, "Echo," *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, ed. Stanley Sadie, 20 vols. (London: Macmillan, 2001) 7: 860-62.

¹⁶See Warren Kirkendale, *Emilio de' Cavalieri "Gentiluomo Romano": His Life, and Letters, His Role as Superintendent of All the Arts at the Medici Court, and His Musical Compositions* (Firenze: Olschki, 2001) ch. 9, 233-94.

¹⁷The quotation is from the facsimile ed.: Emilio del Cavalliere, *Rappresentazione di Anima, et di Corpo* (Rome, 1600; repr. Farnborough: Gregg, 1967) xvii-xviii. Prof. Christoph Miething was kind enough to provide a translation of the quotation: "I will ask heaven / Who never covers up anything. / Let us see what he answers. / Does a wise man love worldly pleasures or flee? / Flee. / What is a man who seeks and seeks in vain? / Vain. / What kills the heart by displeasure? / Pleasure. / How can he get life who speaks of longing? / Love. / What does one care for? For worldly beauties or for God? / God. / Then he who longs for life's beauties will die verily? / Verily. / Well, what heaven has told you / I will now fully summarize: / Flee vain pleasure, love the true God." For the musical demonstration at the symposium I used the live recording of Ernst Maerzendorfer's interpretation of the *Rappresentazione* at the Salzburg Festival of 1973, Orfeo C 5179921, Munich 1999.

¹⁸See, e.g., *The Institutio Oratoria of Quintilian*, ed. H. E. Butler, 4 vols. (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard UP, 1960) 4.2.55: "[...] personam, causam, locum, tempus, instrumentum, occasionem [...]" ("persons, cause, place, time, the instrument and occasion").

¹⁹For summation as a traditional rhetorical device see Ernst Robert Curtius, *Europäische Literatur und Lateinisches Mittelalter* (München: Francke, 1963) 293-94.

²⁰*Metamorphosen* 3.393-94: "Spreta latet silvis, pudibundaque frondibus ora/ protegit [...]" ("The rejected one hides in the forest; deeply ashamed she covers her face with leaves [...]" my translation).

²¹*Ben Jonson*, ed. C. H. Herford, Percy and Evelyn Simpson, 11 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1965) 8: 91 and 125-27.

²²See Maurice J. E. Brown and Kenneth L. Hamilton, "Albumleaf," *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* 1: 326-27.

²³See OED "holly": "Forms: [...] 5-6 holy."

²⁴See John Gerard, *The Herbal*, ed. Thomas Johnson (New York: Dover Publications, 1975): "Agrifolium. The Holly tree [...] the leaves are of a beautiful green colour [...]. It groweth green both winter and sommer" (1338-39).

²⁵See the note to "The holly and the ivy," *The Shorter New Oxford Book of Carols*, ed. Hugh Keyte and Andrew Parrott (Oxford: OUP, 1993) 207: "The (identical) text for verses 1 and 6 is probably the original refrain for a four-verse carol comprising the present verses 2-5 and sung in the old pattern of refrain-verse-refrain, etc." For the affinity of echo and refrain see John Hollander's seminal study *The Figure of Echo* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1981) 34: "The most important scheme of echo [...] is the refrain" etc.

²⁶Cf., e.g., Klopfenstein, "Herbert's 'Heaven,'" Lull, *The Poem in Time*, and P. S. Weibly, "George Herbert's 'Heaven': The Eloquence of Silence," *George Herbert Journal* 4.2 (1981): 1-9. Within his own rhetorical context, John Hollander has, of course, done justice to the musical connections of echo; see *The Figure of Echo* 30-31. Dianne McColley in "The Poem as Hierophon: Musical Configurations in George Herbert's 'The Church,'" *A Fine Tuning: Studies of the Religious Poetry of Herbert and Milton*, ed. Mary A. Maleski (Binghamton, NY: Center for Medieval and Early Renaissance Studies, 1989) 117-43, alludes to "Heaven" on 118.

²⁷Deuteronomy 32.

²⁸Cf. *The Merchant of Venice* 4.1.180-82 "Por. The quality of mercy is not strain'd / It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven / Upon the place beneath" and Deut. 32:2 "My doctrine shall drop as the rain, my speech shall distill as the dew, as the small rain upon the tender herb [...]" ed. John Russell Brown (London: Methuen, 1955).

²⁹John Donne, "The First Anniversary," *John Donne: The Anniversaries*, ed. Frank Manley (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins P, 1968) 460-66.

³⁰See OED "bide," v. 10. and 1.

³¹"The Quip" 24.

³²Rev 1:12, and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, ed. Harold F. Brooks (London: Methuen, 1979) 5.1.190.

³³See Rosemond Tuve, "Sacred Love Poetry, and Herbert," *Studies in the Renaissance* 8 (1961): 249-90.

³⁴See Hutchinson's note to "Clasping of hands."

³⁵"Jordan (I)" and "Jordan (II)" are the classic examples; cf. also "Love (I)."

³⁶There is an exact German parallel to the phrase "O my onely light," the first line of an exquisite song from Heinrich Albert's *Arien* of 1648, "Du mein einzig

Licht." The text (of the first stanza) is by Simon Dach, who lived from 1605-59 and might have seen *The Temple*. See *Chorbuch für gleiche Stimmen, Ars Musica*, vol. 5, ed. Gottfried Wolters (Wolfenbüttel: Mösseler, 1967) 110.

³⁷*The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, ed. William Carroll (London: Arden Shakespeare, 2004) 2.1.19-20; see editor's note to 19.

³⁸*The Winter's Tale*, ed. J. H. P. Pafford (London: Methuen, 1963) 5.3.111.

³⁹See Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, ed. Holbrook Jackson, 3 vols. (London: Dent, 1961) 2: 2.6.3.

⁴⁰See "Aaron" *passim*, and see also, e.g., "Mortification" 17-18, and "The Flower" 18.

⁴¹1 Cor 13:12.

⁴²Publius Ovidius Naso, *Liebeskunst: Ars Amatoria*, ed. and trans. Niklas Holzberg (Düsseldorf: Artemis und Winkler, 1999) 3.549: "A god lives in us and we trade with heaven" (my translation). Cf. Plato, *Menon* 81.b.

⁴³*King Lear*, ed. Reginald A. Foakes (Walton-on-Thames: Nelson, 1997) 5.3.270-71.

⁴⁴Apart from all theological controversies on the subject, Herbert has let us know his personal ideas of the working of the Holy Eucharist in "The H. Communion," especially in lines 7 and 8, "But by the way of nourishment and strength / Thou creep'st into my breast," and 19-21, "Onely thy grace, which with these elements comes, / Knoweth the ready way, / And hath the privie key, / [...]." Martin Luther, in a little book in which he speaks very much as the pastor of his flock, preaches the same direct kind of participation. Christ's invitation to his banquet is to be taken absolutely literally. I am particularly struck by Luther's use of the word "kriecht," which is the exact German equivalent of Herbert's "creep'st": "Wer aber den rechten glauben schöpfft auß den worten/ der glaubt also, Got gebe Christus krieche ynss brodt oder kelch" ("But he who draws the true belief from the words believes that God makes it possible for Christ to creep into the bread or the wine"). *Ein seer gut vnd nützlichs Bettbüchleyn: ym 1527. Jar.*, ed. Elfriede Starke (Leipzig: Edition Leipzig, 1983).

⁴⁵Cf. "Church-musick", especially lines 5 and 6: "Now I in you without a bodie move, / Rising and falling with your wings" and "The Banquet": "Wine becomes a wing at last" (42).

⁴⁶See OED "time," n. 10 and 12. Shakespeare uses time meaning rhythm in, e.g., *Richard II* 5.5.41-4 and in *The Sonnets* 18.12.

⁴⁷See OED "thyme," n. "Forms [...] 6-8 time [...] [...] f. θυειν..." 1.a. A plant of the genus *Thymus*." The idea that "we are unto God a sweet savour of Christ" (2 Cor 2.15) is very dear to George Herbert. He uses it, e.g., in "The Odour" with strong musical overtones; see note to "Der Duft. 2 Kor 2," *George Herbert, The Temple: Mit einer deutschen Versübersetzung von Inge Leimberg* (Münster: Waxmann, 2002) 436-37.

⁴⁸Alchemy is a favourite metaphor of Herbert's for giving expression to the mysterious workings of, to use another favourite metaphor of his, the *sacrum commercium*. Cf., e.g., "The Elixer" and "The Answer."

⁴⁹"The Church-porch" 6.

The Trials and Tribulations of the *revenants*: Narrative Techniques and the Fragmented Hero in Mary Shelley and Théophile Gautier

ELENA ANASTASAKI

Reanimation, as a fantastic subject, can be found in myth and literature of all times. But towards the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth, as a result of the rapid development in the fields of medicine and science, revival from death and even physical immortality—until then belonging to the realms of magic, myth and the imagination—suddenly appeared plausible.¹

Among the first writers to explore in a literary form the consequences of uncommonly prolonged life as a real possibility was William Godwin with his philosophical novel *St Leon* (1799). His daughter, Mary Shelley, also treated the theme of immortality and the closely related subject of reanimation, but chose to do so in the form of the short story or tale. This genre, restricted in terms of length, seems at first at odds with the subject of relating, not only one life, but two—let alone the limitless time of an immortal hero. In this paper I shall examine the different narrative techniques that Shelley uses to treat this subject in three of her tales, namely: “Valerius: The Reanimated Roman” (1819, first published posthumously in 1976), “Roger Dodsworth: The Reanimated Englishman” (1826, first published posthumously in 1863), and “The Mortal Immortal” (1833). Each tale uses a different narrative structure, as if Shelley was experimenting on the appropriate form for such a subject. These are written as a first person narrative embedded in a frame narrative, a chronicle based on information considered as factual, and a diary-testimony; they all share, however, the characteristic of the fragment. Time and space—including the space afforded in the literary annuals Shelley was often writing for—are simultaneously material constraints and literary

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themes that will be considered in relation with the notion of the fragment, which, in Shelley's work, characterizes the human condition.

In the same form of the short tale, but from a different point of view, which entails different narrative techniques, Théophile Gautier also treats the theme of reanimation in *La Morte amoureuse* (1836) and *Arria Marcella* (1852). Two beautiful women passionate about life come back from the realm of the dead to live an ultimate love story. Ancient Pompeii, which is the scene in the second story, echoes the ancient Rome constantly evoked in Shelley's "Reanimated Roman," but what a contrast between the two ancient characters that have come back to life in the nineteenth century! While the one laments the lost glory of Rome, the other fully embraces the gift of a second existence. Gautier's view is clearly different from Shelley's—he regards reanimation as a means to access the ideal—and his narrative techniques reflect his views. Gautier's main narrative device is the dream, which, as we shall see, is unexpectedly used as a means to authenticate the story. Like in Shelley's works, time and space play an important role, even though their connection to the notion of the fragment is of a different kind in Gautier.

Apart from the enthusiastic scientific climate of her times and her father's long philosophical novel relating the adventures of an immortal, there are many other reasons why Mary Shelley should have been interested in reanimation. Most importantly, she had had, ever since she could remember, the ardent desire to bring a loved one back to life, starting with her mother, Mary Wollstonecraft, who died shortly after giving birth to her. Mary experienced a series of losses that intensified this feeling. Soon after the loss of her first born child when she was only eighteen, we read the following entry in her diary: "Dream that my little baby came to life again—that it had been cold & that we rubbed it by the fire & it lived—I awake to find no baby."² Mary would lose two more children at a young age and, of course, her beloved husband Percy, who drowned in 1822. It is not surprising

then that from her first literary attempt, *Frankenstein* (1818), the theme of reanimation is to be found at the heart of her work.

Due to the constraints of the annuals she was often writing for,³ most of her stories are brief, a fact about which she complained:

When I write for them, I am worried to death to make things shorter and shorter—till I fancy people think ideas can be conveyed by intuition—and that it is a superstition to consider words necessary for their expression.⁴

However, when reading the three aforementioned stories, it seems that this form, with its restrictions, contributed to the transformation of the basic theme into a variety of very different original works.

“Valerius: The Reanimated Roman” is chronologically Mary’s first short story dealing with reanimation written immediately after *Frankenstein*, in 1819, and showing that reanimation was a constant inspirational theme in her writing. In this tale, however, the means by which reanimation has been brought about are systematically silenced. Apart from the title, only a series of paradoxical phrases indicate Valerius’s unnatural situation. Phrases like “my sensations of my revival” (332), “when I lived before” (333), “since my return to earth” (337), or “before I again die” (339) make explicit his revival, but without giving the slightest hint concerning the way it came about. This silencing is supported by the fragmentary form of the tale. The first part is narrated by an external third person narrator, and the second by a character in the story, Isabel Harley—the woman who helps Valerius to cope with his new situation. The first part also incorporates the narration of Valerius himself, so that we have three different points of view concerning the reanimated character: Valerius is thus viewed by the external narrator (frame narrative), through his own narration (first fragment), and through another character’s narration (second fragment). All three narrators emphasize Valerius’s strangeness, the fact that he does not belong to the present time of the narration. The external narrator affirms that he looked like “the statue of Marcus Aurelius” (332) and that he “can compare him to nothing that now exists” (332), Valerius calls himself a “curiosity” (338), and Isabel admits that she “often paused anxiously to know whether he

respired air [...] or if his form cast a shadow at his feet" (343), thus reinforcing at all levels the credibility of his reanimation. In this story the multiple narrators are used as "witnesses" to validate the extraordinary event of reanimation, but if we accept Walter Benjamin's view that "[d]eath is the sanction of everything that the storyteller can tell," then Valerius, as a narrator, should have the ultimate authority since he is, in a way, positioned in that privileged spot "past the End, so as to see the structure whole, a thing we cannot do from our spot of time in the middle" (Kermode 8).⁵

The fragmentariness of the text also continues on another level: within the already fragmented narratives themselves. The narrative of Valerius starts with the reminder of a promise: "I have promised to relate to you, my friend, what were my sensations on my revival" (332), thus putting the narration in dialogue with some previous events that remain unknown to us. Valerius's narration also draws attention to the gaps of his story, as if to tease his listener and the reader alike, with phrases such as: "I need not trouble you with the history of my life" (333), or "Nor will I now relate what would greatly interest you" (333). Furthermore, contrary to the effect of closure—which was to become the characteristic and the strong point of the genre of the short story⁶—there are several openings to the future from both internal narrators, reinforcing once again the fragmentariness of the story. Valerius promises his silent listener that "In our proposed journey we shall have frequent opportunities of conversing and arguing" (339) and Isabel confirms this.⁷

Embedded narratives were used by Shelley to authenticate her narrative in *Frankenstein*⁸; thus, she was able to supply various points of view on the same story providing a sort of cross-referencing of the "facts." This prismatic view of the story stresses its fragmentary quality, which becomes the element that paradoxically gives coherence to the story acting as an unorthodox 'frame-work' in the sense put forth by Gregory O'Dea. According to this critic,

a frame may be an internal, cognitive structure [...] the shaping core upon which outer forms are hung or built—not an external bordering picture

frame, but an internal, shaping skeletal frame; [...] re-orientating critical conception from the path of the reader's approach (external toward internal) to the direction of the artist's fundamental shaping vision (internal toward external).

Thus fragmentariness becomes the "skeletal frame" of the narrative structure, which also illuminates the treatment of the theme.

Indeed, the reanimated character appears as fragmented as the narrative structure supporting his story. His suffering is clearly the direct consequence of his experiencing a lack of familiarity and—most importantly—continuity. He refuses to see anything, decides he will "visit no scenery" (334) and even admits in believing, at first, "in a conspiracy formed against [him]" (334). He searches desperately for anything recognizable that will give him the sense of continuity that he lacks, and his only comfort is the view of the waters of the Tiber: "These—these, at least are the same—ever, ever the same!" (334) he repeats like a spell which will keep him whole. Rome is no longer Rome, and the "wretched Italians [...] fill [him] with bitter disdain" (332). Valerius knows that the time he has "missed" creates, or at least accentuates, this fragmentariness that nothing can bridge.⁹ To express his sense of discontinuity he uses a series of anachronisms which reflect the way he views his connection with the world: "I saw ruins of temples built after my time" (335), "in my native Rome, I was in a strange city" (338). The only thing that keeps Valerius alive is the young woman, Isabel, who sets her mind to helping him establish a connection with the present: "she wins my soul and binds it up in hers in a manner that I never experienced in my former life. She is Country, Friends—all, all, that I had lost is she to me" (339); we shall return to this point.

But first, let us turn to Shelley's other two texts. As is obvious from the title, "Roger Dodsworth: The Reanimated Englishman" is also concerned with reanimation. However, the treatment of the theme and the narrative structure supporting it are entirely different. This story was based on a newspaper hoax that made quite a stir in 1826. The incredible story of the revival of a young man said to have been

buried frozen under an avalanche since the seventeenth century was first published in the *Journal du Commerce de Lyon* on June 28, 1826; by July 4 it was printed in the London *New Times* and soon in other British newspapers.¹⁰ In her tale, Mary Shelley makes use of the essay form as she intended to place her story in the *New Monthly Magazine*, which was participating in the discussion of the phenomenon.¹¹ What is striking is that, even though the text starts as a contribution to this dialogue, it quickly evolves into a sort of detailed plan for a philosophical novel on the theme of reanimation in the vein of Godwin's *St Leon*. Having insisted on the idea that such a "new fact [...] is a circumstance to which the imagination must cling with delight" (43-44), Mary Shelley shifts into fiction with the following phrase: "But since facts are denied to us, let us be permitted to indulge in conjecture" (44). Gradually the tone shifts from speculative ("we *may imagine* [...] Dr. Hotham *may well be supposed* to reply"; 45, italics mine) to fictional (with the use of the present tense: "'Indeed,' cries Mr. Dodsworth"; 45). But instead of producing a developed plot, Mary Shelley draws attention to the fragmented and sketchy quality of her narrative not only by stating that "If philosophical novels were in fashion, we conceive an excellent one might be written on the development of the same mind in various situations, in different periods of the world's history" (49), but also by asking topical questions such as "Will he be an advocate for perfectibility or deterioration?" (48). Even her final plea addressed to the reanimated Dodsworth to "no longer hide himself in obscurity" (49) is justified by the need for more information for the completion of such a task: "We have a thousand inquiries to make, doubts to clear up, facts to ascertain" (49).

The notion of fragmentariness is again stressed on two levels: in the narrative structure—as we have already seen—and within the reanimated character with the use of oxymoronic phrases such as "youthful antique" (44) and "the dead alive" (50). Even though the character is only roughly sketched in this text and appears less gloomy than his reanimated predecessor, the idea of him not being able to bear the discontinuity of his life is expressed as an appropri-

ate—and certainly a plausible—ending to this story which remains to be told. Thus, the last conjecture proposed is that “Perhaps [...] finding no affinity between himself and the present state of things—he has bidden once more an eternal farewell to the sun” (50). This notion of not belonging to one’s time—or place—is, of course, a commonplace among the romantics; however, with the reanimation theme Shelley is giving it a more ‘tangible,’ or, we might even say, ‘literal’ expression.

What seems to fascinate Mary Shelley in this story is not only the possibility of living a second life in another time, but also the new possibilities provided by such a ‘stop’ in time for the depiction of the self.¹² Reanimation is treated here as something plausible, and the preservation of the body is viewed in relation with the consciousness of the self:

A body hermetically sealed up by the frost, is of necessity preserved in its *pristine entireness*. That which is totally secluded from the action of external agency, can neither have any thing added nor taken away from it. (44; italics mine)

It is this “pristine entireness” of the frozen body and of time that comes into glaring contrast with the living individual, who is constantly bearing the major consequence of “external agency”—that is its inevitable fragmentation.¹³

This is clearly demonstrated in the case of “The Mortal Immortal,” a story which is closely connected to “Roger Dodsworth” through the fact, noted by Charles Robinson (27), that the date chosen by Mary for Dodsworth’s assumed second death (July 16) is the same as that of the only diary entry by the Mortal Immortal. The diary¹⁴ in general is obviously related to the fragment as a narrative form, as well as to the fragmentation of the self as a theme. The time of the diary form has a peculiar quality; it consists of a series of separate presents which make up the continuity of a representation of one’s life. It is the written form of that “elaborate machinery of linguistic constructions and representations” (Donato 576), organising the fragments of memory which

constitute the consciousness of the self. In the case of the immortal hero, the diary is a means of trying to find continuity in a life which is so prolonged that it becomes an ideal illustration of the fragmentariness of the self.

In fact, this diary consists of only one entry which comprises the whole life of the immortal to that date, condensing 300 years in the space of a dozen pages. The particulars of how Winzy,¹⁵ the pupil of Cornelius Agrippa, drank, at the age of twenty-three, the elixir of life prepared by his master thinking it was a cure for love and all the misfortunes this has brought on him, are all given in a continuous narrative up to the point where his childhood sweetheart—who becomes his wife—dies of old age leaving him young-looking but worn out inside. At this point, which should have been more or less the end of his own natural span of life, the immortal hero chooses to stop his narration: “I pause here in my story—I will pursue it no further” (229). The next almost two and a half centuries are covered by a single phrase: “Since then how many have been my cares and woes, how few and empty my enjoyments!” (229). Bertha was what gave his existence continuity (“I cannot remember the hour I did not love Bertha” 220) and the story of his life ends with her. His subsequent existence becomes a series of disconnected scenes, which he considers not worth mentioning because of their discontinuity. He describes himself as “A sailor without rudder or compass, tossed on a stormy sea—a traveller lost on a wide-spread heath, without landmark or star to guide him” (229). Shelley seems to imply that even immortality cannot guarantee a sense of continuity and wholeness. To further undermine any sense of constancy, she makes her immortal a “*mortal* immortal” by making him drink only half of the elixir. As a consequence, even if immortality could offer some sense of stability, Shelley’s character cannot attain it:

To have drained half the Elixir of Immortality is but to be half immortal—my For-ever is thus truncated and null. But again, who shall number the years of the half of eternity? I often try to imagine by what rule the infinite may be divided. (229)

According to Charlotte Sussman,

In all [Shelley's] tales of the mutability of identity, a radical external discontinuity renders the character unrecognisable, or invisible, to others, while *internal continuity* conserves the individual's knowledge of himself or herself. (167; italics mine)

She traces this interest in the discontinuity of identity in Shelley's own life. Personal experience might well have been a source of inspiration in the depiction of the self-awareness of these characters, but I am arguing that what these stories are all about is, on the contrary, *internal discontinuity* as a perception of the self.¹⁶

Some critics have mentioned the composite nature that Mary Shelley shared with her first literary creation, the (*Frankenstein*) monster. Robert Olorenshaw notes that

Mary Shelley had no Christian or family name that was her own. She was Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin Shelley, that is to say, her name was composed of the disparate parts of other identities, just as her monster was composed of the disjointed sections of other bodies¹⁷;

and Marie Roberts describes her as “ideologically hybrid and disparate as the very creature pieced together by Victor Frankenstein.”¹⁸ In Shelley's reanimated characters, unity in the fragment and fragmentariness in unity are presented as two aspects of the same existence, and the Mortal Immortal becomes the embodiment of this idea in the same way as Shelley's short stories are both fragments and finished text, autonomous and interrelated.

As Charles Robinson has pointed out, Mary Shelley “should be viewed as a transitional writer in the development of the style as well as the form of the short story.”¹⁹ I would argue that one of her contributions is the open ending of the short story, which is related to the romantic opposition of ‘fragment versus finished text,’ two elements that merge in order to arrive at a more elaborate depiction of the fragmented unity of self and text. The endings of these stories open up to the future: Valerius goes on a journey of discovery to England and promises his companion many—and more interesting—discussions;

Dodsworth's imaginary death inscription is posed as a puzzle for the archeologists of a future time; and the Mortal Immortal embarks on an expedition in the hope of becoming "the wonder and benefactor to the human species" (230), leaving the reader to imagine that his most incredible adventures are yet to come. Thus Shelley simultaneously resolves the problem of space restriction imposed by the annuals and finds a new way of expressing—in form as well as in content—the relation between fragmentation and consciousness of the self.

The open ending of these stories could also yield an interesting interpretation if viewed in relation with narrative theories concerning plot and ending. According to Frank Kermode, "we use fictions to enable the end to confer organization and form on the temporal structure"²⁰ (45), and Peter Brooks affirms that

[n]arrative is one of the large categories or systems of understanding that we use in our negotiations with reality, specifically [...] with the problem of temporality: man's time-boundedness, his consciousness of existence within the limits of mortality. And plot is the principal ordering force of those meanings that we try to wrest from human temporality. (xi)

Thus, this lack of closure, along with the discontinuity expressed by the fragmented structure of the stories, could be seen to reflect, at a theoretical level as well, the difficulties in narrating such abnormal relations to death, making Shelley's stories anachronistically supportive of these modern theories.

Reanimation is treated in a very different manner by Théophile Gautier. Some sort of "scientific authentication" is put forth here as well to hint at an explanation of the unnatural phenomenon, but Gautier opts for the more obscure recent discovery of an alleged natural force: animal magnetism. Thus his *revenantes* are coming back to life by a combination of an ardent desire and the magnetic connection of the soul of a living man and a dead woman.²¹ In "La morte amoureuse," Romuald, the priest in love with the dead "courtisane" Clarimonde, brings her back to life by the force of his desire. On her revival, she explains to the astonished priest that she is coming "from a far away place from where no one has ever come back"²² and that

this was made possible by his desire. This is also the case with “Arria Marcella”; Octavien manages to revive the beautiful young Pompeian along with the entire city of Pompeii. As the *revenante* explains, this was made possible through the power of his feelings that established a magnetic connection between them:

When [...] your thought darted ardently towards me, my soul felt it in this world where I float invisible to the vulgar eyes; [...] your desire gave me life, the powerful evocation of your heart has abolished the distance which divided us.²³

In Gautier’s works reanimation has to do with an unusual contortion of time, which is why it seems unclear whether it is the dead that have come back to life or the protagonist that has been transported to another dimension. For Gautier time “exists only in relation to ourselves,”²⁴ and his characters experience this fluidity of time. In “Arria Marcella,” the narrator informs us that for Octavien “the wheel of time was out of joint and his triumphant desire was choosing its place among the past centuries!”²⁵ In fact we are rather witnessing an annulment of time; as Michel Picard puts it, the *revenants* do not come back, they have always been there.²⁶

If Shelley’s concern in treating the theme of reanimation was to express the fragmentation of the self, Gautier’s main objective is to certify not only the unity of the self but also the continuation of consciousness even after death. His idea—confirmed and enriched by his reading of Goethe’s *Faust*—of a place where everything that ever was continues to exist, is expressed in “Arria Marcella.”²⁷ As Georges Poulet points out, Goethe’s realm of the Mothers was not a static, dead past, but a past alive and constantly moving²⁸; and it is from this space that the *revenants* come. The timeless realm itself, however, has no appeal or interest for Gautier. What terrifies Gautier is death in all its forms, and especially the numerous little, fragmentary deaths which operate within the self, leading gradually to inevitable total annihilation.²⁹ In his poem “La Comédie de la Mort”—where we actually find the very image of fragmentation of the self—he expresses the idea that

the human soul is a tomb and man a Necropolis.³⁰ The revived characters in Gautier's stories represent a victory over that slow disintegration of the self and the hope that this victory can be achieved if only desire is strong enough.

However, even those characters who have managed to maintain their individuality after death do not escape the fragmentariness which seems to threaten all existence. It is not the first time, we are told, that Clarimonde is dead (137). Her repeated revivals, about which we learn nothing, constitute a disturbing discontinuity in her existence; and as for Arria, she first appears to Octavien as the truncated imprint of a beautiful body at the Studj museum in Naples, all that has survived of her in the world of the living (237). Their fragmented lives and bodies, and the emphasis on what is lacking in their dwelling place—no moon, no sun, no earth, no air,³¹ no love³²—together with their ardent desire to remain with the living, all point to the difficulty of maintaining a sense of self and wholeness. Despite those signs, however, their attitude shows a remarkable sense of continuity. Contrary to Shelley's *revenants*, they immediately adapt to the new situation, which they seem to have been waiting for. Their continuity in fact stems from their egocentricity; their only concern is their connection to their lovers, with whom they form a unit. Their existence depends entirely on their relationship with the man that has brought them back to life: "Since you still love me, I have to stay alive" (146) says Clarimonde to her lover; and Arria pleads her father to let her "enjoy this existence which love has given [her]" (269).

In fact, the ones with a really fragmented existence seem to be the living characters of Romuald and Octavien. Here comes into play Gautier's main narrative technique in his fantastic stories, the use of dream narrative.³³ In "La morte amoureuse" the atmosphere is dreamlike from the first time Romuald sees Clarimonde; but as the fantastic becomes too incredible, Gautier abandons the dreamlike atmosphere and has recourse to the realm of the dream itself in order to make the revival acceptable, but also to illustrate the divided existence of the hero. From the moment he revives Clarimonde,

Romuald leads a double life: one as a priest at a remote parsonage, and another as a wealthy aristocrat in Venice, “at night, as soon as [he] had shut [his] eyes” (117). As the story progresses, reality and dream change places, and it is his life as a priest that Romuald considers a dream—a nightmare. The dream life, compared to the real life, is pleasant, the atmosphere is relaxed and even seems ‘natural’³⁴ up to the disastrous ending where Clarimonde is destroyed in her tomb by Romuald’s spiritual guide. The same feeling permeates Octavien’s fantastic adventure in “Arria Marcella”; all uneasiness is quickly dispelled and the hero can enjoy a day in Pompeii. This reversal is intensified by the fact that, in Pompeii, it is Octavien who appears as a fantastic character and not the long gone dwellers of the city.³⁵ The dream, becoming familiar and no longer disturbing, loses its fantastic characteristics and gains in ‘reality’—and so, of course, does the fantastic story.³⁶ In the end, Arria Marcella meets the same fate as Clarimonde, and the double life ends abruptly; this return to ‘normality,’ however, does not restore the sense of wholeness to the main character. In contrast with Shelley’s stories, Gautier’s closure for his tales of reanimation is final and pessimistic. Both adventures leave the living characters detached from their time; it is impossible for them to become whole again, since for Gautier this is something that one cannot manage alone; it can only be achieved through a communion of souls.

Throughout Gautier’s stories it is obvious that both the *revenantes* and the protagonists are desperately clinging to the consciousness of the self, which the former do not want to let go, while the latter hope to give it endurance by forming an attachment with creatures that have survived death. And if this self needs a counterpart to be completed, this does not constitute a paradox; it is rather in accordance with Gautier’s belief—closely related to Plato, but also to Swedenborg³⁷—of two souls completing each other and forming a perfect unit. In this sense all his heroes in search of their perfect match, are in search of wholeness, which can only come from a union of souls.

We have seen that the underlying unorthodox 'framework' of Shelley's stories is the notion of fragmentariness; in Gautier's tales it is the dream which fulfils this function. In other words, Gautier emphasizes that all these fantastic adventures are only a dream—something that even the most incredulous reader can accept—only to move on to assert that dreams are real. The ingenious way with which Gautier uses the dream is based on the following syllogism: the content of the dreamlike experience in the tale cannot be contested, as it has all the attributes of a dream, including the impossibility of verification, which, in the case of the dream, would necessarily be absurd because of the dream's very nature. This impossibility of 'verification,' which applies to literature in general and especially, according to Todorov, to the fantastic,³⁸ applies even more strongly in the case of a dream within a fantastic tale. In order for these dreams to abide by the rules of internal coherence of the tale and seem real within the framework of the tale that contains the dream narrative, Gautier has carefully placed within the text 'proofs' of their "reality." But while Todorov places the dream in the group of 'excuses' that show that nothing supernatural has taken place in the narrative ("réel-illusoire" 50), thus placing "La morte amoureuse" in the "fantastique-merveilleux" (58), for Gautier the dream is put forth as an authentication of an experience which is placed within the domain of the 'real.' Indeed Gautier, like his friend Gérard de Nerval considered the dream a second life,³⁹ and this idea is expressed throughout all his work.⁴⁰ The dream is for Gautier the gateway to another dimension, the means to make the impossible possible, and this is what many of his heroes seek to achieve.⁴¹ Gautier regards this desire man has for the impossible as a guarantee that it can be made possible. Seen in this light, the dream in Gautier's tales not only includes and allows the fantastic revival, but is also a symbol of the fantastic itself. The *mise en abyme* of the dream within the fantastic serves, then, to tell the reader how these stories—and the genre itself—should be perceived.

The dream is of course also closely related to the fragment, since fragmentariness is its inherent quality both in terms of experience and

in terms of structure. Thus, even though Gautier's tales appear to be less fragmented in structure, the underlying frame of the dream gives them a fragmented quality similar to Shelley's. Through the treatment of the reanimation theme, the general romantic preoccupation of "how to pass from the fragmentation of perception to a totality"⁴² is thus expressed by both authors, but in relation to their own personal preoccupations. Shelley's sense of a fragmented life and self and Gautier's fear of death and his desire to maintain all that which time annihilates are constants in their respective work. For Shelley, the search for wholeness is a strictly personal matter. Thus, even though Valerius and Winzy have both found their ideal partner, the feeling of fragmentariness persists—Winzy is doomed to stay alive alone, and Valerius cannot overcome his sense of being disconnected, even though he admits to having met the woman who "wins [his] soul and binds it up with hers" (339). Their strong individualism defines their view of the world, which is typically romantic. Even Valerius, who talks nostalgically of the Roman republic when "the history of an individual was that of his country," is in fact displaying an anachronistic romantic attitude, refusing to integrate into the new society he finds himself in—and being thus paradoxically in tune with an era with which he insists he has nothing in common. For Gautier, by contrast, wholeness can only be achieved through an ideal union. His reanimated characters owe their second chance in life to this connection of souls, and it is only the schemes of overzealous Christians⁴³ who destroy the connection, sending to oblivion the revived women and condemning their lovers to a truncated existence.

Reanimation was a subject that had all the necessary characteristics to fascinate the romantics: its almost mystical nature and the possibilities it afforded to the imagination as a literary theme are only the most obvious. The reanimated character provided a new mould for the romantic hero, affording the author a way to give concreteness and plausibility, to give a 'reason,' to the romantic feelings of not belonging and make the romantic character more sympathetic even while he appears increasingly detached from the common man. These charac-

ters could in fact be viewed as the epitome of the romantic hero as expressed by Friedrich Schlegel in his famous fragments, where he asserts that “Man is but a fragment of himself.”⁴⁴

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NOTES

¹The experiments on electricity and the magnetic cures conducted by Franz Anton Mesmer in Paris struck the popular imagination. When the Italian Luigi Galvani (1737-1798) managed, in 1786, to give artificial movement to the limbs of a dead frog, the enthusiasm that followed made many scientists believe that the first step towards the discovery of the principle of life had been taken. Galvani's nephew, Giovanni Aldini, also conducted experiments in reanimation during the years 1802/03 in London, using the bodies of executed criminals. In England many believed that animal electricity existed and that, if it could be brought under control, it would be possible to bring back to life people that had died from drowning or suffocation. See Lecourt 110.

²Quoted by Anne K. Mellor 10.

³Mary Shelley wrote 21 stories for gift-books or periodicals between 1823 and 1839.

⁴Mary Shelley, letter to Maria Gisborne, June 11, 1835, quoted in *Collected Tales and Stories* xiii. All subsequent references to Mary Shelley's tales will be referring to this edition.

⁵This vantage point, equivalent to the one of the author, seems however to add to the confusion of Valerius, who may no longer be “in the midst” (to use Kermode's expression) like the rest of men, but is positioned “aside” rather than “above” and remains, like the others, very much in the dark concerning the meaning of his existence.

⁶What is commonly known since Edgar Allan Poe's essay “The Philosophy of Composition” (1846), and his review on Nathaniel Hawthorne's collection of short stories *Twice Told Tales* (1842) as the “unity of effect”; Poe states that a work of fiction should be written with a specific end in view, which has to be both “novel” and “vivid,” and the emotional response that the author wishes to provoke. All elements of the composition should be treated with this end in mind.

⁷“You will have frequent opportunities of conversing with him” (343).

⁸See, among others, Nita Schechet, *Narrative Fissures, Reading and Rhetoric* ch. 1; and Gregory O'Dea, “Framing the Frame: Embedded Narratives, Enabling Texts, and Frankenstein.”

⁹"[...] the tremendous change operated in the world [...] by the slow flow of many ages, but which appeared to me in my singular situation as the work of a few days" (337).

¹⁰"Dr. Jas. HOTHAM, of Morpeth, in Northumberland, returning from Switzerland, is stated to have reported that a most extraordinary event had lately passed at the foot of Mount St. Gothard, a league from Aizoli, in the valley of Levantina. At the bottom of a kind of cavern, the body of a man, about 30 years of age, was perceived under a heap of ice, proceeding from an avalanche. [...] What was the astonishment of every body, when the individual having recovered the use of his faculties, declared that he was ROGER DODSWORTH, son of the Antiquary of the same name, born in 1629 [...]" Tuesday, July 4, 1826, *New Times*, quoted in Charles E. Robinson, "Mary Shelley and the Roger Dodsworth Hoax" 21.

¹¹Robinson 25.

¹²By 'stop' in time I am referring to the time 'missed' when the character was frozen which enabled him to live in another future time that he should not have been able to reach in his normal life span. Both of these extraordinary elements of the story read in the press provide new possibilities for the storyteller.

¹³The insistence on the name in the titles of these stories is another element that points to the question of the consciousness of the self.

¹⁴Here the form of the diary is designated by the date appearing at the beginning of the text, which is connected with the notion of anniversary: "July 16, 1833—This is a memorable anniversary for me; on it I complete my three hundred and twenty-third year!" (219). The anniversary is another artificial divide which, by means of its repetitiveness, gives a sense of continuity of the self.

¹⁵From the Scottish word "winze" meaning "curse," Charles E. Robinson, *Collected Tales and Stories* 390.

¹⁶Sussman talk only of "The Reanimated Roman" and about Shelley's tales "of the mutability of identity" in general, without mentioning "The Mortal Immortal." The (half) immortal hero is an extreme example of the fragmented self which characterizes all of Shelley's heroes. I therefore believe that the opposite of what Sussman states is actually valid, that is, that those characters suffer from internal discontinuity and are perceiving their state of being in connection with external continuity (i.e. Rome and the Tiber in "The Reanimated Roman").

¹⁷Olorenshaw 169.

¹⁸Roberts 86.

¹⁹*Collected Tales and Stories* xiv.

²⁰He gives as an example of this need of man to "humanise" time through narrative the common conception of the ticking of the clock: "The interval between the two sounds, between *tick* and *tock* is now charged with significant duration. The clock's *tick-tock* I take to be a model of what we call a plot, an organization that humanizes time by giving it form; and the interval between *tock* and *tick* represents purely successive, disorganized time of the sort that we need to humanize" (45).

²¹For a detailed analysis on Gautier, magnetism and immortality, see Anastasi, "Théophile Gautier ou l'immortalité à rebours".

²²"[...] je viens de bien loin, et d'un endroit d'où personne n'est encore revenu: il n'y a ni lune ni soleil au pays d'où j'arrive; ce n'est que de l'espace et de l'ombre; ni chemin, ni sentier; point de terre pour le pied, point d'air pour l'aile; et pourtant me voici, car l'amour est plus fort que la mort, et il finira par la vaincre"; Théophile Gautier, "La morte amoureuse," *Récits fantastiques* 139.

²³This and the subsequent translations of Gautier's stories are mine. The original reads thus: "lorsque [...] ta pensée s'est élancée ardemment vers moi, mon âme l'a senti dans ce monde où je flotte invisible pour les yeux grossiers; la croyance fait le dieu, et l'amour fait la femme. On n'est véritablement morte que quand on n'est plus aimée; ton désir m'a rendu la vie, la puissante évocation de ton cœur a supprimé les distances qui nous séparaient"; Théophile Gautier, "Arria Marcella"; *Récits fantastiques* 266.

²⁴Théophile Gautier, article in *La Presse*, March 31, 1846, quoted by Georges Poulet, *Études sur le temps humain* 1: 325.

²⁵"[...] la roue du temps était sortie de son ornière et son désir vainqueur choisissait sa place parmi les siècles écoulés!" (262).

²⁶"L'annulation du temps rend naturellement contemporains les vivants et les morts: les «revenants», en fait, ne reviennent pas, ils ont toujours été là," Picard 62.

²⁷"En effet, rien ne meurt, tout existe toujours; nulle force ne peut anéantir ce qui fut une fois. Toute action, toute parole, toute forme, toute pensée tombée dans l'océan universel des choses y produit des cercles qui vont s'élargissant jusqu'aux confins de l'éternité. [...] Pâris continue d'enlever Hélène dans une région inconnue de l'espace. La galère de Cléopâtre gonfle ses voiles de soie sur l'azur d'un Cydnus idéal" (266-67).

²⁸Poulet 330.

²⁹However much Gautier wanted the consciousness of the self to continue after death, his rational thought on the subject forced him to acknowledge the impossibility of such a survival: "C'est inadmissible, dit Gautier, vous figurez-vous mon âme gardant la conscience de mon Moi, se rappelant que j'ai écrit au *Moniteur*, quai Voltaire 13, et que j'ai eu pour patrons Turgan et Dalloz? [...] Nous admettons parfaitement l'inconscience avant la vie, ce n'est pas difficile de la concevoir après [...] moi je n'ai peur que de ce passage où mon Moi entrera dans la nuit, où je perdrai conscience d'avoir été"; Théophile Gautier, septembre 1860, quoted by Anne Ubersfeld 329.

³⁰"Toute âme est un sépulcre où gisent mille choses; / Des cadavres hideux dans des figures roses / Dorment ensevelis. / On trouve toujours les larmes sous le rire, / Les morts sous les vivants, et l'homme est à vrai dire / Une Nécropolis. [...] / Tout autour de leur cœur sont debout les momies, / Et l'on y reconnaît les figures blémies / De leurs amours anciens"; Gautier, *Poésies complètes* 25-26.

³¹See footnote 22.

³²"[...] j'ai froid d'être restée si longtemps sans amour," "Arria Marcella" 267.

³³For the function of the dream in Gautier's work see Elena Anastasaki, "The Functions of the Dream in Théophile Gautier's *contes fantastiques*."

³⁴"Je me laissais faire avec la plus coupable complaisance, et elle accompagnait tout cela du plus charmant babil. [...] je ne voyais rien là que de parfaitement naturel"; "La morte amoureuse" 139.

³⁵"Le bouvier aperçut Octavien et parut surpris [...] ne trouvant pas sans doute d'explication à l'aspect de ce personnage étrange pour lui"; "La vue d'Octavien, coiffé de l'affreux chapeau moderne, sanglé dans une mesquine redingote noire, les jambes emprisonnées dans un pantalon, les pieds pincés dans des bottes luisantes, parut surprendre le jeune Pompéien"; "Arria Marcella" 255 and 257.

³⁶Once Gautier has linked the fantastic to the dream in this way, and has shown the dream to be a—at least seemingly—real experience in the frame within which the dream narrative is included, he implicitly leads the reader not to treat the fantastic as a dream, but to allow the state of the dream to permeate the reader's attitude towards the fantastic. By having Romuald accept, while awake, his adventure "avec cette facilité que l'on a dans la vision d'admettre comme fort simples les événements les plus bizarres" (139) and Octavien acknowledge that he is neither asleep nor mad (254), but still not resisting the fantastic adventure and even determined not to find anything extraordinary (256, 264), Gautier gently shows the reader the way he should view the fantastic, that is from the perspective of the dream, as if he himself was in a dream, and judge it by its own rules, from the inside. That is, accept it the same way he would accept a dream—albeit a lucid one—while asleep.

³⁷Plato in his *Symposium* [189c - 193a] develops the idea of the androgyne who, split by Zeus, is eternally seeking his other half; Swedenborg's influence seems to be reaching Gautier via Balzac's *Séraphita* (1835; cf. Savalle). Gautier will further develop Swedenborg's idea of two souls forming an "angel of love" in his *Spirite* (1866).

³⁸For Todorov the fantastic exists only while the feeling of doubt is maintained, and any form of verification would shift the text in the genres of either the *étrange* or the *merveilleux*. He posits the hesitation of the reader as the first condition of the genre of the fantastic; cf. Todorov 29, 36. Gautier approaches the fantastic in a different way, demanding of the reader that he does not hesitate, without however falling into the *merveilleux*; i.e. he does not pose the fantastic under the ambiguity "reality or dream" discussed by Todorov, but is promoting the idea of the reality of the dream.

³⁹"Le rêve est une seconde vie. Je n'ai pu sans frémir ces portes d'ivoire ou de corne qui nous séparent du monde invisible"; Nerval 291.

⁴⁰For example, in *Jettatura* he expresses the idea that: "à un certain point de vue, le rêve existe autant que la réalité"; Théophile Gautier, *Jettatura, Récits fantastiques* 427; and, writing about Nerval, Gautier mentions "la force de projection du rêve, cette puissance de créer hors du temps et du possible, une vision presque palpable"; Gautier, *Portraits et souvenirs littéraires*, quoted in Poulet 334.

⁴¹Octavien admits that “la réalité ne le séduisait guère” (250), and his experience in Pompeii is described as “un de ses rêves les plus chers accompli” (256). Similarly, the hero of *Mademoiselle de Maupin* (1836) admits that “l’impossible m’a toujours plu” and that “tout ce que je peux faire n’a pas le moindre attrait pour moi”; Gautier, *Mademoiselle de Maupin* 273, 274.

⁴²Donato 581.

⁴³The priest Sérapion in “La morte amoureuse” and Arria’s converted father in “Arria Marcella.”

⁴⁴“Jeder Mensch ist nur ein Stück von sich selbst”; Schlegel no. 1043, p. 115.

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Decadence and Renewal in Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend*

LEONA TOKER

The plot of Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend* focuses on the presumed death and ultimate reappearance of the *jeune premier*, John Harmon. It had been Dickens's plan to write about "a man, young and perhaps eccentric, feigning to be dead, and *being* dead to all intents and purposes external to himself, and for years retaining the singular view of life and character so imparted" (Forster 2: 291), until, presumably, he could overcome his ghostly detachment. This, indeed, happens owing to the unhurried growth of mutual love between Harmon, posing as the impecunious John Rokesmith, and Bella Wilfer, the woman whose hand in marriage is the condition, according to his eccentric father's will, for his inheriting the vast property that has meantime gone to the old man's trusty steward Boffin. Thus Harmon, as well as the erstwhile willful and would-be "mercenary" Bella, are reclaimed, redeemed by love—in the best tradition of the religious humanism that suffuses Dickens's fiction.

As this précis of the plot may suggest, dying and being restored from death are both a metaphor for the literal events of the novel and a symbol of moral regeneration. As usual, Dickens partly desentimentalizes the up-beat poetic justice by limiting its applicability: Betty Higden's little grandson whom the Boffins wish to adopt and name John Harmon dies—his death symbolizes or, perhaps, replaces that of the protagonist; the traitor Charley Hexam is ready to march off, unpunished, treading (metaphorically) on corpses (including his father who had literally made a more or less honest living from salvaging corpses from the river). The symbolism is also deautomatized when another traitor, Rogue Riderhood is drowned and reanimated—

no moral sea-change occurs in his case, no regeneration—and so the next time he is drowned when fighting with Bradley Headstone it is, as if to revive poetic justice, for good. The sea-change is reserved for battered and half-drowned Eugene Wrayburn, the decadent yet not depraved young gentleman¹ whom the working-class Lizzy Hexam and Jenny Wren restore to physical life and bring to moral conversion. The coherent structure into which the motifs of death, revival, and regeneration converge goes a long way towards compensating for the weaknesses of the virtue-rewarded type ending in the Lizzy-Eugene plot line (which recycles elements of *Pamela* along with those of *Jane Eyre*²) and the taming-of-the-shrew-into-the-angel-of-the-house ending of the plot line that involves Bella Wilfer and John Harmon.³

Henry James regarded *Our Mutual Friend* as a product of an exhausted mine, “dug out as with a spade and a pickaxe” (853). The aesthetics of this novel may, indeed, be less dependent on Dickens’s erstwhile imaginative vigor, yet I see James’s verdict as an unintentional metonymy: *Our Mutual Friend* is not a case of impoverishment but it deals extensively with deterioration, impoverishment, decadence. Its main exponent of the motif of decadence is Eugene Wrayburn, but this motif is also distributed among other characters and plot lines.⁴ The book that Silas Wegg first reads to Boffin is *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, whose title is on one occasion, reflecting the post-Crimean War Russophobia, transformed into *The Decline and Fall of the Rooshian Empire*. Boffin himself pretends to degenerate into a miser. Jenny Wren’s alcoholic father has degenerated both physically and morally; Riderhood degenerates morally from a dredgerman for whom the money to be found on the corpses is a tacitly recognized perk to a thief, blackmailer, and murderer, a producer rather than a finder of corpses. Other characters exemplify a decline of fortunes but not a deterioration of character: Betty Higden has known better times but has retained her fiber; Bella’s father Reginald Wilfer is always a gentleman fallen on harder times, whether or not he is indeed a descendent of the “De Wilfers who came over with the Conqueror,” for, adds Dickens, “it is a remarkable fact in

genealogy that no De Any ones ever came over with Anybody else" (1.4: 32).

The latter remark exemplifies Dickens's own ironic reclamation of tired clichés (see Edgecombe), especially in his representation of middle-class conversation. The way in which Mortimer Lightwood speaks about the fate of John Harmon and his sister, both disowned by their father, suggests a detached, ironic, blasé attitude to the life of true feeling. Soon enough, however, Lightwood and Wrayburn find out that the life of passions is not such an old story. Miss Harmon managed to preserve her heart from being reduced to Dust by an arranged marriage; the smouldering in the wry Wrayburn will flare up at the sight of Lizzy (as does, belatedly, that of his namesake, Pushkin's Onegin); and John Harmon's heart will rise from its ashes when he and the Boffins reclaim the emotional and moral life of Bella Wilfer.

The plots of Dickens's novels unfold against the setting of specific professional activities with which they are thematically linked. In *Our Mutual Friend* such an activity is the reclamation of waste, what we now call "recycling" of what was then euphemistically called "dust." The plot and the setting have a common denominator: the slow and scrupulous work of returning the discarded back into the process of human life. The slowness of the reader's recognition of John Harmon in John Rokesmith is part and parcel of this motif. The centrality of the motif of Dust, for the thematic unity of this novel (with Dust serving as a metaphor for money since the seventeenth century), has been explored by H. M. Daleski (270-336). Later, the importance of the motif of recycling for the architectonics of the novel was discussed by Nancy Aycock Metz (1979), who classified the types reclamation represented in the novel into "analysis" (emblemized by the Veneerings' butler, referred to as the Analytical Chemist, or simply, the Analytical) and articulation, emblemized by Mr. Venus, the "articulator" of dry bones (Metz 67)—the pagan goddess of love presiding over Isaiah's prophesy of resurrection. Daleski and Metz demonstrate the coherence of the pattern which the motifs of dust and reclamation

deploy. This pattern belongs to what Benjamin Hrushovski (1984) called the “Internal Field of Reference”—aesthetic constructs shaped by the mutual co-positioning of units in the semantic network of the text. My remarks, taking off from these studies and another seminal study, Harland Nelson’s 1965 article on Dickens’s debt to Henry Mayhew, will focus on two examples of the way in which mimetic references, that is items that pertain to what Hrushovski calls the “External Field of Reference,” the historical and socio-economic realities of mid-nineteenth-century London, are *transformed* when they enter newly articulated inter-relationships in the text of the novel—transformed both in the direction of their mutual aesthetic adjustment in the Internal Field of Reference and for the sake of a judicious appeal to Dickens’s Victorian audience, mainly, but not exclusively, middle-class.

Dickens was personally acquainted with Henry Mayhew and, no doubt familiar with his sketches (see Sucksmith and Dunn). In his monumental book *London Labour and the London Poor*, Mayhew notes:

In London, where many, in order to live, struggle to extract a meal from the possession of an article which seems utterly worthless, nothing must be wasted. Many a thing which in a country town is kicked by the penniless out of their path even, if examined and left as meet only for the scavenger’s cart, will in London be snatched up as a prize; it is money’s worth. A crushed and torn bonnet, for instance, or, better still, an old hat, napless, shapeless, crownless, and brimless, will be picked up in the street, and carefully placed in a bag with similar things by one class of street-folk—the Street-Finders. And to tempt the well-to-do to *sell* their second-hand goods, the street-trader offers the barter of shapely china or shining glass vessels; or blooming fuchsias or fragrant geraniums for ‘the rubbish,’ or else, in the spirit of the hero of the fairy tale, he exchanges ‘new lamps for old’. (2: 6)

Recycling is nowadays mainly an ecological issue—and it may mean restoring the discarded, back into economy, into individual and communal homeostasis. As a metaphor, it can stand for the reabsorption of intellectual debris into ideological innovation and of the emotionally abject into spiritual self-renewal.

Yet in mid-nineteenth-century London, that “great (and dirty) city” (*Bleak House* 1.1: 5), recycling was, mainly, a source of precarious sustenance for thousands of the indigent—with earning sometimes below a sixpence a day. John Harmon’s father is supposed to have presided over much of this activity. He had made his fortune as a garbage-removal contractor: in addition to the funds received for having the dust carted off he also made money out of the huge dust-heaps themselves. The way to articulate dust back into gold was by having people process the dust mounds—that is, analyze them, sort the items into separate heaps that could be sold—“to brick-makers, soap boilers, paper manufacturers, road makers, dealers in metal and glass, concrete makers” (Johnson 2: 1030).

The Internal Field of Reference in *Our Mutual Friend* combines the source of the Harmon riches with an array of other kinds of reprocessing, indeed, a strand of motifs that connects most of the novel’s plot-lines. Here we find Jenny Wren, who makes doll’s dresses out of waste, and recycles the waste of her own art into pincushions and pen-wipers; for Jenny even the cemetery is connected with a renewal: the funeral of her father gives her an inspiration for the clothing of a minister-doll, one that would not bury other dolls but would unite two of Jenny’s “young friends in matrimony” (4.9; see also Stewart 125). Here also is Sloppy who makes children’s toys “out of nothing” (2.14)—creation *ex nihilo* reinterpreted as a reprocessing of cosmic waste. Here are Gaffer Hexam and the other dredgermen who fish the lost things out of the river for reward. The pawnshop operations in Fledgeby’s firm are also associated with recycling—it is there, for instance, that Jenny buys unredeemed items to be used in her own artistic projects. On the metaphorical level the sorting and articulating of information is also the job of the police Inspector (1.3: 24; 1.12: 159), of Rokesmith the Secretary (1.15: 179-80) in Boffin’s employ, who works to reduce the entropy in his proliferating papers, and of young Blight, the clerk in Lightwood’s employ, who is trying to stave off the chaos caused by the lack rather than by the abundance of business, alphabetizing the names of non-existent callers. This young man’s

own name reminds us that all these are efforts to bring back to life not what has died the natural death of old age wear-and-tear but what has been prematurely blighted.

The recurrent reprise of the theme of entropy and its containment in *Our Mutual Friend* does not merely reflect the facts of waste and reclamation in Dickens's London. Waste and reclamation are important issues in the External Field of Reference, issues whose literary processing, before Dickens, seems to have lagged behind the size of the socio-economic problems that they represented. Yet when such issues make their way into Dickens's novel, they turn into *motifs*, that is, building blocks of an artistic structure whose recurrence sets the rhythms of the narrative and connects subplots, separate narrative details, and features of character portrayal into a unified semantic structure—motifs that, moreover, often acquire metaphoric and symbolic force. The mechanics of this transformation may be affected by the pragmatics of addressing Dickens's immediate audience.⁵

As Harland S. Nelson has helpfully observed, the character of Betty Higden may well have been inspired by one of Mayhew's informants: an indigent old woman who had lost her family—husband, children, grandchildren all dead—but who steadfastly refuses to go to the workhouse. In Mayhew's book, however, this woman makes her living as a pure-finder, that is, a gatherer of dog dung from the streets. A bucket of this dung was sold for about 6d to tanners who took advantage of its alkaline content to "purify" the skins that they were processing; hence the substance got its paradoxical name "pure." The occupation granted the weakest and the poorest of the unemployed a means of honest sustenance. While helping the ecology of the streets, it exposed the finders to a great deal of filth—a particular that Dickens chose to spare his readers. One may surmise that one of the reasons of his choice would be the need to preempt the conventional metonymic associations between the roughness of the occupation and the character of the worker employed in it⁶: coarse tools and disgusting materials were liable to extend to the hands that wielded them in the imagination of the public. Mainly, however, Dickens had reason to fear the

potential hurdle audience of his book (see Toker 282-87), the unofficial censors that stood between the novel and its target audiences. One of the characters of the novel, the self-confident Mr. Podsnap, actually represents such a hurdle audience: for him "Literature, large print" must be "respectfully descriptive of getting up at eight, shaving close at a quarter past, breakfasting at nine, going to the City at ten, coming home at half-past five, and dining at seven"; whereas "Painting and Sculpture" must supply "models and portraits representing Professors of getting up at eight, shaving close at a quarter past," etc. (1.11: 128). For this philistine audience the question about every work of art is "would it bring a blush into the cheek of the young person?" and the young person "seemed always liable to burst into blushes" (1.11: 129). Pure-finding would hardly pass through the eye of this needle.

Hence Dickens transforms Mayhew's prototype for Betty Higden from a pure-finder to an artisan, child-minder, and laundress (or at least, as a mangle-operator, a laundry adjunct). In the latter capacity, she retains the motif of purifying what is soiled but escapes the idea of personal contamination: ablutions connoted by laundry elicit a considerably sanitized complex of visual, tactile, and olfactory images. But apparently the memories of the pure-finder were not easily erased from the imaginative background of that character—they might partly account for the name of her faithful apprentice Sloppy, associated with the slop-pail. Sloppy turns the mangle for her, that is, operates the nineteenth-century drying-and-flattening contraption. And once the mangle has come into play, it harks back to the motif of the workhouse treadmill, tucking up a potentially loose end. For Sloppy, Betty's house is a welcome alternative to the workhouse; as a child-minder she also takes over and partly improves on one of the functions of that notorious institution (Stokes 723-24).

Though Dickens must have read Mayhew's research to supplement his own observations, the "young persons" in his audience did not possess information about such low matters as the "pure" and "pure-finders." However, the handling of Gaffer Hexam and his daughter Lizzy may be rooted in information more readily accessible to broad

readership, information that Dickens may have held in common with his audience as part of the cultural code which the present-day reader needs help with reconstructing. The work of dredgers is as closely connected to the motif of resurrection as the work of grave robbers in *A Tale of Two Cities* (these suppliers of corpses for anatomy theatres were, indeed, called “resurrectionists”)—with an essential point of difference: the work of dredgers was not only legal but of much value to the police. This work, paid for by the sale of recovered items, by rewards, and by inquest-money, required much skill and informed observation, a fair amount of intelligence as well as physical strength. Rogue Riderhood envies Hexam his luck with finding corpses, but the luck is actually a matter of semiotic proficiency, knowledge of the way the river signals the presence of the dead-by-water.

Mayhew notes that, in comparison with other “finders,” dredgers were morally and financially capable of maintaining a relatively fair domesticity (148). This, indeed, goes a long way to explain how a naturally refined Lizzy could be found in this social stratum. It also explains the physical strength that stands her in good stead when she has to rescue Wrayburn: dredgers often employed their children as their helpmates—in the first scene of the novel we do, indeed, find Lizzy rowing her father’s boat with the ease of strength and practice (1.1: 1). Lizzy’s aversion to her father’s occupation is caused by his being not an ordinary dredger but one who specializes in body-finding (the body that he finds in the first chapter is the one to be misidentified as the corpse of John Harmon). This specialization, moreover, accounts for the absence of the regular dredgers’ bulky and complicated gear in Gaffer’s boat—we do not see any nets with stones used to raze the bottom of the river and trap smaller items. This, in its turn, is a convincing background of Charley’s absences; in the usual course of affairs, a regular dredger would have his son, or an apprentice, guard the boat with all the equipment, instead of running off to school. Hexam himself is intelligent but illiterate and fully determined to let his son’s mental capacities be wasted like his own. Charley is reclaimed from this waste by his sister’s efforts, but

the type of education that he scrambles himself into under Bradley Headstone for the sake of social advancement does nothing to keep him from degenerating into a callous careerist.

Lizzie attempts to impede her father's agenda of reclaiming bodies and wasting minds as much as filial duty allows, mainly by sending Charley to school and keeping him off the river (Mayhew suggests that the water may be addictive; boys who went to work on the river tended to drift away from learning irreversibly). After Gaffer's death and her escape from London, Lizzy finds work in a factory warehouse—which likewise involves sorting and arrangement. A metaphoric negative version of the warehouse motif is carried by Bradley Headstone, who stores facts as in a “mental warehouse” (2.1: 217), not letting the cultivation trickle down to his affective self. It is Bradley Headstone, the headstrong new man, who blights the life of the well-born (eugenic) Eugene Wrayburn, wasting his own life in the process.

As noted above, Eugene will be granted a recovery—a slow, laborious, and emotion-fraught reclamation. In the novel, the diligent work of reclamation done by some is contrasted with the predaceous wastefulness of others, such as the *nouveau rich* Veneerings who live “in a bran-new house in a bran-new quarter of London” with everything “spick and span new”:

All their furniture was new, all their friends were new, all their servants were new, their plate was new, their carriage was new, their harness was new, their horses were new, their pictures were new [...] they were as newly married as was lawfully compatible with their having a bran-new baby, and if they had set up a great-grandfather, he would have come home in matting [...] without a scratch upon him, French—polished to the crown of his head. (1.2: 6).

In England even these days one of the worst things one can say about a person is that he has had to buy all of his own furniture. In the artificial little world of the appropriately named Veneerings much must have been discarded, and nothing seems to have been carried over from the past.

In *Our Mutual Friend* the social target of Dickens's criticism has partly shifted from the corruptly ruling upper classes to the callous new middle class. The society presided over by self-satisfied bourgeois Podsnaps and the climbing Veneerings is wasteful of people and their creative potentialities: from the vacuous Mr. Twemlow, caught in the net of his artistocratic cousin's "vicarious leisure" (Veblen 59), through the repressed Miss Podsnap (the embodiment of the "young person" kept in cotton-wool), to victims of lower-class child mortality such as Betty's grandson. The conspicuous waste of beautiful human beings as an effect of the leisure-class's invidious emulation will be explored in a more focused way about half a century later, in Wharton's *The House of Mirth* and Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, whose Long Island valley of ashes would compete for symbolmaking power with the dust mounds of Dickens's London. *Our Mutual Friend* reclaims the marginalized—the deserving handicapped, the decent poor, the Jew—while allowing its hedged-in poetic justice to dispense with the predators, sending the Veneerings into bankruptcy and exile and Silas Wegg into a dustman's cart.

While *Our Mutual Friend* attaches value to the process of a laborious conversion of the blighted back to life, it has practically no place for the main thrust of the creative *élan vital*, the head-on confrontation with the flow of reality evident in *Nicholas Nickleby*, *David Copperfield*, and partly even *Bleak House*. Even John Harmon's experiment in creating a progressive modest yuppie household upon marrying Bella is canceled when he comes into his patrimony in the end. Neither John Harmon nor Eugene Wrayburn is a Stephen Dedalus, even though Eugene seems to find the Word that Stephen is still seeking at the close of *Ulysses* (and this word is "Wife"). *Our Mutual Friend* is a novel without a hero, yet it distributes the heroism of daily labor and daily endurance among several of its male and female characters. This is the kind of heroism that harks back to Wordsworth's leech-gatherer and anticipates the twentieth-century ideas of the heroism of survival.⁷ One may say that the novel itself, for all its minor flaws, is a product of the *élan vital*, the creative impulse, whose waste I have been proc-

essing with the help of Mayhew while also celebrating the aesthetic effect of its semantic coherence. My reading can point to one of the facets of this novel's connection with a poem on whose composition, as is well known, it exerted a considerable influence—T. S. Eliot's *Waste Land*, where it is for the reader to play the role of the knight who must ask the right question, that is, engage in the kind of intellectual activity that can articulate fragments and restore fertility to the fallow. Perhaps the reason why *Our Mutual Friend* strikes many readers as a less powerful source of aesthetic experience than Dickens's earlier novels is that the aesthetic effects produced by this labor or articulation are predominantly the effects of meaning rather than what Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht (104-11) calls presence effects.⁸ Presence effects are not absent from this novel, but they are mainly achieved by recurrent verbal and physical gestures that give us a strong sense of characters' bodily selves, while only partly offsetting the reduction in the gusto, the sense of depth, and the festive wit that quickened characters in Dickens's earlier novels.

The Hebrew University of Jerusalem

NOTES

¹As Vincent Newey points out, Eugene is presented as always capable of critical self-scrutiny and compunction; his development is "by and large the history of the enhancement of this faculty" (76).

²Cf. Magnet on the *jeune promiers* of *Barnaby Rudge*: "Readers of the English novel, with examples like Squire B in *Pamela* or Mr. Rochester in *Jane Eyre* before him, are familiar with the idea that becoming a true gentleman involves a diminution of free, aggressive, masculine potency, sometimes even to the point of mutilation" (68).

³See Surridge for a different view of the function of the sensationalist elements of the novel: Surridge associates the novel's use of the mysteries, of the slightly decadent lawyer/hero type, and the *mort vivant*—ingredients of Victorian proto-detective fiction, with the contemporary anxieties concerning the potential disruptiveness of female willfulness.

⁴Cf. James Phelan's discussion of the thematic model of character construction, 287-92.

⁵If Hrushovski's Internal and External Fields of Reference roughly correspond to two of the three major divisions of semiotics—Syntactics and Semantics, respectively—the gearing up of the material to the needs of a particular audience belongs to the third division—Pragmatics (see, for instance, Morris 217-20).

⁶See Spector on Dickens's consistently refraining from such a metonymy.

⁷See, for instance, Terrence Des Pres and Todorov.

⁸In a literary work, "presence effects" are associated with style, varieties of emotional appeal, and effects of *hypotyposis* (Fontanier 390-92)—the illusion of the characters' presence and the unfolding of the events in front of the reader's eyes.

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The Return of the Dead in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* and *Alias Grace*

BURKHARD NIEDERHOFF

1. Introduction

1972 was Margaret Atwood's *annus mirabilis*. In one and the same year, she published *Surfacing*, a powerful and disturbing novel that has become a classic of twentieth-century fiction, and *Survival*, an engaging study of the characteristic themes of Canadian literature that has established itself as a major critical text on works written north of the 49th parallel. The title of this study points to what, according to Atwood, her compatriots are most likely to write about: surviving the hardship of a barren land and an inhospitable climate, surviving a crisis or a disaster, or surviving, in a psychological or cultural sense, different kinds of victimisation or colonialisation (41).

Whether survival really constitutes the central theme of Canadian literature is a question that need not detain us here. What is more important in the present context is the fact that it plays a prominent part in Atwood's own writings. She readily admits as much in the introduction to *Survival*, in which she states that "several [...] of the patterns I've found myself dealing with here were first brought to my attention by my own work" (20). Thus one of Atwood's central concerns is close to the restoration from death, the theme of the conference at which a preliminary version of this paper was presented.¹ Admittedly, to survive does not literally mean to be restored from death, but it means to be restored from a near-death experience or from a situation which can be metaphorically described as death-in-life.

For debates inspired by this article, please check the Connotations website at
<<http://www.connotations.de/debniederhoff01613.htm>>.

Thirty years after *Survival*, Atwood published another book of popular literary criticism, *Negotiating with the Dead*, in which she moves even closer to the restoration-from-death topic. Commenting on the chapter title that is also the title of the book, she argues:

The title of this chapter is "Negotiating with the Dead," and its hypothesis is that not just some, but *all* writing of the narrative kind, and perhaps all writing, is motivated, deep down, by a fear of and a fascination with mortality—by a desire to make the risky trip to the Underworld, and to bring something or someone back from the dead. (156)

Again, this sweeping generalisation is based just as much on Atwood's own work as on literature in general. A cursory perusal of her writings yields a long list of people returning from the underworld. An early poem from *The Animals in that Country* (1968), "The revenant," describes "the skull's noplacé, where in me / refusing to be buried, cured, / the trite dead walk" (52); in the final poem of *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* (1970), the eponymous heroine returns to twentieth-century Toronto long after her death; in *Surfacing* (1972), the protagonist encounters the ghosts of her parents; *Lady Oracle* (1976) begins with the words, "I planned my death carefully" (7), and is about a woman who stages her own death to cut herself loose from her old life and begin a new one; *Cat's Eye* (1988) features a protagonist who portrays herself as a vampire (233) and interprets Halloween as an event "when the spirits of the dead will come back to the living, dressed as ballerinas and Coke bottles and spacemen and Mickey Mice, and the living will give them candy to keep them from turning vicious" (387); in "Death by Landscape," a story from *Wilderness Tips* (1991), the narrator is troubled by the continuing presence of a childhood friend who disappeared on a canoe trip; in *Alias Grace* (1996), the dead return to the living to haunt or even possess them; in *The Penelopiad* (2004), Penelope talks to us from Hades. Atwood's two most recent books, both published in 2006, also include negotiations with the dead. In "The Entities," one of the short stories in *Moral Disorder*, a landlady relocates the ghost of a recently deceased tenant, who was

also the first wife of her husband; and “Nightingale,” one of the miscellaneous short pieces in *The Tent*, contains a dialogue between the ghost of Procne and Philomela, who may or may not be a ghost herself.

This essay will deal with *Surfacing* and *Alias Grace*, two novels whose representation of the return of the dead is particularly challenging. After a reading of the former I will present a discussion of the latter, in which I will focus on the surprising number of similarities between the two. However, there is also a crucial difference in the way the two novels represent a secret or repressed knowledge that is associated with the return of the dead. The roles that this knowledge plays in *Surfacing* and *Alias Grace* could not be more different, as I will argue in the final part of this paper.

A last introductory point concerns the conference topic, “Restored from Death,” which needs to be emended for the purposes of this essay. When the dead appear to the living, they are obviously restored from death, but often their appearance is just as much about being restored *to* death as *from* it. A case in point is the very first revenant of Western Literature, the spirit of Patroclus, who appears in the 23rd canto of the *Iliad*. He returns to his friend Achilles to ask him for a proper burial:

Sleeping so? Thou hast forgotten me,
 Achilles. Never was I uncared for
 in life but am in death. Accord me burial
 in all haste: let me pass the gates of Death.
 Shades that are images of used-up men
 motion me away, will not receive me
 among their hosts beyond the river. I wander
 about the wide gates and the hall of Death.
 Give me your hand. I sorrow.
 When thou shalt have allotted me my fire
 I will not fare here from the dark again. (398)

In his encounter with Achilles, Patroclus is temporarily restored from death, but what he is negotiating for is a restoration to death. Caught in the no-man’s-land between the dead and the living, he is waiting to

be buried in the proper fashion, which will allow him to pass the gates of the underworld and to find his place in the "hall of Death," never to "fare [...] from the dark again."

Admittedly, Atwood's novels are a far cry from Homer's epics. In the *Iliad*, the ghost is real, not a figment of Achilles's imagination. Furthermore, conducting him to his eternal rest does not pose any knotty psychological problems; it is a matter of performing the traditional burial rites. In Atwood's fiction, the spirits of the departed are much more intricately entangled with the souls of the living to whom they return. Moreover, there are no rites and formulas for dealing with them—to negotiate with the dead means to embark on a perilous journey of (self-)discovery. However, in these negotiations there is, just as in the *Iliad*, a connection between a restoration *from* death and a restoration *to* death. When the negotiations between the living and the dead are successful, both of them can exist more peacefully in their respective worlds.

2. A Reading of *Surfacing*

The narrator-protagonist of *Surfacing* is a Canadian woman whose name is never revealed, an absence that hints at serious problems of identity and of communication.² She illustrates books for a living and shares a flat with her lover Joe, a sculptor and pottery teacher. She is also, or so we are told in the first chapters, recently divorced and the mother of a child, who lives with her former husband. The setting is the wilderness of northern Quebec, where the narrator's family spent their summers when she was a child, leading a rather isolated life on an island in a lake. The plot consists of the narrator's search for her father, who has been living in the family's cabin on the island. When he is reported missing and believed to have drowned, the narrator travels north with Joe and two friends to spend some time in the family's cabin and to look for her father. Unlike everybody else, she is convinced that he is still alive.

On her arrival at the island, the narrator recalls the death of her brother:

The dock slants [...]; it's been repaired so much all the materials are different, but it's the same dock my brother fell off the time he drowned. [...]

My mother [...] ran to the dock, he wasn't there, she went out to the end of it and looked down. My brother was under the water, face upturned, eyes open and unconscious, sinking gently; air was coming out of his mouth.

It was before I was born but I can remember it as clearly as if I saw it, and perhaps I did see it: I believe that an unborn baby has its eyes open and can look out through the walls of the mother's stomach, like a frog in a jar. (26)

A foetus in her amniotic fluid, a being emerging or surfacing into life, looks at a child in another kind of fluid, sinking away from life. This is a pregnant moment, in more than one sense. However, its full significance cannot be discerned at this point; it unfolds in a series of revelations that occur later in the novel. One of these revelations is that the brother did not die:

This was where he drowned, he got saved only by accident; if there had been a wind she wouldn't have heard him. She leaned over and reached down and grabbed him by the hair, hauled him up and poured the water out of him. [...] If it had happened to me I would have felt there was something special about me, to be raised from the dead like that. (68)

Literally speaking, the child is only rescued from the danger of dying, but in terms of the narrative representation he is restored from death; we have been told, in so many words, that he drowned. This is not the only inconsistency in the narrative; it is riddled with distortions and misdirections, especially when it comes to the narrator's memories of her past. All of these distortions are highly significant. When the narrator has a child die only to resurrect him afterwards, this says a lot about her past and about her future, as we learn later on.

A second revelation occurs in the course of the narrator's search for her father. When she realizes that he discovered rock paintings created by First Nations artists, she looks for the paintings herself. At one point, she dives into the lake, believing the paintings to be on the submerged part of a steep rock face. What she discovers in the depths

of the lake, however, is not what she was looking for: "It was there but it wasn't a painting, it wasn't on the rock. It was below me, drifting towards me from the furthest level where there was no life, a dark oval trailing limbs. It was blurred but it had eyes, they were open, it was something I knew about, a dead thing, it was dead" (136). The shape of the "dead thing" is highly ambiguous; it could be the corpse of her drowned father, as George Woodcock surmises (35). But the thoughts of the narrator move in the opposite direction; what comes to her mind is not a missing father but a lost child:

[A]t first I thought it was my drowned brother, hair floating around the face, image I'd kept from before I was born; but it couldn't be him, he had not drowned after all, he was elsewhere. Then I recognized it: it wasn't ever my brother I'd been remembering, that had been a disguise.

I knew when it was, it was in a bottle curled up, staring out at me like a cat pickled; it had huge jelly eyes and fins instead of hands, fish gills, I couldn't let it out, it was dead already, it had drowned in air. It was there when I woke up, suspended in the air above me like a chalice, an evil grail and I thought, Whatever it is, part of myself or a separate creature, I killed it. It wasn't a child but it could have been one, I didn't allow it.

[...] That was wrong, I never saw it. They scraped it into a bucket and threw it wherever they throw them, it was travelling through the sewers by the time I woke, back to the sea, I stretched my hand up to it and it vanished. (137)

The narrator's child does not live with its father; it was aborted. Nor was the father the narrator's husband, as we learn a little later. He was a middle-aged, married man who had an affair with the narrator, a student of his, and persuaded her to have an abortion. This is an anagnorisis for the reader but also for the narrator. She has fabricated a false past to protect herself from the traumatic truth. This pseudo-past is so deeply embedded in the narrator's mind that even here, in the climactic scene of anagnorisis and self-discovery, the truth does not flash upon her in one instant. She recognizes it only gradually, working her way down through a series of memories in which the truth is half veiled and half visible, until she finally arrives at a recollection of the abortion.

This anagnorisis allows the reader to see the full significance of the passage about the drowning of the brother (26), which contains one of the narrator's characteristically distorted memories that both conceal and reveal the truth. What it tells us about the narrator's brother is obviously false, but then it is not really about her brother. It is about her child, whose abortion is hinted at through the combination of a foetus in its mother's womb and of a child drowning. The motif of an animal in a jar, present both in the early passage and in the anagnorisis, evokes the idea of doctors and scientists killing animals to preserve them in alcohol (killed animals such as fish, frogs or herons are repeatedly used as symbols of the aborted child in *Surfacing*). The fact that the foetus and the animal look through their respective containers (the mother's belly and the jar) expresses the narrator's feeling of guilt, an irrational but all too understandable fear that her unborn child was conscious of what she did to it.

The narrator's later memory, in which the drowned brother is resurrected (68), reveals wishful thinking of a retrospective kind; it shows what the narrator would like to have done with her child. But it also proves to be prophetic; it anticipates a later scene in which she has sexual intercourse with Joe to become pregnant:

"I love you," he says into the side of my neck, catechism. Teeth grinding, he's holding back, he wants it to be like the city, baroque scrollwork, intricate as a computer, but I'm impatient, pleasure is redundant, the animals don't have pleasure. I guide him into me, it's the right season, I hurry.

He trembles and then I can feel my lost child surfacing within me, forgiving me, rising from the lake where it has been prisoned for so long. (155-56)

This passage is of particular importance. It contains the title word "surfacing" which, apart from the title itself, is used only at this point,³ where it refers to a restoration from death. The narrator thinks of the conception as a resurrection of the aborted foetus. Later on she similarly thinks about the embryo's growth as a kind of return journey from Hades: "My body also changes, the creature in me, plant-animal, sends out filaments in me; *I ferry it secure between death and life*" (162; my italics). This resurrection can occur only after the narra-

tor has acknowledged the death of the aborted child and her responsibility for it. The ghost of this child, who has led an uncanny and ghoulish life in the narrator's distorted memories, must be laid to rest before it can be reborn. In other words, restoration to death and restoration from death are connected, as in the case of Patroclus. This connection will become even more evident in the subsequent paragraphs, which are about the ghosts of the narrator's parents.

The narrator's sexual intercourse with her lover marks the beginning of a strange ordeal that is like a rite of passage or like a reversion to the state of an animal. The narrator separates herself from her lover and her friends. She leaves the cabin and sleeps in a kind of lair; she sheds her clothes and takes a baptismal bath in the lake. She destroys crockery, books, a samsonite case, and other trappings of civilization. All this time, she becomes increasingly aware of the presence of her parents, who return from the dead to be close to their daughter. The entire ordeal, including the presence of the parental ghosts, is best understood as a response to the insanity of the character's city life. This covert insanity is now transformed into an overt insanity, a cathartic experience that makes it possible for the narrator to overcome her alienation from her child, from her parents, and from herself.

The main reason for the parents' return to their daughter seems to be her need to compensate for the long period of separation and estrangement between them. The narrator's friends have "disowned their parents long ago, the way you are supposed to" (11). It seems that the narrator has similarly disowned her parents; visiting her terminally ill mother in hospital, she tells her that she will not attend her funeral (16). We also hear that her parents did not attend her wedding, learning of it later through a postcard (17), and that they never forgave her for divorcing her husband and leaving her child (23). Of course, these memories are fabrications, but what they say about the estrangement between the narrator and her parents is only too true. She sums up this estrangement between herself and her parents and the need for a reconnection as follows: "I was a coward, I would not let them into my age, my place. Now I must enter theirs"

(171). Just as the narrator remembered and resurrected her lost child, she now remembers and resurrects her parents, who have been similarly lost to her.

Entering the place of her father and mother, however, is not easy. As a result of the estrangement between the narrator and her parents, the relationship between them has ceased to evolve long before their deaths:

They have no right to get old. I envy people whose parents died when they were young, that's easier to remember, they stay unchanged. I was sure mine would anyway, I could leave and return much later and everything would be the same. I thought of them as living in some other time, going about their own concerns closed safe behind a wall as translucent as jello, mammoths frozen in a glacier. All I would have to do was come back when I was ready but I kept putting it off, there would be too many explanations.
(3)

The narrator's relationship with her parents is in a state of arrested development; it was frozen a long time ago. This may also be the reason why she refuses to attend her mother's funeral and why she is so stubbornly convinced that her father is still alive (a conviction that resembles her delusion that she has a child that lives with her divorced husband). If you deny your parents the "right to get old," you are even less prepared to accept their death.

Once the narrator has entered her ordeal and begun to re-establish the relationship with her parents, she must pick it up at the point at which it ceased to develop, when she was still a child or teenager, and she must live through the lost stages of this relationship in a time-lapse fashion. Characteristically, she begins by calling out to her parents, as a lonely and frightened child would do (166). After this, she is still like a child in experiencing them as powerful authorities; they are like nature spirits or gods who provide their daughter with support and guidance, setting the rules for her ordeal: the places she is permitted to be, the food she is allowed to eat. The return of the parents culminates in two separate encounters. If it is true that the daughter has to renew a relationship arrested in the past and to recapture the lost stages of this relationship, then the face-to-face encounters mark

the point at which she comes of age. Here the parents no longer set the rules. They do not talk to or interact with their daughter; instead they perform actions in which they reveal something important and essential about themselves. What their daughter receives in these encounters is not an explicit lesson but an implicit message which she has to decipher on her own.

The narrator discovers her mother feeding jays, with the birds so little afraid of her that "one perches on her wrist, another on her shoulder" (176); this also happened when the mother was alive (101). Given the symbolism of animals in *Surfacing*, in particular their association with children, the feeding of the birds suggests the mother's life-sustaining role. The daughter now wishes to accept this role, after rejecting it when she aborted her child. Throughout the novel she has tried to emulate her mother's feat of making the birds sit on her body, without any success so far (87, 142, 158). But now it seems that she can finally follow in her mother's footsteps. At the end of the encounter she takes the position of the latter, who seems to have turned into one of the jays, peering down at her. This transformation of parent into bird fits in with a reference elsewhere to "countries where an animal is the soul of an ancestor" (122).

The appearance of the father poses greater interpretive problems as it is more complex and more shifting: "How many shapes can he take" (181). Like his wife, he turns into an animal at the end of the encounter; he is transformed into a fish or rather an "antlered fish thing drawn in red on cliffstone, protecting spirit" (181). When the narrator first discovers him, he is looking at the fenced-in garden, evidently realizing the limitations of his rationalist attitude:

He has realized he was an intruder; the cabin, the fences, the fires and paths were violations [...].

I say Father.

He turns towards me and it's not my father. It is what my father saw, the thing you meet when you've stayed here too long alone. (180-81)

As I have noted, the ghost of the father does not give his daughter any explicit lesson; he is, rather, learning his own lesson. She perceives

him in a process of self-discovery and change, which she is, for other reasons and in other ways, even more in need of than he is.

To experience the final stage in her relationship with her parents, the narrator has to acknowledge their “right to get old,” their decline and their death. This is probably the most important stage; the daughter calls her parents back to life primarily to take leave of them. Restoration from death and restoration to death go hand in hand. Thus the return of the parents is reminiscent of the return of Patroclus in the 23rd canto of the *Iliad*; it is about the need for a burial—with the difference that in *Surfacing* this need seems to be felt much more strongly by the living than by the dead.⁴ Even before her ordeal, this need is on the narrator’s mind. She is haunted by the memory of a dead heron that she found hanging from a tree, gratuitously killed by some tourists: “In my head when I closed my eyes the shape of the heron dangled, upside down. I should have buried it” (112). She also regrets her decision not to attend her mother’s funeral—to be more precise, she wishes she had given her a more appropriate burial:

The reason they invented coffins, to lock the dead in, preserve them, they put makeup on them; they didn’t want them spreading or changing into anything else. The stone with the name and the date was on them to weight them down. She would have hated it, that box, she would have tried to get out; I ought to have stolen her out of that room and brought her here and let her go away by herself into the forest, she would have died anyway but quicker, lucidly, not in that glass case. (144)

A little later, she weeps, for the first time, in a fit of rage rather than of sadness, and she accuses her parents of leaving her behind and neglecting her (166). This rage is part of the mourning that the narrator has suppressed so far.

Another reason why the narrator has to find a way of resurrecting and burying her parents is a religious need that Atwood also posits in an interview given shortly after the publication of *Surfacing*:

Everybody has gods or a god, and it’s what you pay attention to or what you worship. And they can be imported ones or they can be intrinsic ones, indigenous ones, and what we tend to have done in this country is to use im-

ported gods like imported everything else. [...] Christianity in this country is an imported religion. [...] I think that the authentic religion that was here has been destroyed; you have to discover it in some other way. (Gibson 30-31)

The need for religion that Atwood speaks about in this passage is also evident in *Surfacing* in an exchange between the narrator and her mother. After hearing how her brother fell off the dock and was rescued by her mother in the nick of time, she wants to find out what happens to people after they die:

I asked our mother where he would have gone if she hadn't saved him. She said she didn't know. My father explained everything but my mother never did, which only convinced me that she had the answers but wouldn't tell. "Would he be in the graveyard?" I said. [...]

"Nobody knows," she said. She was making a pie crust and she gave me a piece of the dough to distract me. My father would have said Yes; he said you died when your brain died. I wonder if he still believes that. (68-69)

Like Atwood herself, the parents have rejected the orthodox Christian answers, but they do not offer new ones that would satisfy their child's need for explanations. Nor do they satisfy the adult narrator. The sentence, "I wonder if he still believes that," expresses her doubts about her father's answer not only as to its explicit content, but also with respect to the implied assumption that he is still around, believing or not believing in the views that he held when alive. Elsewhere the narrator makes a similar comment, which also shows that her father's attitude to religion left his daughter unsatisfied. Ironically, the man who does not believe in gods is turned into a god himself:

He said Jesus was a historical figure and God was a superstition, and a superstition was a thing that didn't exist. If you tell your children God doesn't exist they will be forced to believe you are the god, but what happens when they find out you are human after all, you have to grow old and die? (98)

The narrator's parents have to undergo two basic transformations. First, they have to become gods, giving their daughter guidance, power, and the kind of religious experience that Atwood envisions in the interview, i.e. a religious experience that is an authentic reflection

of one's environment. But then they have to turn human, thus enabling their daughter to witness their decline and to accept their death—in other words, to mourn and to bury them.

All of these transformations have indeed occurred by the end of the narrator's ordeal as is shown in the following passage, which describes the departure of the parents:

During the night I have a dream about them, the way they were when they were alive and becoming older; they are in a boat, the green canoe, heading out of the bay.

When I wake in the morning I know they have gone finally, back into the earth, the air, the water, wherever they were when I summoned them. The rules are over. [...]

No gods to help me now, they're questionable once more, theoretical as Jesus. They've receded, back to the past, inside the skull, is it the same place. They'll never appear to me again [...]

No total salvation, resurrection, Our father, Our mother, I pray, Reach down for me, but it won't work: they dwindle, grow, become what they were, human. Something I never gave them credit for. (182-84)

The narrator's relationship with her parents, which was arrested in the past, has now evolved and caught up with the present—just as her relationship with her unborn child has. She had to accept the death of this child before she could resurrect it, and she had to resurrect her parents before she could accept their death.

The narrator's realization that her parents will no longer haunt her signals a change to a more ordinary frame of mind. She re-enters the cabin to eat food from a can and she puts on her clothes. She also realizes that she will go back to the city. This return to common sense raises the question whether the ghosts have an objective existence, or whether they only appear in their daughter's mind. In the interview with Graeme Gibson, Atwood states her preference for the "Henry James kind of [ghost story], in which the ghost that one sees is in fact a fragment of one's own self which has split off" (Gibson 29). It is certainly possible to explain the ghosts in *Surfacing* along these lines.⁵ During the encounters with their daughter, they are doing precisely, as we have seen, what she would like or will have to do herself. When the narrator walks to the place where she saw her father's ghost, she

realizes that the footprints left behind by him are in fact her own (181). After the end of her ordeal, she thinks that her parents have "receded, back to the past, inside the skull" (183). However, despite all of this evidence, it would be reductive to say that the ghosts are merely figments of the narrator's diseased imagination. It is one of Atwood's achievements in *Surfacing* that her storytelling does not privilege any particular frame of mind. She skilfully modulates from the stunted sensibility and distorted memory of the first chapters to the magical or mythical imagination of the ordeal and finally to a mood of clarity and common sense, rendering each of these phases with equal persuasiveness. This means that throughout the ordeal the ghosts are as fully alive and present to the narrator and the reader as to anyone who has a mythical world view and believes in the spiritual presence of his or her ancestors.

In addition to the narrator's child and her parents, there is another character who returns from death. This is the narrator herself, by far the most frightening ghost in *Surfacing*, an example of death in life if ever there was one. Before the changes brought about by her ordeal, she has lost many of the gifts that define a full human life. She does not dream (37); nor does she weep (166). She is incapable of loving (36, 156), claiming that this is due to her divorce, which was like an amputation (36)—of course, she was not divorced in the literal sense, but, like other distorted memories, this is metaphorically true. Her feelings are either missing (22, 99) or strangely disconnected from events and experiences (24). When Joe shows his suffering in one of the frustrating exchanges about their relationship, her response speaks volumes about her withered emotional life: "His face contorted, it was pain: *I envied him*" (101; my italics). One of her friends describes the narrator as "inhuman" (148), and the narrator herself suspects that she might no longer be truly alive. Turning the pages of the family photo album, she tries to find the point at which she died, and she concludes that she is like a head without a body (101-02).

The anagnorisis and the ensuing ordeal restore the narrator from her death in life. After diving at the rock face, she regains her capacity

to feel: "feeling was beginning to seep back into me, I tingled like a foot that's been asleep" (140). She also weeps (166), dreams (182) and even talks about her love for Joe (186). Where all of this will lead, to motherhood and a renewed relationship with Joe (whom earlier she resolved to leave) or to pain and failure, is not clear. The ending, like many another ending in Atwood, remains open. But some sort of change, some sort of movement from death to life, has certainly occurred. This is also suggested by a passage in which the narrator comments on the news that her father's corpse has been found. Whereas her friends think she should feel grief and misery, she is almost elated: "They're avoiding me, they find me inappropriate; they think I should be filled with death, I should be in mourning. But nothing has died, everything is alive, everything is waiting to become alive" (153). These words refer to the child to be conceived, to the parents' return from the underworld, and most of all to the narrator's own restoration from death.

3. A Reading of *Alias Grace*

Alias Grace, published in 1996, is a historical novel based on one of the famous murder cases of nineteenth-century Canada. In the summer of 1843, Thomas Kinnear, a gentleman farmer, and Nancy Montgomery, who was both his housekeeper and his mistress, were murdered in a small town near Toronto. Kinnear had two other servants, James McDermott and Grace Marks, who were charged with the murders and found guilty. McDermott went to the gallows, while Grace Marks's death sentence was commuted to life imprisonment. It has always remained a moot question if or to what extent Grace Marks was involved in the murders. In McDermott's eyes, she was the chief culprit: she had promised to sleep with him if he killed the housekeeper, and she had even helped to strangle her. Grace's motive, according to McDermott, was jealousy. She envied the housekeeper for the privileges which she enjoyed as Kinnear's mistress.⁶

Despite the historical gap between the settings of the two novels, *Alias Grace* resembles *Surfacing* in a surprising number of ways. The narrative structure of the two works, for instance, is highly similar. Both are detective novels that contain a major anagnorisis scene towards the end. In *Surfacing*, the initial mystery or question is what happened to the father, and the narrator herself plays the part of the detective. In *Alias Grace*, we want to find out whether Grace was involved in the murders; the part of the detective is played by Simon Jordan, a young doctor and a specialist on amnesia, who investigates Grace's case. The anagnorisis in the earlier novel is the narrator's regaining of her true memories when she sees the ambiguous corpse-or foetus-like shape in the water. The corresponding anagnorisis in the later novel occurs when Grace is hypnotised, with rather surprising results, which will be discussed below.

The two novels are also similar in that the protagonist is heavily traumatised by experiencing (*Surfacing*) or witnessing (*Alias Grace*) an abortion. When Grace is working for a wealthy family in Toronto, she becomes very close to a fellow servant, Mary Whitney. Mary has an affair with one of her employer's sons, who makes the usual promises while enjoying her favours. On Mary's becoming pregnant, however, he pays her off and puts an end to the relationship. Faced with the prospect of losing her job and ending up as a prostitute, Mary has an abortion and bleeds to death in the bed she shares with Grace, an event that Grace sums up in the words, "And so the happiest time of my life was over and gone" (180). While playing a pivotal role in the novel, the seduction of Mary is only one instance of a more general pattern of sexual exploitation. As a young and attractive servant and as a prisoner later on, Grace is regarded as fair game by employers, strangers and prison guards. She is subjected to an endless round of innuendo and harassment throughout the novel. It also seems that Grace was abused by her own father; this is never explicitly referred to, but indicated by various hints and clues.⁷ Another traumatic event, which is not itself a form a sexual exploitation but closely connected to it, is the death of Grace's mother. This occurs in the crowded hold of a

ship in which emigrants are ferried across the Atlantic like cattle. Grace's father, who has frequently beaten his wife and has driven his family into poverty, is at least partially responsible for this death, and entirely accountable for its squalid circumstances.

Grace also resembles the protagonist of *Surfacing* in that her mind, in particular her memory, is profoundly affected by the traumatic events she has experienced. While the narrator of *Surfacing* fabricates a false past to protect herself against the real one, Grace's response to trauma is amnesia. Instead of false recollections, she has none at all when it comes to certain events in her life, including the abuse by her father or some crucial hours on the days of the murders. In fact, she is a case of multiple personality disorder, having developed a second consciousness, a so-called alter, with a different character and a separate memory, which is not accessible to Grace herself. This alter is first revealed in the anagnorisis of the hypnosis scene when it talks through Grace's mouth while she herself is fast asleep. The presence of the alter inside Grace also accords with the intimations of child abuse, which is believed to be the most common cause of multiple personality disorder,⁸ and it explains her involvement in the murders. The Grace Marks that we witness throughout the novel is no angel, but given the hardship, the brutality and the losses she has experienced, she comes across as a remarkably honest, sane and considerate human being—the last person we would suspect of the murders of which she has been convicted. However, the popular theory of her involvement in these murders proves to be roughly true, with the qualification that it is the alter, who, unbeknownst to Grace, incites McDermott to kill the housekeeper and helps to strangle her.

While the present reading takes the hypnosis scene at face value, other readings assume that it is—or might be—an act, and that the solution suggested by the scene, i.e. the existence of an alter, amounts to nothing more than a rather dubious hypothesis.⁹ However, it is highly unlikely that Grace is putting on a performance. Her behaviour during the scene is not at all in her interest. The personality talking from her mouth insults the committee lobbying for Grace to be par-

done, and it more or less admits to taking part in the strangling of Nancy. Would a planned performance not be a little less self-damaging? The disagreement about the hypnosis scene is related to a more general disagreement. The critics who suspect Grace of putting on an act tend to read *Alias Grace* as historiographic metafiction of a highly sceptical kind; in their view, it is a novel that offers many different versions of the past without privileging any one of them.¹⁰ The focus of these readings is epistemological; they argue that *Alias Grace* is about the impossibility of knowing the truth. The focus of the present reading is pragmatic; in my view, the novel is about the effects that knowing or not knowing the truth has on people's lives (as will be shown in the fourth and final part of this essay).

The traumatic events experienced by Grace give birth to ghosts who return from the dead to visit her, which creates a further parallel to *Surfacing*. In her waking life as well as in her dreams, Grace is haunted by a vision of the dying Nancy, a vision that is presented in the very first chapter, as a kind of epigraph to the novel (5-6). The memory of Grace's mother is similarly disquieting and uncanny. After her mother's death, a fellow passenger by the name of Mrs. Phelan makes a remark that sticks in Grace's mind. "Mrs. Phelan also said that we had not opened the window to let out the soul, as was the custom; but perhaps it would not be counted against my poor mother, as there were no windows in the bottom of the ship and therefore none to be opened" (120). This statement induces Grace to believe that the ghost of her mother is trapped in the hold of the ship, travelling back and forth across the Atlantic without any possibility of escape (122). After listening to Grace's narrative of her mother's death, the doctor has a nightmare in which he experiences "[h]is father, in the sinuous process of coming back to life" (140). On a more humorous note, there is also, at the house of the prison governor, "on Thursdays the Spiritualist Circle, for tea and conversing with the dead, which is a comfort to the Governor's wife because of her departed infant son" (22). The most important person to return from the dead is the woman who talks through Grace's mouth when she is hypnotised. This being

claims to be her friend Mary, the fellow servant who died after the abortion.

Instead of analysing this “Mary” in the language of psychology, using such nineteenth-century terms as *double consciousness* or such twentieth-century ones as *multiple personality disorder* and *alter*, one might also consider “Mary” a ghost that returns from the dead to possess the body of her friend. The idea of possession is suggested by the events immediately after Mary’s death when Grace hears her friend’s voice saying, “*Let me in*” (178). Remembering the death of her mother and the remark made by the fellow passenger, Grace believes that she must have misheard the words, *Let me out*; therefore she hastily opens a window to allow Mary’s soul to escape. But it seems that the words were indeed, *Let me in*, and that her friend’s spirit has entered her body. This is also indicated by a dream that Grace has on the eve of the murders. In this dream, Mary appears to her, holding a glass with a firefly in it:

“[T]hen she took her hand from the top of the glass, and the firefly came out and darted about the room; and I knew that this was her soul, and it was trying to find its way out, but the window was shut; and then I could not see where it was gone. Then I woke up, with the tears of sadness running down my face, because Mary was lost to me once more.” (312-13)

The reason why Grace cannot discover where the firefly or soul has gone is that it has sought refuge inside her.

The difference between reading *Alias Grace* as a psychological study of multiple personality disorder or as a Gothic fiction about the possession by a ghost¹¹ does not greatly matter in the present context as both imply a restoration from death. If Mary’s soul enters Grace’s body after her demise, we are dealing with a clear-cut example of this theme. If the person inside Grace is an alter modelled on Mary, the latter is still restored from death, albeit in a more tenuous and indirect fashion. What is particularly interesting in each case is the way in which the person inside Grace affects her life and her well-being. Here, again, I discern a similarity with *Surfacing*. In this novel, the parents’ return from death may be uncanny and bewildering, but it is

ultimately helpful and cathartic, enabling their daughter to overcome her inertia and alienation. In *Alias Grace*, the spirit of Mary also supports Grace. We should not see the ghostly presence inside Grace in exclusively negative terms: as a demon to be exorcised, a disorder to be cured. We should also see it as a survival strategy. The person talking through Grace's mouth during the hypnosis scene quite literally defends and protects Grace when she tells the audience that Grace is not guilty of the murders because she knew nothing about them (402). This person also enables Grace to insulate her mind against the memory of traumatic experiences, and provides her with an outlet for her feelings of jealousy and rage, primarily against Nancy, that Grace more or less represses in her own person. Moreover, the Mary inside Grace turns the tables on the male victimizers with the help of her host's body. In the hypnosis scene, she describes how she used her sexuality to wield power over the men around her:

"I would meet him [McDermott] outside, in the yard, in my nightdress, in the moonlight. I'd press up against him, I'd let him kiss me, and touch me as well [...]. But that was all, Doctor. That was all I'd let him do. I had him on a string, and Mr. Kinnear as well. I had the two of them dancing to my tune!" (400)

If Grace's accommodation of the Mary inside her is a survival strategy, a way of coping with trauma and exploitation, it is, admittedly, a rather desperate and also an unconscious one. Grace can maintain her own sanity and identity only at the cost of splitting in two, of relegating some of her memories and actions to a second person, who turns out to be a murderer. This person, intruding ghost or self-created alter, is "alias Grace"; she is the same woman as Grace Marks in the sense that she shares some of the experiences and motives of the latter, and she is a different person in the sense that Grace Marks is not aware of her. I will return to this crucial point, which distinguishes *Alias Grace* from *Surfacing*, in the final part of this essay.

The various ghosts that haunt or possess the living in *Alias Grace* represent only one version of the restoration-from-death theme. A more optimistic version of this theme is the return to a lost paradise.

This is suggested by Grace's name, which, although historically given, is turned into a telling one by Atwood. At one point, Grace speculates that her name was inspired by the hymn, "Amazing Grace" (379), and the ballad in chapter 2, which tells Grace's story from a popular and sensational point of view, concludes with the idea of Grace's salvation:

And she will be as white as snow,
And into Heaven will pass,
And she will dwell in Paradise,
In Paradise at last. (15)

The final passage of the book echoes these ideas in a more indirect and symbolic fashion. For the first time in her life, Grace is making a quilt for herself, the pattern being "The Tree of Paradise." In this quilt, she intends to include three patches from garments worn by Nancy, Mary and herself respectively:

I will embroider around each one of them with red featherstitching, to
blend them in as a part of the pattern.
And so we will all be together. (460)

The patchwork structure of the quilt recalls the co-existence of different personalities in Grace. But it also envisions a change for the better, a reconciliation of sorts. The blending of the three pieces of cloth into a work of art, and the companionship of the three women, who will "all be together" rather than at enmity with each other, is of a more peaceful nature, more fully and truly a restoration from death than the uncanny and disturbing way in which Grace's mind has been haunted and possessed by the ghosts of Nancy and Mary throughout the novel.

4. The Different Roles of Knowledge in the Two Novels

In *Alias Grace*, Reverend Verringer, the leader of the group that lobbies for Grace to be pardoned, refers to a well-known verse from the Gospel of John: "And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make

you free" (John 8:32; *Alias Grace* 80). While drawing his quotation from the Bible, as one might expect a clergyman to do, Verringer here articulates a view that was also expressed, in more secular terms, by the writers of the Enlightenment. "*Sapere aude*," writes Immanuel Kant in his famous essay, "Was ist Aufklärung?"¹² If one dares to know the truth about the world and oneself, one will ultimately enjoy a better life. The belief in the beneficial results of true knowledge has been an ingredient in many post-Enlightenment philosophies and theories, for instance in psychoanalysis. If a patient wishes to be cured, she has to face up to the truth about herself, in particular to the traumatic elements of this truth. The layers of deceit and disguise that censorship and repression have left in her mind have to be stripped away; what lies hidden deep down in the unconscious has to be raised to the light of the conscious. Although this process may seem perilous and painful in the short term and is resisted by powerful forces in the psyche of the patient, it is salutary in the long run. "And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you healthy," is the promise of psychoanalysis.¹³

In her early works, Atwood fully endorses the principle of *sapere aude*, echoing the revolutionary and optimistic *Zeitgeist* of the late 60s and early 70s, which, in its various political philosophies aiming at liberation and emancipation, was affiliated with the Enlightenment. In *Survival*, Atwood writes, "[A]cknowledging the truth of your situation is always preferable to concealing it" (75). This view is also implicit in the way she presents her well-known "victim positions," i.e. the attitudes that one can take to being a victim:

Position One: To deny the fact that you are a victim.

[...]

Position Two:

To acknowledge the fact that you are a victim, but to explain this as an act of Fate, the Will of God, the dictates of Biology [...] or any other large general powerful idea.

[...]

Position Three:

To acknowledge the fact that you are a victim but to refuse to accept the assumption that the role is inevitable. (46-48)

There is a clear ranking in terms of value: position three is better than two, two better than one. What distinguishes the more advanced positions is a greater awareness of the truth. Position one consists in a complete refusal to see things as they are; position two reaches partial awareness; position three amounts to complete awareness. It entails a recognition of one's victim status and a realistic appraisal of the causes of this status. The assumption is, of course, that this complete knowledge provides a starting point for working one's way out of the victim position.

Atwood's views on knowledge are relevant in the present context because literary ghosts are often associated with dangerous and disturbing knowledge about the past. Hamlet's father, for instance, tells his son about the fratricide that caused his death. The ghost of Banquo, who appears to Macbeth, embodies the latter's guilt, i.e. his disquieting knowledge of his responsibility for the murder of Banquo. In Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, the ghost of Alfonso reminds Manfred not of the latter's own crimes but of those committed by his ancestor. As these examples show, the dangerous knowledge communicated or embodied by the ghost is usually secret; in more recent works such as *Surfacing* and *Alias Grace* it may even be repressed and unconscious, thus rendering the appearance of the ghost a return of the repressed.

To deal with a ghost according to the principles of the Enlightenment requires a full recovery of the secret or repressed knowledge; the ghost can only be laid to rest if the living explore their biographies and their souls, facing up to what they have not been able to acknowledge previously. In *Surfacing*, published in the same year as *Survival* (1972), Atwood has the narrator deal with the ghosts of her past in exactly this way. The novel is based on the firm belief that "acknowledging the truth of your situation is always preferable to concealing it." Moreover, in its general outlines the narrator's development resembles a psychoanalytic cure. She has lost her mental equilibrium because she has experienced a traumatic event, of which she is not aware, however, having banned the direct recollection of it to her

unconscious. Thus she has to work her way down through the disguises and distortions in her mind until she arrives at the true memory, a process that is certainly bewildering and distressing in the short term but may prove to be salutary in the long run. Only after recovering her past, after facing up to the truth about herself, does she have a chance to heal. This belief in the beneficial effects of true knowledge also characterizes the following passage, in which the narrator comments on the place where she experienced her anagnorisis:

The map crosses and the drawings made sense now: at the beginning he [the narrator's father] must have been only locating the rock paintings, deducing them, tracing and photographing them, a retirement hobby; but then he found out about them. The Indians did not own salvation but they had once known where it lived and their signs marked the sacred places, the places where you could learn the truth. (139)

The sacred power of the place, the "salvation" that it offers, is linked quite explicitly to "learn[ing] the truth."¹⁴

Some of the characters in *Alias Grace* argue along similar lines as the narrator of *Surfacing*. As we have seen, Reverend Verringer quotes the Gospel of John to the effect that the truth will make us free. In his lecture, Simon alludes to the Enlightenment notion of the beneficial progress of science: "The nineteenth century, he concluded, would be to the study of Mind what the eighteenth had been to the study of Matter—an Age of Enlightenment. He was proud to be part of such a major advance in knowledge, if only in a very small and humble way" (300). Early on in the novel, Grace similarly thinks that "science is making such progress, and what with modern inventions and the Crystal Palace and world knowledge assembled, who knows where we will all be in a hundred years" (27). After telling Simon what little she knows of the murders, she concludes, "'It would be a great relief to me, to know the whole truth at last'" (320).

However, Grace also has her sceptical moods, in which the prospect of knowing the whole truth does not appeal to her. When she learns that a doctor will hypnotise her to restore her memory, she is less than enthusiastic about it: "I told [the Governor's wife] I was not at all sure

I wanted to have it back" (382). Later on, she similarly states that she would never consult a medium to get in touch with the dead. "I don't go in for any of that, as you never know what might come out of it" (455). In the final chapter, she mentions that she might be pregnant (another similarity with the narrator of *Surfacing*) or that she might be dying of cancer like her mother. "It is strange to know you carry within yourself either a life or a death, but not to know which one. Though all could be resolved by consulting a doctor, I am most reluctant to take such a step; so I suppose time alone must tell" (459). Grace's preference for not knowing is all the more interesting as the enigmatic and ambiguous growth resembles the ghostly presence inside her, of whose very existence she is unaware. Other characters also make a case for ignorance. Thus a fellow passenger on the coach from Toronto to Richmond Hill advises Grace not to look back: "Never look behind you, said the dealer in farm implements. [...] Because the past is the past, he said, and regret is vain, let bygones be bygones. You know what became of Lot's wife, he went on. Turned to a pillar of salt she was" (204). Simon, of course, is generally in favour of restoring memory and acquiring knowledge. In a letter to a friend he writes about his research on Grace, "*Not to know* [...] is as bad as being haunted" (424). But occasionally he also realizes the blessings of ignorance. When he fantasizes about being married to Grace, he asks himself if he would really appreciate a full disclosure of her relationship with McDermott: "But what if, some evening in the lamplit parlour, she were to reveal more than he would care to know?" (388).

A powerful argument against knowledge is implied in the many references to the Fall. At their first meeting, Simon presents Grace with an apple, asking her what it makes her think of. On the one hand, this is the first of his many association exercises meant to awaken Grace's dormant memory. On the other hand, it is an allusion to the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden. Simon—who in the same scene also quotes a speech by the devil from the Book of Job (38)—is cast in the role of a tempter who offers dangerous knowledge.¹⁵ In a similar vein, the pedlar Jeremiah tells Grace, "You are one of us" (155;

see Gen. 3:22), presumably implying that she has a special telepathic gift. Later he suggests to her that she join him, earning a living as a travelling clairvoyant and communicating hidden knowledge to their clients (268). Grace, however, cannot make up her mind to accompany him right away. Her response to Simon's offer of the apple is equally hesitant. Instead of eating the apple and agreeing to talk to him, she answers his offer with an ambiguous gesture:

He says, I give you my word that as long as you continue to talk with me, and do not lose control of yourself and become violent, you shall remain as you were. I have the Governor's promise.

I look at him. I look away. I look at him again. I hold the apple in my two hands. He waits.

Finally I lift the apple up and press it to my forehead. (42)

Grace's gesture shows that this apple is about the head and about knowledge. Moreover it shows Grace's intense interest in this knowledge but also her reluctance to allow it into her mind.

What does all of this mean for Grace's knowledge of the murders? As I have argued above, Grace herself has no knowledge of them, just as she has no knowledge of the time after Mary's death or of the abuse by her own father. It is only as Mary Whitney, as a separate person with a distinct consciousness and a distinct memory, that she knows about them. Unlike the narrator of *Surfacing*, she is not the driving force behind the anagnorisis in her novel; she is not even present in the anagnorisis scene of *Alias Grace*. While another person is talking through her mouth, revealing the strange truth to Simon and others, Grace herself is far away in a dream, floating in the sea with her mother (403). Grace is unaware of the Mary Whitney inside her, and it is imperative that she, and others, remain so. If the discoveries of the hypnosis scene were generally known, Grace would never be pardoned (407), and if she herself were to find out, her mental balance would be in jeopardy. This is why, despite her evident sympathy for Simon and her enjoyment of their talks, she must resist his attempts to restore her memory:

Looked at objectively, what's been going on between them, despite her evident anxiety over the murders and her surface compliance, has been a contest of wills. She hasn't refused to talk—far from it. She's told him a great deal; but she's told him only what she's chosen to tell. What he wants is what she refuses to tell; what she chooses perhaps not even to know. Knowledge of guilt, or else of innocence: either could be concealed. But he'll pry it out of her yet. He's got the hook in her mouth, but can he pull her out? Up, out of the abyss, up to the light. Out of the deep blue sea.

He wonders why he's thinking in such drastic terms. He means her well, he tells himself. He thinks of it as a rescue, surely he does.

But does she? If she has anything to hide, she may want to stay in the water, in the dark, in her element. She may be afraid she won't be able to breathe, otherwise. (322)

While *Surfacing* is about the necessity of surfacing, of emerging into the full light of knowledge, Grace must remain below the surface to survive. Ignorance means life to her.

This need for ignorance is one of the reasons why psychoanalysis, which provides a general model for interpreting the development of the narrator in *Surfacing*, is not an adequate model for understanding *Alias Grace*. Simon is in many ways like Freud: a doctor of the mind rather than the body who talks to his patient on a regular basis, takes an interest in her dreams and associations, and aims to unearth the traumatic memories buried in her unconscious. Nor is it a coincidence that the maid working at his lodging, Dora, shares her name with the protagonist of Freud's most famous case study.¹⁶ Despite these allusions, *Alias Grace* is not a psychoanalytic novel but rather an attack on psychoanalysis. The tables are turned on the doctor. Instead of reading his patient's mind, he finds her reading his mind in the hypnosis scene (400). And rather than restoring her memory, he loses his own after receiving a head injury in the American Civil War (430).¹⁷ It is not Simon's talking cure that leads to the discovery of the Mary inside Grace, but the hypnosis initiated by Jeremiah. There are several reasons for the breakdown of the psychoanalytic project, including a feminist critique of the masculine bias of this project,¹⁸ but the most fundamental of these reasons seems to be that one of the major tenets of psychoanalysis, the belief in the curative powers of enhanced self-knowledge, does not apply in *Alias Grace*.

To sum up, Atwood is still very much concerned with survival and with victimisation in *Alias Grace*, just as in *Surfacing* and *Survival*. Grace is a survivor in many senses of the word, including the most literal one; she narrowly escapes being hanged. She is also a woman who attempts to abandon her role as victim and succeeds in doing so, to a limited extent at least, after a long and laborious struggle. But these concerns are divorced from the belief in the liberating power of true knowledge, from the Enlightenment legacy that is still apparent in her early works. The struggle for survival and against victimisation no longer involves the recognition of truth. On the contrary, it is not knowing the truth that makes Grace free.

Ruhr-Universität Bochum

NOTES

¹I should like to thank Matthias Bauer and Angelika Zirker for organising this conference, and the participants for their responses to my talk. Thanks are also due to Pola Rudnik, Sven Wagner, Frank Kearful, Irena Struck, Alexa Keuneke and the *Connotations* readers for their comments on earlier drafts of this essay.

²Perhaps we are also supposed to think of Odysseus, who outwits the cyclops Polyphemus by telling him that his name is "Nobody." There is a further echo of the Polyphemus episode when the narrator escapes from her friends after destroying their film. Her lover Joe, who is like Polyphemus in that he has wielded the one-eyed camera, pursues her: "Joe [...] yells my name, furiously: *if he had a rock he would throw it*" (161; my italics). The narrator is also similar to Odysseus in that her story is about the difficult return to an island and to one's family after a long period of separation and alienation.

³The word *surface* is used elsewhere, both as verb (e.g. 37) and noun (e.g. 175). The concept of surfacing occurs as well, most importantly in the diving episode when the narrator emerges from the water after seeing the ambiguous shape (136). But the form *surfacing* is, to the best of my knowledge, only used in this passage.

⁴See also Janice Fiamengo, who describes the narrator's relationship with her parents as follows: "Conjuring up their ghosts helps her to accept their deaths and to appreciate that in life they were always and only human, rather than the inaccessible gods she imagined" (146). The subtitle of Fiamengo's essay is "Margaret Atwood's Texts of Mourning"; she discusses a number of novels, short

stories and poems as essentially elegiac works concerned with the memory of parents “shadowed by death” (148). It is interesting to see that Atwood’s most recent short story cycle, *Moral Disorder*, contains two additional texts of this kind, “The Labrador Fiasco” (about the protagonist’s father) and “The Boys at the Lab” (about the protagonist’s mother).

⁵As Keith Garebian does in his essay: “*Surfacing* reveals cumulatively that its ghosts are essentially projections of the protagonist’s troubled mind” (2).

⁶This is the version presented by Susanna Moodie in *Life in the Clearings* (152-71). Moodie’s account is cast in the form of a highly vivid first-person narrative, a confession made by McDermott on the eve of his execution. For Atwood’s review of the historical evidence, in particular of Moodie’s account, see her afterword to the novel and “In Search of *Alias Grace*” (1512-13). An independent assessment of the historical sources on the case of Grace Marks is given by Judith Knelman.

⁷One of these is an erotic dream in which Grace wonders whether the man embracing her from behind is Jeremiah the pedlar, McDermott, or Mr. Kinnear: “And then I felt it was not any of these three, but another man, someone I knew well and had long been familiar with, even as long ago as my childhood, but had since forgotten” (280).

⁸For a critical discussion of multiple personality disorder and its alleged cause, child abuse, see Ian Hacking’s *Rewriting the Soul*; this study is cited by Atwood in the “Acknowledgments” at the end of the novel. A less critical discussion of multiple personality disorder, also cited in the “Acknowledgments,” is given by Adam Crabtree. For a well-informed reading of *Alias Grace* in the light of contemporary discussions of multiple personality disorder and trauma therapy, see Darroch.

⁹See, for instance, Zimmermann 418, Rogerson 14, Rowland 251 and Bölling 118.

¹⁰See the studies mentioned in the preceding note as well as Michael and Szalay. A critique of the epistemological approach to *Alias Grace* is given by Niederhoff.

¹¹See the inconclusive discussion of these alternatives in ch. 49, in which Simon, Jeremiah and Reverend Verringer review what they have just witnessed in the hypnosis session (405-07). Stephanie Lovelady also thinks that “‘Mary’ works as easily as a ghost as an alternate personality” (55-56); this view is supported by Rosario Arias Doblas (96).

¹²The Latin quotation is from Horace, *Epistles* 1.2.40. Admittedly, Kant’s focus is more on the activity of thinking for oneself than on the knowledge of truth as the result of this activity. But he, too, is convinced that the effect of the activity will be beneficial; he compares it to attaining one’s majority in his famous definition of enlightenment as “*Ausgang des Menschen aus seiner selbst verschuldeten Unmündigkeit*” (55). See also Denis Diderot, who, in the entry on *encyclopédie* in the *Encyclopédie*, argues that knowledge leads to virtue and happiness: “En effet, le but d’une *Encyclopédie* est de rassembler les connaissances éparses sur la surface de la terre [...] afin que les travaux des siècles passés n’aient pas été des travaux inutiles

pour les siècles qui succéderont; que nos neveux, devenant plus instruits, deviennent en même temps plus vertueux et plus heureux" (415).

¹³In *Abriß der Psychoanalyse*, Sigmund Freud writes about the relationship between analyst and patient, "Unser Wissen soll sein Unwissen gutmachen, soll seinem Ich die Herrschaft über verlorene Bezirke des Seelenlebens wiedergeben" (*Werke* 17: 98). Later in the same work, he puts it even more succinctly, "Unser Weg, das geschwächte Ich zu stärken, geht von der Erweiterung seiner Selbsterkenntnis aus" (*Werke* 17: 103). See also Freud's often-quoted dictum, "Wo Es war, soll Ich werden" (*Studienausgabe* 1: 516), in his lectures on psychoanalysis.

¹⁴In the introduction to her book, *Reading the Gothic in Margaret Atwood's Novels*, Colette Tennant writes, "Atwood's didacticism leads her readers to a kind of emancipation through informed self-knowledge" (2). While this claim is certainly justified as far as *Surfacing* and *Survival* are concerned, it does not hold true for *Alias Grace*, as I will argue below. Tennant herself acknowledges as much when she writes, "It is difficult to fit *Alias Grace* neatly into this chapter since the entire novel is in some ways about how slippery memory is" (56).

¹⁵Ryan Miller reads *Alias Grace* in the light of Gnosticism, in which the story of the Fall is interpreted in an unorthodox manner: God is an evil patriarch jealously insisting on his privileges, and the serpent is a justified rebel offering valuable knowledge to Adam and Eve. While I find Miller's reading interesting and original, I do not consider the parallels with Gnosticism sufficiently strong to be persuaded by his argument.

¹⁶See *Bruchstück einer Hysterie-Analyse* (*Studienausgabe* 6: 83-186).

¹⁷For various ways in which Grace turns the tables on Simon, see Morra (126-28), Niederhoff (76-80), Staels (432-36), and Zimmermann (390-400 and 411-12).

¹⁸This feminist critique of psychoanalysis in *Alias Grace* is thoroughly explored by Heidi Darroch: the novel challenges the assumption of the intellectual superiority of the male therapist over the female patient; it is also critical of the blindness of the male therapist to child abuse, which Freud at one point considered a cause of neuroses before he later rejected this view. It is also interesting that, in the "Acknowledgments," Atwood cites Adam Crabtree's *From Mesmer to Freud: Magnetic Sleep and the Roots of Psychological Healing*; this is a history of what Crabtree calls the "alternate-consciousness paradigm," a tradition in psychology and psychotherapy that started with Mesmer's animal magnetism, was temporarily eclipsed by Freudian psychoanalysis and re-emerged in the theory of multiple personality disorder. In focusing on child abuse, multiple personality disorder and alternate states of consciousness and memory inhabiting one body, Atwood privileges precisely the rival traditions to Freudian psychoanalysis.

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“For/From Lew”: The Ghost Visitations of Lew Welch and the Art of Zen Failure A Dialogue for Two Voices*

JOHN WHALEN-BRIDGE

[The following is a transcription of comments made by two academics in the lobby of a post-9/11 airport, where they sat waiting as their computers were searched. Suspicions were aroused when these two subjects—they claimed they were “scholars” who came to Germany to present long and uninteresting papers at the same academic conference—both objected simultaneously seizure of toiletry items in excess of 100ml. Lab tests confirm presence mouthwash, but halitosis tests were not administered. Our cameras recorded their conversation, which would be completely without interest but for a few brief references to the socialist-anarchist group known as “The International Workers of the World,” or “The Wobblies.” The main writer they discuss, a completely forgotten poet known as Lew Welch who is sometimes associated with the “San Francisco Renaissance,” apparently wrote a poem called “Wobbly Rock.” We suspect that references to wobbly matters were coded communication of some sort, since there is no other way to account for their efforts to keep in memory dead poets whose books didn’t sell well.]

Second Speaker: Your abstract said something about the San Francisco Renaissance. You’re not fooling anyone. San Francisco wasn’t even discovered until 1776, and Shakespeare never made it west of Chicago.¹ What did Lew do?

First Speaker: Well, he wrote the advertising slogan “Raid kills bugs dead,” which in *To Be the Poet* Maxine Hong Kingston counts as a “four word poem” (92) of the sort often found in the Chinese tradi-

*The poem “Old Bones” by Gary Snyder appears in his book *Mountains and Rivers Without End* and is reprinted with kind permission by the author. All rights reserved.

For debates inspired by this article, please check the Connotations website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debwhalen-bridge01613.htm>>.

tion, but that's not his main claim to fame. The "San Francisco Renaissance" was launched in 1955 with the famous Six Gallery reading, which included poets such as Gary Snyder, Allen Ginsberg, and Lew Welch. Ginsberg and Snyder went on to achieve fame as poets, but Welch disappeared in May of 1971 and is presumed to have committed suicide.

Second Speaker: Presumed?

First Speaker: No one really doubts it, but his body was never found.² He left a note and took his gun when he went into the mountains. As with Weldon Kees and Elvis, there were reported sightings.³ There seems to be a *type* of poet, one who disappears mysteriously and then reappears in works of the imagination and in the mind of devotees. A kind of literary apotheosis of Welch returns as a ghost in two Snyder poems. And he returns as a *model* for how to live, even though his life was, given his end, in large part a failure. It makes us wonder how deities and spirits in many world religions come into the forms that are passed down to us. We may often think that an apotheosis is a kind of ideal figure, one so perfect as to etch a permanent place in the human imagination. But this ... type ... of poet, if I'm right, gives us a different sort of model entirely. What if these figures that find their way into larger systems of memory did *not* conform to ideal patterns? What if these poets departed in ways that were especially wounding, so much so that *readers* hold them back in earthly imagination? The popular fantasy is that the ghost has unfinished business and so cannot leave, but perhaps we have unfinished business with the ghost.

Second Speaker: So you'll talk about Welch's writings, or writings about Welch?

First Speaker: Much more of the latter. One poem about Welch is from Snyder's collection *Axe Handles*, a collection of poems about cultural continuity and tradition. The key image of the title poem "Axe Handles" is from Lu Chi's fourth-century *Wen Fu*, or "Essay on

Literature,” which states that “In making the handle / Of an axe / By cutting wood with an axe / The model is indeed near at hand.” The poet goes on to say that Ezra “Pound was an axe,” that “Shih-hsiang Chen,” Snyder’s teacher who “Translated [the *Wen Fu*] and taught it years ago” was an axe, and also that “I am an axe / And my son a handle, soon / To be shaping again, model / And tool, craft of culture, / How we go on” (6).

Second Speaker: That sounds pretty general. How does Welch fit in, as a *specific* poet?

First Speaker: Immediately following “Axe Handles” is the poem entitled “For/From Lew.” As the title indicates, it’s at once an homage and a message. One critic called it a “dream vision” (Murphy 125). But the poem doesn’t claim to be a dream at all—it is quite literally a ghost story:

Lew Welch just turned up one day,
live as you and me. “Damn, Lew” I said,
“you didn’t shoot yourself after all.”
“Yes I did” he said,
and even then I felt the tingling down my back. (*Axe Handles* 7)

Snyder accepts that Welch really did kill himself, and this acceptance of death, of ultimate failure, becomes the turning point in the poem:

“Yes you did, too” I said—“I can feel it now.”
“Yeah” he said,
“There’s a basic fear between your world and
mine. I don’t know why.
What I came to say was,
teach the children about the cycles.
The life cycles. All the other cycles.
That’s what it’s all about, and it’s all forgot.” (7)

Welch returns as a shade, but he is also “live as you and me,” and he returns to speak with sad knowledge about the failure of people to understand cycles, as he himself must have failed in succumbing to despair.

Second Speaker: Was his poetry good ... I mean, was he a 'success' or a 'failure' as a writer?

First Speaker: In conventional terms I guess he was a failure. He didn't become famous and win awards, but he wrote about half a dozen poems that have really mattered to quite a few people. The most important ones are "Ring of Bone," "Wobbly Rock," "Song of the Turkey Vulture," and "The Song Mt. Tamalpais Sings." And one or two others. And—I'm not supposed to say this—my California friends will disown me—he wrote some terrible poems. Full of adolescent crudity and yuck-yuck laughing at his own superiority to blah blah conventional thinking.

Second Speaker: Ouch. I'm hearing 'failure.'

First Speaker: Yes and no. He's remembered for his best poems and also because of the way he fit into the fabric. His suicide, like that of Brautigan's later, and like that of Salinger's fictional character Seymour Glass, makes him into a paradox, a Zen failure. The failure, the one who personifies lostness, comes back to us in literature and memory as one who, in some ways at least, points the way for others, a kind of savior-ghost. Notice how writers—Welch, when he was alive, but also Snyder and Kingston—complain about the social marginality of writers, but they also redescribe marginality as the path to authenticity. By embracing one's marginality one does not gain general social stature, but as a member-in-good-standing of the counter-culture, one certainly gains a reputation for exemplary authenticity. One should stop trying to zoom down the superhighway of American life and instead hop across it like an unnoticed jackrabbit—Snyder's poem "Jackrabbit" expresses this idea as a kind of American *kōan*, a riddle of sorts. The jackrabbit in this poem is an important symbol—perhaps it's a kind of Native American 'totem animal' that shows itself to the poet to offer a clue about how to live. The poet meditates on this animal, which he sees as it sits by the side of the road:

hop, stop.

Great ears shining,
 you know me
 a little. A lot more than I
 know you. (*Mountains and Rivers* 31)

This lowly rabbit—and you only get the rabbit as opposed to any direct statement about how to live—is a kind of wisdom figure. The rabbit has to avoid your car, whereas the driver doesn't have to pay any attention. The rabbit is what you must become if you don't want to conform to the mainstream idea of what you should be. The strange voice in the poem defers to the road-side rabbit.

Second Speaker: This rabbit poem doesn't mention Welch. How can we be sure "rabbit" and "poet" are connected? What makes your interpretation better than free association? I would like to believe I understand the point being made but, to be honest, I am not sure. Snyder's "Jackrabbit" doesn't help me, as there is no indication that the rabbit gets killed by the car. I keep trying to connect the suicide—the quintessential item I had thought in the point being made—to becoming a Zen failure. And then comes the jackrabbit, which certainly isn't lost, and if it's sitting on the side of the road it hasn't attempted suicide—

First Speaker: —OK OK ... it's an image, a 'deep image.' Let me back up. Snyder uses a Welch idea as an epigraph in *Mountains and Rivers Without End*, one that matches the rabbit idea quite nicely. Give me a minute to find it. [*At this point the first speaker rustles paper before throwing hands up.*] It'll turn up. Anyway, the group of Zen Buddhists who live near the place from which Welch disappeared built a practice hall and named the hall (and their group) the "Ring of Bone Zendo," after Welch's "Ring of Bone." Snyder, Kingston, and others who honor Welch's memory, who, in a sense, bring him back to life by remembering his work, especially like his poem "Ring of Bone," which Welch's executor Donald Allen used for the title of Welch's collected poems. His poem, "Ring of Bone" ... where did I put that

poem *[Subject continues to rustle paper ineptly and then clumsily scatters his notes on the floor.]* Merde!

Second Speaker: *[Turns directly to observation camera and says the following]:* In a moment he's going to want me to say "It sounds clean. It's a clear stream. Very 'open,' very 'California' I guess. " I'm a mere straight-man here—he's making me say these lines. Some of them are very prissy and snotty—but it is just a persona. *[Second Speaker stares hard at First Speaker, who continues to rustle papers.]* I would rather, if I were writing my own lines, speak like ... Terry Gross! Do you know her? She's on National Public Radio. *[Imitating Terry Gross' highly sensitive American accent.]* "Hiiii, this is Terry Gross from Fresh Aair."

First Speaker: Here it is. Tell me if you like it:

I saw myself
a ring of bone
in the clear stream
of all of it

and vowed
always to be open to it
that all of it
might flow through

and then heard
"ring of bone" where
ring is what a

bell does (*Ring of Bone* 77)

Second Speaker: It sounds clean. It's a clear stream. Very 'open.' Very 'California,' one could say.

First Speaker: There's the *memento mori* aspect, the seeing oneself as bones—but as a ring of bones. The circularity instead of the linearity. It's not that you live, you die, full stop. I can see why Zen students like it especially, since one begins formal group meditations, called *sesshin* in Japanese, with formal vows to save all sentient beings—to

be open to all sentient beings and never turn your back on *anyone*. And a bell is used to mark the beginning and end of the sesshin. But the idea that *bones* can ring like a bell is really something. Memento mori imagery often arouses the disgust we feel at the sights and smells associated with death and mortification. Another poem from *Ring of Bone* plays on the idea of memento mori—it's entitled "Memo Satori" (17). "Alas poor Yorick" is great fun and all, but we are more often reminded about rot and decay and transience and other kinds of negativity. The ringing bell in the context of Zen practice often brings your mind back from its wandering, it unifies your parts—bones that hunger home.

Second Speaker: Bones hunger home? Explain that to me later. Anyway, are all Welch's poems like this one? Meditative, clean, clear?

First Speaker: Hardly. Most of the poems collected in *Ring of Bone* are much more ... conversational. William Carlos Williams was a strong influence on several of the Beat writers—Allen Ginsberg even shows up in Williams's *Paterson* as a character of sorts.⁴ Lew Welch, Gary Snyder, and Philip Whalen drove Williams to the airport after he read at Reed College, where those three met. You know the plum poem, "This is just to say / I have eaten / the plums / that were in / the icebox / and which / you were probably / saving / for breakfast" (Williams 1274).

Second Speaker: Yes, right. "Is it a poem or is it a remark, just a note taped to the fridge?" Not my cup of tea.

First Speaker: Understood—and this kind of poem gives many writers the feeling, a kind of license, that anything they think is poetry as long as there are line breaks after every word or three. But Williams's point is that poetry isn't just *like* everyday life. Rather, there is poetry *in* everyday life. Everyday life is "imagistic," such as when Williams finds the plums "so sweet / and so cold." Poets like Welch found much encouragement in Williams's work and were encouraged by Williams personally.⁵ The poetry celebrates a democratic open-

ness—Welch wanted to capture, as accurately as possible, "The din of a Tribe doing its business. You can't control it, you can't correct it, you can only listen to it and use it as it is" (Welch, *How I Work* 31).

Second Speaker: It sounds to me like a formula for mediocrity. Where's the selection ... the *choice*?

First Speaker: He called this method "Letting American speak for itself," which he admitted was "often ... a depressing job" (*Ring of Bone* 5). But he wasn't just walking around with a tape recorder, and he was specifically collecting and supporting voices that organized themselves against a mediocre, conformist, unimaginative life. Sometimes this is just bohemian rant, but there is, in his democratic openness, a great potential for what the Russian Formalists called "defamiliarization." And it is an anti-pretentious poetic, one that might have pleased the John Dewey who complained about the "museum conception of art"—art separated from everyday life and from utility, art that really functions to legitimate class privilege.⁶ Here's another description of the "din":

The sound we hear from our tribe is not much different from the thousand sparrows who used to sleep in a palm tree outside my window, once. The racket was unbelievable, but the birds were only arguing about who has the right to sleep, and where.

But I still have faith that if I do this right, accurately, the sound will emerge a "meaningless din of joy." Because I know that the true sound of living things, a carrot or a tribe, is meaningless, joyful, and we, singing it, know this joy. (*Ring of Bone* 5)

Welch also returns as a mentor-spirit in Kingston's novel *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book*.

Second Speaker: I know all about Kingston as she is America's "most-taught living author," though I haven't read the fake book.⁷

First Speaker: —No, *fake book*. It's a jazz term. The novel has a highly improvisational style, and the artist Wittman Ah Sing—a Chinese

name that echoes Walt Whitman—works with highly improvisational theater. Everyone in the audience is put into the play in Wittman's work.

Second Speaker: So Lew Welch was a wise fellow, a mentor to Maxine Hong Kingston?

First Speaker: Welch shows up about half-a-dozen times in Kingston's novel. Welch, or his literary alter-ego the Red Monk, says sardonic things that help put Wittman back on track. Here's one such passage from Kingston's novel in which Welch, enigmatically, appears:

Pea-coat collar up against the foggy dusk, which can break your heart—your true love has left, and you're lost, when you haven't even found her—he walked through ambiguities. Poems blow about that nobody has put into words. Old poems partly remembered sniff at your ears. Nah. Lew Welch warned that it isn't the moon that's sad, it's you. The moon is never sad, says the Red Monk. (*Tripmaster* 262)

Second Speaker: So the character is talking to himself or thinking to himself, deciding whether the poem is in the world or in the mind. And Lew Welch shows up to tell him that poems and moods are in you, not the world or the moon.

First Speaker: Yes. But it's the ghost of Lew Welch. The sadness that is not in the moon itself resonates, since Welch was a suicide. And the novel begins with Wittman Ah Sing contemplating suicide, something he reportedly does every day:

Maybe it comes from living in San Francisco, city of clammy humors and foghorns that warn and warn—omen, o-o-omen, o dolorous omen, o dolours of omens—and not enough sun, but Wittman Ah Sing considered suicide every day. Entertained it. There slid beside his right eye a black gun. He looked side-eyed for it. Here it comes. He actually crooked his trigger finger and—bang!—his head breaks into pieces that fly apart into a scattered universe. Then blood, meat, disgusting brains, mind guts, but he would be dead already and not see the garbage. (3)

There is a performative dimension to the narrative, which slides between Wittman's interior monologue and the narrator's outside-Wittman's-head commentary. The theatrical reference in this passage is anything but accidental:

Anybody serious about killing himself does the big leap off the Golden Gate. The wind or shock knocks you out before impact. Oh, long before impact. So far, two hundred and thirty-five people, while taking a walk alone on the bridge—a mere net between you and the grabby ocean—had heard a voice out of the windy sky—Laurence Olivier asking them something: "To be or not to be?" And they'd answered, "Not to be," and climbed on top of the railing, fingers and toes roosting on the cinnabarine steel. (3-4)

Second Speaker: The "no name woman" in her first book *The Woman Warrior* is a suicide who—the narrator is unsure—may offer strength or may also tempt her to despair. Ghosts can't be trusted. Hamlet has the same problem, yes?

First Speaker: The old poems blowing around that Wittman thinks about and the ambiguous ghosts—in many ways they are the same. Dead thoughts restored:

The words of a dead man
Are modified in the guts of the living. (Auden 242)

The voice of the dead calls through these old poems and images. The voice can call us to life or tempt us to death. What's interesting about Welch is the way the person who committed suicide becomes, in his literary rebirths, a figure of hope.

Second Speaker: Sounds confusing. Is this what is meant by "Zen failure?" Are you doing it now?

First Speaker: Not intentionally, but after Eugene Herrigal's *Zen and the Art of Archery* and then Pirsig's *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, there have been a lot of jokey conjunctions: Zen and something you think it shouldn't go with but it really does. It takes

two Zen Buddhists to change a light bulb, by the way: one to change it and one to not change it.

Second Speaker: You seem to be describing all literature. King Lear thinks he sees “the thing itself” when he looks at mad Tom, but Tom isn’t really Tom, he’s Edgar acting. Don Quixote had his windmills.

First Speaker: Or think of Don Quixote on his death-bed. He renounces everything we just read about as failure, but this failure is the book we just loved.

Second Speaker: You’re still not isolating a particular kind of story as well as I’d like.

First Speaker: Okay. We’re talking about a pattern, about a set of stories which describe and also call for a “revaluation of values,” but the stories would all have us think, *contra* Nietzsche, that this revaluation is not merely a shift in power. Fundamental to “Zen failure” is the idea that there exists a Will to Wisdom. But you might be completely wrong; you might look like a fool. Pirsig’s book is a good example. *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* is the story of a man who challenges conventional ways of thinking, but the unconventionality might really be madness, depression ... simple failure. J. D. Salinger’s character Seymour Glass is a Zen failure, in that he is presented in the novella “Raise High the Roofbeam, Carpenters!” as a kind of Zen master or Buddha figure—but readers of the novella know that Seymour commits suicide. He shoots himself at the end of Salinger’s short story “A Perfect Day for Bananafish,” and it’s a bit disturbing to remember this wretched end when we see how he is idealized, at least in the mind of his brother Buddy, who narrates the novellas.

In the poems and stories I’m addressing, the Zen failure character doesn’t even come close to seeming like an ideal, perfect person, and yet the stories bring this character back from the dead. The literature not only brings the person back—it imagines the character as an embodiment of *perfection*.

Second Speaker: This approach—I think I've heard it called a "Zen aesthetic"—in which the ordinary world is perfect by itself and in which we create problems only by imagining things are not how they are supposed to be—it really annoys me. Wasabi ... or wobbly-sobby.

First Speaker: The ideal, which promotes a notion of beauty in which mistakes are central, is called *wabi-sabi*.

Second Speaker: Wabi-whatever! And what if *everyone* did that? There are people who go around describing cracks in the wall as if they were epic poetry. I remember "Happenings" in which we were supposed to wait patiently while a cake of ice melted on a Pasadena sidewalk.

First Speaker: Ezra Pound said that James Joyce's "Araby" is "much better than a 'story,' it is a vivid waiting" (Pound 400).

Second Speaker: I wish I'd had a copy of *Dubliners* that day in Pasadena.

First Speaker: Once upon a time John Cage was sitting in a chair on a stage. Next to him was a telephone on a small table. He told the audience that Andy Warhol was going to call, and that he'd have the conversation with Warhol in front of the audience. Long silence. Everyone waited and waited. No call. Finally, Cage said, "Oh, I forgot to tell Andy the number." I can't remember who told me that story—it might be apocryphal.

Second Speaker: "Spots of time." A *not-so-vivid* waiting. That trick might work once. Wouldn't you rather read *King Lear*? When the bard says "failure," he really means it. Give me Lear's rages or Macbeth's "Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow" over melting ice or forgetful Andy Warhol any day.

First Speaker: "Life's but [...] a poor player / That struts and frets his hour upon the stage / And then is heard no more."

Second Speaker: Now you're talking.

First Speaker: But don't you think the actor was delighted?

Second Speaker: *Great* role. *Es muy* juicy.

First Speaker: When Macbeth says "a poor player / That struts and frets," we shouldn't presume that this actor himself was a poor player. That would be like watching ice melt. But the beautifully realized failure is redemptive, and the fact that the Macbeth on the stage is an actor playing a role can have a meta-theatrical effect—we're all playing roles, and our moments of greatest failure and suffering are but the wanderings of a script from which we should look up.

Second Speaker: Are you putting something a little extra in your coffee? [*Makes "drinking sign" with thumb to lips, tilting hand up as if taking a swig.*] Anyway, I'm not a fictional character. Let's get that straight.

First Speaker: You're totally real! That's my favorite thing about you. But I'm saying that, like a good Zen story, the actor strutting and fretting is part of a kind of joke in which everything is at once real and delusory—

Second Speaker: —ah, the light bulb changers—

First Speaker: — since the pleasure of the text consists in confronting life's pain while, at the same time, seeing it as imaginary. Robert Alter has a quotation from Denis Donoghue in *The Pleasures of Reading in an Ideological Age* that nails it nicely: "[I]n general the symbol-using animal takes pleasure in using symbols: the passions may be terrible, but the syllables are a relief" (Alter 77).

Second Speaker: Literature ... transformation ... fortunate falls ... bad puns—this is beginning to sound like a *Connotations* conference.

First Speaker: Perpetual *comedia*. It's fortunate rebirth rather than fortunate fall. I'll get to that. But first I want to quote another bit, a

poem by Gary Snyder. One of my favorite poems. It's about bones, bones that speak. Dem bones, dem bones gonna ... rise again! In grade school we used to sing a "spiritual" song about Ezekiel.⁸ Must have come from African-American folk culture or church. Snyder's bone song, the second poem in *Mountains and Rivers*, is called "Old Bones," and it's about bones in a desert or some sort of arid landscape. It goes like this:

Out there walking round, looking out for food,
a rootstock, a birdcall, a seed that you can crack
plucking, digging, snaring, snagging,
barely getting by,
[...]. (Mountains and Rivers 10)

We're in the mind of some sort of animal, some scavenger who is living in a biological niche. Life is painful and difficult, and the syllables are a relief. It is a rolling song, the words describing activity—*walking, looking, plucking, digging, snaring, and snagging*—all show the animal impulse to move forward, to eat and survive. Each of Snyder's poems in *Mountains and Rivers Without End* has its own rhythm in which he attempts to meet the world half-way, often the non-human and non-linguistic world. Creatures in the desert looking for a seed to crack open—scuttling from spot to spot. Then the rhythm changes in the line "barely getting by." It slows—we are panning back, looking at the animals as if distant. A seed that "you" can crack means it's "you," though. You and me.

Second Speaker: It moves in rushes. Vital sounds for vital things.

First Speaker: The next bit makes another transition, this time from life to death:

no food out there on dusty slopes of scree—
carry some—look for some,
go for a hungry dream.
Deer bone, Dall sheep,
bones hunger home.

Second Speaker: That stanza becomes strange. Go for a hungry dream? Sheep and deer? Bones hunger home?

First Speaker: The poem can't make any sense if you refuse to believe that deer and dall sheep have no yearnings. The desert is a vale of suffering but it is also the foundation of joy. It appears arid and empty, but it is saturated with desire.⁹ The poet knows that desire is what holds bones together, both in a vital, living body and in our forensic understanding of bones—our mental apprehension of the world. Our poetry in which we take fragments and turn them into song. "These fragments I have shored against my ruins."

Second Speaker: What the Thunder Said. But Eliot's speaker is fishing with the arid plains *behind* him.

First Speaker: And Snyder's speaker is surveying arid plains, aware that they not only have been and will be but also *are* full of life. Deserts have rats and snakes and birds and plants. A desert can be seen as an ecological catastrophe—but it can also be seen as something brimming with life, with *desire*, as is shown in the poem. Without some sort of desire, there would be no shoring against ruins. But there's more to the poem:

Out there somewhere
a shrine for the old ones,
the dust of the old bones,
old songs and tales.

And then, after three four-line stanzas, Snyder caps it with two lines that contain a radical shift:

What we ate—who ate what—
how we all prevailed.

The radical shift is from "you" to "we." Not your desire, and not my desire but rather *our* desire. Our community and our interconnections. That's what *Mountains and Rivers Without End*, as a kind of ecological

epic, is about. It's the common song not of Italy or Albion but of the planet. Before and through human history—how we all prevailed.

Second Speaker: But I thought environmentalist writers were always talking about death and extinction. I know 'naturalist' writers pay closer attention than most to creatures and ecosystems, and, like Snyder would seem to want to talk to birds and other animals.¹⁰

First Speaker: Yes, *Silent Spring* and Al Gore's film "An Inconvenient Truth" warn about death as "The undiscovered country from whose bourn / No traveller returns." BUT Gore says about his film that "you can't kill the frog."

Second Speaker: Did he say such things often before his movie came out? Is this why Bush won the election? "Hello America: you mustn't kill a frog."

First Speaker: Bush didn't win the election, but never mind. Gore learned, in doing his 'slide-show,' the series of talks he gave about global warming, that his analogy about the frog in the bowl of water that dies when the water gets too warm *had* to change. A doomed frog destroys hope, but a saved frog ... well, it sounds sentimental, but Jeremiah has this rhetorical problem: if it's already too late, why should you the listener mend your ways? The doomed frog must be saved.

Second Speaker: I feel like I should imagine imaginary gardens with real frogs in them. Is Lew Welch the frog in your Beat garden?

First Speaker: He might like that, though he preferred turkey buzzards. Some people think that disappearing into the mountains the way he did was an offering of his body, as carrion, for the birds. In Tibet this is called "sky burial," and it is someone's job to cut the corpse into pieces so that the birds can do their job thoroughly. Anyway, this is not how writers like Kingston and Snyder have remembered—or 're-membered'—Welch. Just after Snyder's poetic

claim that “bones hunger home,” his next poem begins with an epigraph from Welch:

Only the very poor, or eccentric, can surround themselves with shapes of elegance (soon to be demolished) in which they are forced by poverty to move with leisurely grace. We remain alert so as not to get run down, but it turns out you only have to hop a few feet to one side and the whole huge machinery rolls by, not seeing you at all.

Lew Welch (*Mountains and Rivers* 11)

This epigraph leads into a poem titled “Night Highway 99” in which Snyder recounts various journeys up and down Highway 99, across his home-turf, the Pacific Northwest. Snyder is traveling by thumb and recounts the stories—joys and sorrows—of the “very poor” and “eccentric” people who found their ideals quite marginal within the context of conventional, middle-class America and who were certainly on the margins of the American literary landscape of the 1950s. Snyder, Welch, and the other Beats who go ‘on the road’ and who consider the possibilities of stepping away from the well-trodden paths are not unique in American literature; it is probably the lightness of Lew Welch’s touch that appeals to writers like Snyder and Kingston.¹¹

At one point Snyder works in a motto of the “Wobblies,” the radical labor movement that was being (already was?) demolished by anti-communist fervor and legal persecutions of this period: “a night of the long poem/ and the mined guitar / ‘Forming the new society / within the shell of the old’ / mess of tincan camps and littered roads” (13). Snyder was turned down for a visa the first few times he tried to go to Japan to study Zen Buddhism, and FBI agents asked questions of his friends and associates (Baker 27). To Old Left stalwarts, the so-called Beats were withdrawing from responsibility into an orientalist fantasy. But Snyder and Welch saw themselves as offering a kind of resistance. By refusing to be attached to the rewards of mainstream society, one could survive its attempts to starve out, well, anti-capitalists like Snyder and Welch.¹²

Second Speaker: They talked the talk, but did they walk the walk?

First Speaker: Kingston tells us in her appreciation that one of Welch's hopes was "to organize to feed poets 'so poets could have babies and fix their wives' teeth and the other things we need.' He planned a magazine to be called *Bread* that would discuss the economics of being a poet in America. Somebody still needs to carry out those plans" (*Hawai'i* 63). And she said he spoke exactly as he wrote. But no, he wasn't a labor organizer and he didn't leave behind institutions or influential writings that translated such sentiments into social movements.

Second Speaker: Well, you've said he wrote five or six really good poems, poems that astounded some readers and influenced a few other writers. Bless the WRITER—I won't call him a failure! So I guess a "Zen failure" is a failure that succeeds—one to change the light bulb and one to declare darkness beautiful in its own right.

First Speaker: Here's the best thing she says about him: "he had reached forty already; he had lines in his face, but though his eyes were red, they opened wide. He looked at you out of bright blue eyes, but at a part of you that isn't your appearance or even your personality; he addressed that part of you that is like everybody. I would like to learn to look at people that way" (62).¹³

Second Speaker: You're okay, but I've been looking at you for long enough—here they come with our computers.

National University of Singapore

NOTES

¹Wikipedia: "The first recorded European discovery of San Francisco Bay was on November 4, 1769 when Spanish explorer Gaspar de Portolà, unable to find the port of Monterey, California, moored his ship close to what is now Pacifica. Short on water and food, Portolà and an expeditionary crew of 63 men and 200 horses began an overland journey that took them to the summit of the 1200 foot high

Sweeney Ridge, where he sighted San Francisco Bay." It is true that Shakespeare never made it west of Chicago ("San Francisco Bay").

²Rod Phillips writes, partly in response to Albert Saijo's eulogy/fantasy in which Welch leaves human society behind without actually taking his life, "But such pleasant imaginings aside, the numerous references to suicide in Welch's letters, as well as his fragile emotional state at the time of his disappearance, can leave little doubt that the poet did take his own life" (Phillips, *Lew Welch* 45).

³John Yau briefly compares Welch and Weldon Kees in his essay on Kees and Frank O'Hara: "Kees was forty-one when he left his car on the approach to the Golden Gate Bridge. His body was never found; and he was never heard from again. Because he vanished into thin air, rumors and sightings persisted for years, but nothing concrete was ever proven" (Yau 11). Rod Phillips writes in *Lew Welch*, "Despite extensive searching, Welch's body was never found, leading some to speculate, hopefully, that the poet's last note signaled not a suicide, but a planned disappearance—a twentieth-century Huck Finn's plan to 'light out for the Territory'" (Phillips, *Lew Welch* 45). In his poem "Last Days of Lew Welch," Welch's friend Albert Saijo imagines a desperate Welch approaching suicide but then deciding to live; his identity as "Lew Welch," however, does not survive the confrontation with deep despair, and so he cannot answer the searchers who call his name, and he flees to a new life. I thank Robert Aitken Roshi for sending me scanned copies of the Saijo poem. According to Kingston, Welch's editor and executor Donald Allen concluded his editor's note to *Ring of Bone: Collected Poems, 1950-1971* with this comment: "O.K., Lew, I've done what you asked me to do. And, now, where are you?" (Kingston, *Hawai'i One Summer* 66). My edition of the poems ("Second printing, with revisions, 1979") does not contain this afterword.

⁴Welch's *Ring of Bone* is dedicated "To the memory of Gertrude Stein & William Carlos Williams," and the dedication page is itself a poem retelling the story of

that very poem
pasted in the florist's window

(as Whalen's *I wanted to bring you this Jap Iris* was)

carefully retyped and
put right out there on Divisadero St.

just because the florist thought it
pretty,

that it might remind of love,
that it might sell flowers (v).

Like Williams's poem "This is just to say," the Welch dedication is at once a useful object—an advertisement for flowers, just as Williams's poem was an apology to

his wife, a note on the fridge—and a shaped verbal artifact with allusions, historical references.

⁵In “Lew Welch: an Appreciation” Maxine Hong Kingston remembers the time she and her husband Earll visited Welch and his wife Magda. Though Kingston was unknown and Welch worked on the docks all day as a longshoreman’s clerk to support himself, he gave his time generously, giving encouragement as it had been given him: “He talked about being one of the young poets who had driven William Carlos Williams from the airport to Reed College. I love the way that car ride has become a part of literary history. Gary Snyder, Lew Welch, Philip Whalen, and William Carlos Williams were the poets in the car. Today, Welch told us that he had felt Williams giving the power of poetry to him. The two of them had agreed on their dislike of T. S. Eliot. Then Lew Welch sang us “The Waste Land” to a jive beat, and it did not sound at all as if he disliked it” (Kingston, *Hawai’i One Summer* 63-64).

As in Gary Snyder’s poem “Axe Handles,” there is the idea that the poet-model shapes the attitudes and practices of the following generation, Williams to Welch, and then Welch to Kingston.

⁶In *Art as Experience* John Dewey writes, “When artistic objects are separated from both conditions of origin and operation in experience, a wall is built around them that renders almost opaque their general significance, with which esthetic theory deals. Art is remitted to a separate realm, where it is cut off from that association with the materials and aims of every other form of human effort, undergoing, and achievement. A primary task is thus imposed upon one who undertakes to write upon the philosophy of the fine arts. This task is to restore continuity between the refined and intensified forms of experience that are works of art and the everyday events, doings, and sufferings that are universally recognized to constitute experience. Mountain peaks do not float unsupported” (*Later Works: 1925-1953*, 10: 9).

⁷It would be hard to know who is “most-taught,” but Kingston is a good candidate, as her books are included not only in American literature surveys but also in specialized courses in Women’s Studies, postmodernism, autobiography, Asian-American literature, and, more recently, Peace Studies. Gayle K. Sato claims Kingston as “most-taught” (112) in “‘Reconfiguring the ‘American Pacific’: Narrative Reenactments of Viet Nam in Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Fifth Book of Peace*.” Sato notes that Sau-ling Wong made the same claim in her keynote talk for the Asian American Literature Association symposium address, “Maxine Hong Kingston in a Global Frame.” Wong’s address was presented in Kyoto, September 25, 2004.

⁸“Dem Bones”:

Ezekiel connected dem dry bones
Ezekiel connected dem dry bones
Ezekiel connected dem dry bones
I hear the word of the Lord.

To music written by James Weldon Johnson (see “Dem Bones” at *Wikipedia* and *Everything2*).

⁹As discussed in my article, “The Sexual Politics of Divine Femininity: Tārā in Transition in Gary Snyder’s Poetry.”

¹⁰For a discussion of Snyder’s dialogic approach to bird songs and what we can call the speech of the world, see my essay, “Snyder, Dōgen, and ‘The Canyon Wren.’” More than any other writer in English, Henry David Thoreau is thought of as a ‘nature writer.’ In this passage he allows for communication of a sort between humans and animals: “Just before night we saw a musquash (he did not say muskrat), the only one we saw in this voyage, swimming downward on the opposite side of the stream. The Indian, wishing to get one to eat, hushed us, saying, “Stop, me call ‘em”; and, sitting flat on the bank, he began to make a curious squeaking, wiry sound with his lips, exerting himself considerably. I was greatly surprised,—thought that I had at last got into the wilderness, and that he was a wild man indeed, to be talking to a musquash! I did not know which of the two was the strangest to me. He seemed suddenly to have quite forsaken humanity, and gone over to the musquash side. The musquash, however, as near as I could see, did not turn aside, though he may have hesitated a little, and the Indian said that he saw our fire; but it was evident that he was in the habit of calling the musquash to him, as he said. An acquaintance of mine who was hunting moose in those woods a month after this, tells me that his Indian in this way repeatedly called the musquash within reach of his paddle in the moonlight, and struck at them” (Thoreau 228). Thoreau’s freedom from anthropocentrism is a strong virtue for ‘green’ readers, but the way in which the Indian man is presented as a primitive form of humanity suggests a chain of being that extends from muskrat to Indian man to author. Thoreau is not an absolute anthropocentrist, but this passage reveals a kind of relative anthropocentrism. Note how the moose hunter, in comparing field notes with Thoreau, speaks about “his Indian.”

¹¹Consider the famous conclusion of “Wakefield” for a reflection on what it means to step out of the story-line expected by one’s community. Hawthorne’s story, a Kafkaesque extension of the theme Washington Irving treats in “Rip Van Winkle,” concludes with the narrator’s anxious observation as Wakefield prepares to leave home for twenty years, without having told anyone where he is about to go: “This happy event—supposing it to be such—could only have occurred at an unpremeditated moment. We will not follow our friend across the threshold. He has left us much food for thought, a portion of which shall lend its wisdom to a moral, and be shaped into a figure. Amid the seeming confusion of our mysterious world, individuals are so nicely adjusted to a system, and systems to one another and to a whole, that, by stepping aside for a moment, a man exposes himself to a fearful risk of losing his place forever. Like Wakefield, he may become, as it were, the Outcast of the Universe” (926). “We” stay on our side of the threshold and witness the home-leaver as he crosses over, whereas, in Welch’s imagining of this transition, “we” successfully side-step the dangerous machinery of the primary as opposed to the countercultural one: “We remain alert so as not to

get run down" and "only have to hop a few feet to one side and the whole huge machinery rolls by."

¹²While the 'on the road' excursions associated with Beat writers such as Kerouac can be construed as navel-gazing, and thus as an alternative to *political* resistance, the practices of the IWW or "Wobblies" in many ways foreshadow the attitudes of Beat authors such as Kerouac, Snyder, and Welch. Recalling that Kerouac begins *The Dharma Bums* by associating his early-1950s train-riding character Ray Smith with the hobos of a previous generation, this Wikipedia discussion of IWW tactics would seem to give Beat challenges to the idea that we must all be conventionally productive all the time a significant place within political (rather than merely cultural or personal) tradition: "Between 1915 and 1917, the IWW's Agricultural Workers Organization (AWO) organized hundreds of thousands of migratory farm workers throughout the midwest and western United States, often signing up and organizing members in the field, in railyards and in hobo jungles. During this time, the IWW became synonymous with the hobo; migratory farmworkers could scarcely afford any other means of transportation to get to the next jobsite. Railroad boxcars, called 'side door coaches' by the hobos, were frequently plastered with silent agitators from the IWW. Workers often won better working conditions by using direct action at the point of production, and striking 'on the job' (consciously and collectively slowing their work). As a result of Wobbly organizing, conditions for migratory farm workers improved enormously."

¹³I would like to thank Janice Rossen for helpful comments and Jane Wong for helping me organize a final draft, and to the participants in the 2007 *Connotations* Symposium, "Restored from Death," held in Tübingen, Germany. Most of all, I would like to thank the poet Eric Paul Shaffer with whom I studied at UC Davis some years ago. I wouldn't have any idea about Welch's work had it not been for Eric's reckless enthusiasm. Under the direction of Dave Robertson and Gary Snyder, Eric wrote the first PhD dissertation about Lew Welch, and no poet I can think of has carried on Welch's spirit across the decades since Welch's disappearance as Shaffer has. His work is, in a very important way, another one of Welch's magical returns from the dead.

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Dis(re)membering History's *revenants*: Trauma, Writing, and Simulated Orality in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

HANNES BERGTHALLER

"Most artful Teuth, [you], being the father of written letters, have on account of goodwill said the opposite of what they can do. For this will provide forgetfulness in the souls of those who have learned it, through neglect of memory, seeing that, through trust in writing, they recollect from outside with alien markings, not reminding themselves from inside, by themselves. You have therefore found a drug not for memory, but for reminding."

Plato, *Phaedrus* 275a

I

The suspicion that writing might be an ally not of memory, but of forgetfulness, is perhaps as old as writing itself—at least, that is what the words of divine King Thamos to his subaltern are designed to suggest, thus underscoring one of Plato's principal concerns in the *Phaedrus*.¹ Writing, he has Socrates tell his pupil, is dangerous, as it leads people to mistake the written representation of knowledge for knowledge itself. Instead of teaching them truth, it merely teaches them true opinions, and so truth will fall into oblivion. In the *Phaedrus*, this distrust of writing gives rise to the dream of a different kind of writing, "one that is written with knowledge in the soul of him who understands, with power to defend itself, and knowing to speak and to keep silence towards those it ought [...], a speech living and endowed with soul" (276a). This would be, in effect, a written *logos* with the ability not only to convey the originary presence of its "father" but also to establish a community of those who share the

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truth which this presence imparts. The form in which Plato strove to realize this dream is that of a *simulated* orality—namely, that of the dialogues themselves, which, if approached in the right spirit, are supposed to restore for the reader the presence of his teacher Socrates.

In the past few decades, this very old anxiety has assumed both a new form and a new kind of urgency, as writers and critics have begun to question if and how the human catastrophes which have shaped modern history could properly be represented and remembered. The French director Claude Lanzmann expressed this anxiety in its most radical form when he argued that “to learn the Holocaust” is effectively to “forget” it (85). Of course, Lanzmann is primarily concerned with the medium of film, but much the same has been argued for written accounts of the Holocaust, most notably by Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub. According to this school of thought, it can never be enough to know ‘about’ the horror of genocide. As Walter Benn Michaels summarizes the argument, “what the Holocaust requires is a way of transmitting not the normalizing knowledge of the horror but the horror itself” (141).² Texts which deal with such traumatic historical events must therefore strive not merely to render them in a factually accurate fashion, but rather to *reenact* them for the reader in order to implicate him in the traumatic experience, and to evoke the lost presence of the victims. Theories of trauma have, over the past decades, become one of the principal tools for conceptualizing not only the Holocaust, but the historical experience of victimized minority groups in general, and for outlining the ethical responsibilities of both writers and critics with respect to the latter.

It is therefore hardly surprising that Toni Morrison's 1987 novel *Beloved* has frequently been approached from such an angle—it is, after all, a work which announces its ambition to commemorate one of the constitutive historical traumas of American culture already in the famous epigraph: “*Sixty Million and More*” (xi)—the number of Africans who are estimated to have died during the Middle Passage, before even reaching the shores of America. In this reading of *Beloved*, I will triangulate such a take on the novel with some ideas from

scholarship on the split between orality and literacy, as well as with Toni Morrison's own essays on the poetics of Afro-American art. In the latter, Morrison typically conceives of the relation between reader and text on the model of oral communication, arguing that something like the antiphony characteristic of Afro-American musical forms or the call-and-response interaction between a preacher and his congregation can also take place in reading—indeed, that the achievement of such an interaction between reader and text ought to be the principal measure of a text's literary value. Insofar as it successfully simulates oral interaction ("reminding" the reader, as it were, "from inside"), literature is a catalyst in the reproduction of a community and helps to preserve its identity.

Beloved is clearly informed by these ideas: it is full of descriptions of communal story-telling, call-and-response preaching and choir singing. It is these 'oral' interactions which help the victims of slavery, as they are depicted in the novel, to remember their past and thereby to 're-member,' to heal, both themselves and their fractured community. Many readings of the novel haven taken over, to a greater or lesser extent, these basic assumptions: they see the text as drawing readers into a shared experience not only with the cast of the novel, but with the historical victims of slavery, thus rescuing the latter from the willful oblivion of what Morrison herself has diagnosed as a "national amnesia" ("The Pain of Being Black" 257); by recovering and "working through" traumatic aspects of the national past which have been violently repressed (LaCapra 89), the novel enacts a communal healing process.

What such readings usually lose sight of, however, is that this act of remembrance—like all such acts—is necessarily founded on a simultaneous act of 'dis-membering.' All the models for the functioning of the healing process which Morrison offers her readers (both in *Beloved* and in her poetological essays) are drawn from oral discourse. In order for the reader to remember slavery in the way that the novel seems to call for, he must therefore suspend his awareness of the fact that *Beloved* is neither a communal song nor the living partner in a

dialogue, but a printed text. In order for the characters of the novel to heal, they must forget those experiences in their past which would overwhelm and mentally break them—experiences that are figured in the text by the eponymous character of *Beloved*, the revenant of a baby girl killed by her own mother to prevent her from being taken back into slavery. At the novel's end, *Beloved* is expelled by the community but continues to haunt its margins. As I will argue in the following, *Beloved* thus represents not only those aspects of slavery which must be repressed so that those living in its wake can go on with their lives; she can also be taken to stand for the very medium where this process of healing is dramatized for the reader, but which has to be disavowed in order for it to take effect: i.e., the printed letters on the page, which remain, after we have closed the book, "thirsty" for meaning (Nancy 38-39), supplicating for the reader's return.

II

Read as a historical novel about slavery and its aftermath, *Beloved* is curiously devoid of the factual accoutrements which usually serve to give a sense of historical substantiveness to fiction of this type. Pivotal historical events such as the passage of the Fugitive Slave Bill or the Dred Scott decision are mentioned only in passing; the participation of Paul D, one of the novel's major characters, in the Civil War figures only as a minor episode which has left little impression on him. Instead, the novel focuses on the day-to-day life of a small group of former slaves living in the house on Bluestone Road 124, on the outskirts of Cincinnati, telling of their daily efforts "to keep the past at bay" (51) and tracing the process of their psychological recovery. As Morrison has pointed out on several occasions, her aim was not to give an account of slavery as a social institution but to make it "a personal experience" for the reader ("The Pain of Being Black" 257; *Beloved* xix). Attaining this goal is, of course, a manifest impossibility—not only because of the limits inherent in what reading can do,

but also because slavery is precisely the denial of personhood. It is thus only consequential that the novel puts its characters at a temporal remove from their own experience of slavery: the diegetic present of the novel is set in the year 1873, and the former lives of the characters as slaves are presented in a series of flashbacks as the novel unfolds.

Properly speaking, then, *Beloved* is a novel not so much about slavery itself as about its effects on those who live in its wake. This is thoroughly in keeping with the elusive ontological status of trauma as it has been described by psychoanalysts such as Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok and literary theorists from Dominick LaCapra to Cathy Caruth: the traumatic event itself can never be 'present' to the subject; it permanently resists recollection and can become present only through its linguistic and somatic figurations, i.e., through its symptoms. Trauma manifests itself in language, "through ellipsis, indirection and detour, or fragmentation and deformation" (Schwab 107), and in the body, whose pathologies reflect the psychological fragmentation of its subject. Morrison's cast of characters in *Beloved* has been marked by slavery in exactly this sense. Sethe, the novel's chief protagonist, goes color-blind after killing her baby daughter in order to keep her from being brought back to Sweet Home, the plantation where she herself had been kept as a slave. Her second daughter Denver becomes deaf and dumb when a class-mate asks her about this event; she recovers her ability to hear and speak only years later, and continues to be plagued by recurrent nightmares in which she is decapitated by her mother (243). Paul D, the only other surviving slave from Sweet Home, temporarily loses control of his hands after being sold off from the plantation (126); after escaping from slavery, he feels that his "red heart" has been replaced by a rusty tobacco tin which permanently shuts in his most shameful memories (86)—an image that illustrates almost too neatly Abraham and Torok's description of the traumatic event as being entombed in a psychic "crypt" (135-65).

This "corporeal cryptography" (Schwab 99) is matched by the elliptic narrative form of the novel, which dramatizes the way in

which the "encrypted" memories seep back into the conscious lives of the characters. One of the first things we learn about Sethe is that "she worked hard to remember as close to nothing as was safe" (6), yet already in the opening chapter, the narrative is shot through with fragments of past events which assail Sethe as if coming from outside: "baby blood that soaked her fingers like oil," "men coming to nurse her," the "scent of ink" (6). These ominous images will only begin to make sense to the reader as the narrative progresses, looping through ever more detailed analepses. The disjointed character of the novel's discourse (in the narratological sense), with its fragmented plot and shifting narrative perspectives, can thus be understood as mimetic of the psychological derangement from which its characters suffer, and which also finds expression in the fantasies of dismemberment that haunt them. Accordingly, the reader's activity of synthesizing a coherent story from this discourse can be seen as paralleling the psychological recovery of the characters themselves as they work through their repressed memories, "reconfiguring" them in order to construct viable personal identities (Henderson 91). As a whole, *Beloved* has therefore often been interpreted as enacting a "ritual of healing" (Krumholz 396) which inaugurates a new community encompassing the novel's characters as well as its readers by involving them in a "shared experience" (Morrison, *Beloved* xviii). As Homi Bhabha emphatically puts it with reference to the chapters at the center of the novel where the voices of Sethe and her two daughters are merged: "it is impossible not to see in them the healing of history, a community reclaimed in the making of a name" (17).

The name to which Bhabha refers here is, of course, that of the character for which the novel is named: Beloved—the girl who walks out of the waters of the Ohio, is taken in by Sethe, and finally recognized as the revenant of the daughter whom Sethe had killed eighteen years ago, after their escape from Sweet Home. It is the presence of Beloved, more than any of the other characters, that accounts for much of the novel's remarkable pathos, and it is her enigmatic fate at the novel's end which puts into question 'therapeutic' readings of the

novel. As her name signifies both the novel itself and a figure within that novel—a figure, furthermore, whose spectral character invites allegorical attributions—it also gives *Beloved* a self-referential twist which has attracted surprisingly little critical attention. Much has been written about this character. For my present purposes, it will suffice to say that the majority of commentators go along with Gurleen Grewal when she writes that the figure of Beloved embodies the “principle of the ‘return of the repressed’” (105). Beloved’s elusive ontological status is thus linked to the ‘ghostly’ character of the trauma of slavery which can be neither fully remembered nor entirely forgotten.

If Beloved thus embodies trauma, and trauma is knowable only through its effects, what then are the effects of Beloved’s arrival at Bluestone 124? Most strikingly, she solicits stories. Her presence induces the characters around her—Sethe, Denver, and Paul D—not only to remember the past they have been repressing, but also to shape it into narratives and relate these narratives to Beloved and to each other. Sethe is the first to realize “the profound satisfaction Beloved got from storytelling”; it becomes “a way to feed her,” to placate her “bottomless” longing (69). To her own surprise, “because every mention of her past life hurt,” Sethe shares Beloved’s pleasure: “[As] she began telling [...], she found herself wanting to, liking it. Perhaps it was Beloved’s distance from the events itself, or her thirst for hearing it [...].” (69). Thus with her first plea, “Tell me your diamonds,” Beloved prompts Sethe to relate the story of her wedding with Halle; Beloved’s second question, “Your woman never fix your hair?” (72), takes Sethe all the way back to the few memories she retains of her childhood: of a mother whom she barely saw other than as a distant figure working in the rice fields, and of her wet nurse, Nan, who spoke to Sethe in an African language she “understood then but could neither recall nor repeat now,” and who told Sethe about her mother. Nan’s brief speech, as Sethe recollects it, begins and ends with two sentences which emphasize the parallelism between this scene of oral instruction and the one that is taking place in the diegetic present, where Sethe has now assumed Nan’s place: “Telling you. I

am telling you, small girl Sethe" (74).

This scene—of Sethe recounting to her daughters what Nan told her about her mother—is only the first of a sequence of stories which are evoked by *Beloved*'s presence, and which together form the narrative pith of the novel. It sets the tone for the many acts of telling that will follow: recounting the past is both painful and necessary; its most important function is to establish origins and genealogies. Only through narration can even the most intimate human bonds be snatched from the oblivion to which slavery wishes to consign them; only through narration can these bonds be maintained or recreated, albeit only in a tenuous form whose force consists in nothing but the force of the narrator's word. Sethe knows herself to be her mother's daughter primarily because Nan has told her so. A similar set of concerns is at work in a scene that follows only a little later. Denver is the first to recognize *Beloved* as the ghost of her dead sister, and as she is grateful for *Beloved*'s companionship, Denver is afraid that she will "get up and wander out of the yard just the way she wandered in" (80). So Denver tells her the story of her own (Denver's) birth during Sethe's escape to Ohio, in order "to construct out of the strings she had heard all her life a net to hold *Beloved*" (90). With *Beloved* as her audience, Denver is led to engage with the story (which she has never heard in its entirety) more profoundly than ever before:

Denver was seeing it now and feeling it—through *Beloved*. Feeling how it must have felt to her mother. [...] And the more fine points she made, the more detail she provided, the more *Beloved* liked it. So she anticipated the questions by giving blood to the scraps her mother and grandmother had told her—and a heartbeat. The monologue became, in fact, a duet as they lay down together, Denver nursing *Beloved*'s interest like a lover whose pleasure was to overfeed the loved [...]. Denver spoke, *Beloved* listened, and the two did the best they could to create what really happened, how it really was [...]. (92-93)

Even though it is only Denver who tells the story, the narrator nevertheless insists here that it is not in fact a monologue: Denver's responsiveness to *Beloved*'s questions, both actual and anticipated, literally "animates" the tale. The interaction between narrator and

narratee creates not only a bond of intimacy between them, a communal interiority that encompasses both, it also endows the tale with a living presence—“blood” and a “heartbeat.”

III

If we recall Claude Lanzmann’s cautionary remarks as quoted above, it seems that what Morrison sets forth in this passage is a model of a form of ‘learning’ about the historical and personal trauma of slavery which would not at the same time also be a way of ‘forgetting’ it; in other words, Denver’s interaction with Beloved provides a model for the interaction of the reader with the book of the same name. Indeed, Morrison’s poetological reflections in other texts invite a reading of this scene as a metafictional comment on the aesthetic principles which inform her art. The scene dovetails neatly with Morrison’s avowed commitment to a form of writing that would “reflect the aesthetic tradition of Afro-American culture.” Writing in a narrative voice that is “speakerly, aural, colloquial” (“Unspeakable Things” 150) is only the least of these efforts. Such a form, she writes, “must make conscious use of the characteristics of its art forms and translate them into print: antiphony, the group relationship to audience performance, the critical voice which upholds tradition and communal values” (“Memory” 388-89). To put it differently—and to return to the terms which I introduced in my opening remarks on the *Phaedrus*—, writing must *simulate* orality: it must assume a form which involves the reader in the same way as a dialogue between living speakers would, allowing not only for a call, but also for a response, a “spoken counterpoint” (Holloway 73; also cf. Sale 42-43). It must produce, to quote Plato’s *Phaedrus* again, “a speech living and endowed with soul” (276a).

The *Phaedrus* is a text concerned with the transition from orality to literacy—the transition from a culture which transmits knowledge primarily through oral instruction to one in which written texts increasingly take over this function (Havelock 198-99). The anxiety

that writing will destroy rather than preserve knowledge is also an anxiety about the loss of presence and communal intimacy which orality implied. This same anxiety also runs through *Beloved*, most of whose characters have already passed out of the 'pure' orality of their West-African ancestors and are standing just outside the threshold to literacy; of all the important characters in the novel, only Denver has begun to learn to read and write. One of the moments in which the anxiety about the loss of oral culture surfaces is the already mentioned scene in which Sethe remembers Nan, whose African language she can no longer speak, even as the narrator insists that "the message [...] was and had been there all along" (74); but it is expressed most clearly in the refusal of Sixo—the only one of the slaves at Sweet Home to have come directly from Africa—to learn to read and write: "[he] said it would change his mind—make him forget things he shouldn't and memorize things he shouldn't and he didn't want his mind messed up" (245).³ Presumably, one of the things he is afraid of forgetting is the different relation of the subject to language which subtends the African traditions which Sixo represents; that is to say, he is afraid of forgetting the power of "nommo"—"the magic power of the word to call things into being" (Handley 677) which, according to Janheinz Jahn (124-26), is fundamental to West African conceptions of language, and which Morrison herself has invoked as a measure for the work she seeks to accomplish in her writing: "I sometimes know when the work works, when *nommo* has effectively summoned, by reading and listening to those who have entered the text" ("Unspeakable Things" 162). Even if one were to assume that she is speaking hyperbolically, it is quite clear that Morrison sees the ability of her texts to endow their characters with a living presence as an African heirloom which is absolutely central to her work.

In *Beloved*, orality and the possibility of simulating it in a written text are thus inextricably tied up with the promise of resurrecting the dead—both those who are literally dead, such as Beloved and the victims of the Middle Passage, and those who are caught in the kind of 'death in life' which is the consequence of trauma. Significantly, the

scene which Denver and Beloved 'bring to life' in their antiphonal narration is itself the scene of a birth, and its protagonists are Sethe and the white girl Amy Denver, after whom Denver would later be named; when the narrator remarks at the end of the scene that "[there] was nothing to disturb them at their work. So they did it appropriately and well" (100), the comment seems to apply not only to young Sethe and Amy Denver, but just as much to Denver and Beloved, who have 'resurrected' them in their story. And again, this may be seen as dramatizing, on the novel's thematic level, the work that Morrison seeks to perform with her reader. In a conversation with Gloria Naylor, Morrison remarked that her image of Beloved was partly based on an old photograph by Van der Zee, showing a girl who had been killed by a jealous former lover ("A Conversation" 207); by writing about her, Morrison claims, she is effectively resurrecting her:

bit by bit I had been rescuing her from the grave of time and inattention. Her fingernails might be in the first book; face and legs, perhaps, the second time. Little by little bringing her back into living life. So that now she comes running when called [...] she is here now, alive. (217)

Here, bringing the girl back to life principally means giving her a body *through writing*. Remembering her is recollecting her body, part by part and word for word—literally 're-mem-bering' her. The pun here is not mine, but Morrison's: In another essay, she has described *Beloved* as being about "the process of re-mem-bering the body and its parts, re-mem-bering the family and the neighborhood, and our national history" ("Home" 6). It is just such a process of "re-mem-bering" which the characters in the novel undergo. Those who suffer from the trauma of slavery experience their bodies as fragmented or threatened by fragmentation. Overcoming the trauma means to restore the integrity of their bodies and to reclaim them as their own; as Sixo says about the power of his lover, the "Thirty-Mile Woman": "She gather me, man. The pieces I am, she gather them and give them back to me in all the right order" (321). At the end of the novel Paul D returns to Sethe, who has suffered a complete breakdown after the expulsion of Beloved by the women of the community.

He offers to take care of her and suggests that he begin by bathing her; Sethe wonders: "Nothing left to bathe, assuming he even knows how. Will he do it in sections? [...] And if he bathes her in sections, will the parts hold?" (321). This refers the reader back to the scene when Sethe first arrived at Bluestone 124 after her escape from Sweet Home and Baby Suggs bathed all the parts of her body, one after the other; and the act of cleansing and rejoining the body is linked, again, to storytelling, when the reader is informed that Paul D, as he proceeds to wash Sethe, "wants to put his story next to hers" (321).

It is, however, the figure of Baby Suggs, Sethe's mother-in-law, with whom this theme of 're-memberment'—of remembering and healing the slaves' dismembered personalities—is most persistently connected. After her son Halle has bought her freedom, Baby Suggs discovers, as if for the first time, that she has a body: "[S]uddenly she saw her hands and thought with a clarity as simple as it was dazzling: 'These hands belong to me. These *my* hands'" (166). Suggs becomes an "unchurched" (102) preacher to the community of free blacks around Cincinnati. The chief subject of her sermons, which she delivers in a place in the woods referred to as "the Clearing," is precisely the necessity of re-membering the body:

"Here," she said, "in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. [...] They don't love your eyes; they'd just as soon pick em out. No more do they love the skin on your back. Yonder they flay it. And O my people they do not love your hands. Those they only use, tie, bind, chop off and leave empty. Love your hands, love them! Raise them up and kiss them. [...] And O my people, out yonder, hear me, they do not love your neck unnoosed and straight. So love your neck; put a hand on it, grace it, stroke it and hold it up. And all your inside parts that they'd just as soon slop for hogs, you got to love them. The dark, dark liver—love it, love it, and the beat and beating heart, love that too. More than eyes or feet. More than lungs that have yet to draw free air. More than your life-holding womb and your life-giving private parts, hear me now, love your heart. (104-05)

Clifton Spargo has argued that this passage should be seen as evidence of Suggs's inability to extricate herself from trauma, as her speech reinscribes the mistreatment of the slaves' bodies even as it

renounces them (115). However, if it is read in conjunction with the passage where she bathes Sethe, it seems justified to understand it as another model for the process of healing, recovering and remembering towards which the novel as a whole seems to be gesturing. Like Denver's narration, Suggs's speech is not a monologue, but an antiphonal exchange with the community—a community whose social bond is created and reinforced in the shared act of recollecting the past. Suggs cannot “re-member” by herself—only the response of the community can consummate the ritual of healing. The reader, too, is supposed to step into that circle of intimacy which the novel creates and to answer Suggs's call for “re-membering,” becoming a member of the community and a story-teller in his turn; as Morrison writes (with reference to another novel, *Song of Solomon*): “The reader *as narrator* asks the questions the community asks, and both reader and [narrative] ‘voice’ stand among the crowd, within it, with privileged intimacy and contact [...]” (“Unspeakable Things” 37; my italics). Thus “history-making,” as Linda Krumholz has it, “becomes a healing process for the characters, the reader, and the author” (395). Just as antiphonal narration creates an intimacy between Denver and Beloved in which the past can be re-animated, and just as Baby Suggs's preaching creates a communal interiority where the body is re-membered, so *Beloved* is assumed to create a space into which the reader must step in order to fulfill its promise of communal restoration. The novel would thus do for the reader what Beloved does for Denver, allowing him to “see” and “feel” like the characters in the novel do—“through *Beloved*” (92; my italics).

IV

Now I certainly do not wish to contend that it is impossible to read *Beloved* in this way—it might very well be that this is an appropriate model of how the text functions in many class-rooms (and Linda Krumholz's suggestion that *Beloved* demands a new form of pedagogy which would replace “fact-based” instruction with “initiatory and

healing rituals" certainly seems to point in this direction; 405). Yet it must not be forgotten that such a take on the novel effectively conflates "the representation of cultural practices with the latter's operativity" (Schinko 303n; my translation). In other words, it assumes that the novel itself can function in the same way as the scenes of antiphony and oral instruction which the novel describes—that orality can be successfully simulated, as it were, in a written text. It should be obvious enough that such an understanding of the text's work must suppress some of the qualities which clearly separate the written from the spoken word and which always threaten to undercut the work of 're-membling' attributed to the latter.

To begin with, the spoken word disappears the moment after it has been uttered; what has been said can be repeated, but as the original utterance is no longer available for comparison, it is fully displaced by its reiterations—and it is precisely this circumstance which gives rise to the impression that oral memory (whose bearers remind "themselves from within," Plato 275a) is more faithful than written memory. This transience is not incidental, but a necessary prerequisite of oral communication: if speech persisted in time, subsequent utterances could not be understood. Accordingly, oral communication requires that its elements be ordered in a temporal sequence, that all of its participants are physically co-present in a shared space (such as Baby Suggs's Clearing), and that certain protocols of turn-taking are observed (such as antiphony). With written communication, a completely different set of restrictions comes into play. *Littera scripta manet*—as Christian Huck and Carsten Schinko explicate the consequences of Horace's dictum, words and sentences

can exist next to each other [...]. [This] spatial arrangement has an opposite effect on the participants in communication. They are now arranged in time. Writing and reading hardly ever occur simultaneously. [...] For communication in the medium of writing there is absolutely no need for a co-presence of the participants, they can be, and mostly are: scattered in space. (60)

Writing thus endows communication with both greater durability and wider reach, but it also imposes much higher hurdles for its continua-

tion—with the lack of a shared context, it becomes less probable that what is communicated is understood and taken up in a sympathetic manner. Within an oral setting, there is a direct feedback between the speaker and her audience. The speaker can observe how her words resonate with her audience and she can recalibrate her utterance to the exigencies of the moment. The writer, on the other hand, has no way of knowing how her words will be received, or who will receive them—she cannot see the reader's approving nod, nor can she lower her voice in order to exclude some potential listeners from communication. If the spoken word gathers the speaker and her listeners into a collective interiority, the letter puts writer and reader out in the open, at a remove from each other, in a way that neither can ever be sure whether communication was 'successful.' At the risk of overstating the point, one may say that oral discourse produces communities, while reading (at least after silent reading has become the norm) shapes people into individuals.⁴ The persistence of the written word allows for differing interpretations of its meaning, and, more importantly, it allows for these interpretations to be *observed* as differing. As Niklas Luhmann has argued, it therefore opens up the possibility of "assuming the position of a second-order observer" (36)—it makes it possible to observe how others observe the world, to compare their viewpoints (which now are simultaneously available), and thus exposes these viewpoints as contingent, i.e., as only one possibility among others. To some extent, this is of course also true for oral communication, yet here the experience of the signifier's indeterminacy is as fleeting as the signifier itself—the contingency of one's own understanding and the possibility of alternatives to the latter is easily passed over and forgotten. While it may be true that "reading a text oralizes it" (Ong 175, qtd. in Holloway 73; for a similar view, cf. Gadamer 441), the decisive difference to spoken discourse is that these oralizations can never entirely displace the texts which they are oralizations of. Thus, there is no more room for the illusion attending oral memory: that it could fully recover an original presence. What is recorded in writing can never achieve the same effect of presence as

that which is recalled in oral discourse—*because* it can never be fully forgotten.

What a 'therapeutic' understanding of the novel, insofar as it emphasizes the healing power of oral discourse, therefore usually entails is a sidelining of the text *as text*—a text which is *read* rather than received, and which therefore always threatens to puncture the intimacy of the simulated oral community because it allows itself to be read against the grain. The dismissive stance Morrison takes toward readers who refuse to participate in the work of "nommo" illustrates the point: "I learn nothing from those who resist it, except, of course, the sometimes fascinating display of their struggle" ("Unspeakable Things" 162). If simulated orality is to be effective, those who fail to be seduced by it must be kept outside. And there is another elision which most 'therapeutic' readings of the novel share, an elision which is correlated to their tendency to mistake the oral protocols described on the thematic level as models of their own relation to the text: such readings have relatively little to say about the fate of the *character* Beloved at the end of the novel, except that it clears the path for the recovery of the community. As Sethe devotes herself exclusively to her daughter's revenant, Beloved begins to drain her of her intellect, her vitality and even of her will to live. Alarmed, the women of the community gather in front of Bluestone 124 to exorcise the ghost. This is how the scene is described:

For Sethe it was as though the Clearing had come to her with all its heat and simmering leaves, where the voices of women searched for the right combination, the right key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words. Building voice upon voice until they found it, and when it did it was a wave of sound wide enough to sound deep water and knock the pods off chestnut trees. It broke over Sethe and she trembled like the baptized in its wash. (308)

Like so many other scenes of the book, this one, too, is clearly designed so as to exalt the power of the human voice to heal and to bring into being—Sethe is cleansed and "re-membered" as the community (which had shunned her since the infanticide) takes her

back inside the sonic circle of their song. All the differences that threaten to rend the community are suspended, sublated in a single "sound." Through their song, the women avail themselves of the creative power of "nommo" in its purest form. Morrison's wording explicitly sets it into opposition to a Western (more specifically, a Judeo-Christian) understanding of language, pointing to the continuing presence of African origins: "[...] Ella hollered. Instantly the kneelers and standers joined her. They stopped praying and took a step back to the beginning. In the beginning there were no words. In the beginning was the sound, and they all knew what that sound sounded like." (305) The "sound" is closer to music than to language, it communicates no particular meanings but only the togetherness of the community.

If this "sound" (rather than the semantic dimension of language) is the source from which oral discourse derives its power to recall the past into presence and to heal the community, a written text which strives to emulate these effects must, in a sense, disavow itself—it must entice the reader to lose sight of the letter. As Morrison has put it on several occasions, "language must get out of the way" (xix; cf. also "Unspeakable Things" 162) To be properly understood, this statement must be read against the backdrop of the idealized (and, in its final consequence, non-linguistic) notion of orality that is dramatized in *Beloved* and developed more explicitly in her poetological essays: what she is aiming at is, in fact, a language that would touch the reader with the same kind of immediacy which she attributes to the "sound"—a language which would deprive the reader of the possibility to distance himself, foreclosing reflection and thus, as Morrison states her purpose in the same quote, rendering "enslavement as a personal experience" (xix). When Morrison writes that "language must get out of the way," she is, I would therefore argue, also describing the process of "forgetting" the letters as the reader "oralizes" the text, bringing the characters of the novel into presence and being drawn into that space of intimacy where alone slavery can become such a personal experience. When *Beloved* commands Paul D to

"touch me on the inside part and call me my name" (137), the scene may thus be taken to allegorize the seduction of the reader by the novel, including his engulfment in an almost 'womb-like' interiority. As Paul D is seduced by Beloved, he is also "re-membered": the tobacco tin in which his traumatic memories were locked away breaks open, and he is awoken by the sound of his own voice repeating: "Red heart. Red heart. Red heart" (138). At the end of the novel, Paul D recalls the experience of "coupling with her": "beached and gobbling air, in the midst of repulsion and personal shame, he was thankful too for having been escorted to some ocean-deep place he once belonged to" (311). I am not sure whether this "ocean-deep place" is the very same one which the choir is "sounding" as it exorcizes Beloved (308); but certainly, it is yet another moment where the text figures its seductive effect on the reader, this time as he emerges ("beached and gobbling air") from the experience into which *Beloved* had drawn him—and appropriately, the scene is positioned only a few pages before the novel's end.

What "get[s] out of the way" at the end of the novel is, however, not only "language"—it is Beloved herself. And Beloved does not simply disappear. She falls apart, repeating her first decapitation and literalizing the fears of dismemberment which have haunted all of the novel's central characters. The language the text uses to describe her disintegration inverts the vocabulary of "re-membering" which we have already become familiar with: "Disremembered and unaccounted for, [...] the girl who waited to be loved and cry shame erupts into her separate parts, to make it easy for the chewing laughter to swallow her all away" (323). The community lets her fall into oblivion—and it does so in a manner that is characteristic for a primarily oral culture:

After they made up their tales, shaped and decorated them, those that saw [Beloved] that day on the porch quickly and deliberately forgot her. It took longer for those who had spoken to her, lived with her [...] to forget, until they realized they couldn't remember or repeat a single thing she said, and began to believe that, other than what they themselves were thinking, she hadn't said anything at all. So, in the end, they forgot her, too. (323-24)

Thus, on the concluding pages of the novel, *Beloved* unravels itself. Oral discourse, the text seems to indicate, can heal traumatized individuals by recreating the bonds that tie them into a single community, it can “re-member.” What it cannot remember is that every such act of remembrance, every production of a communal past is at the same time also an act of exclusion and selection, of forgetting—we are only able to remember some things because we forget others. The simulated orality of the text—or its temporary oralization in the act of reading—can produce a vicarious bond between the reader and the characters of the novel. However, this intimacy must break down as the reader puts down the book and the words on the page collapse back into bare letters, their very bareness calling for the reader’s return: “Down by the stream in the back of 124 her footprints come and go, come and go. They are so familiar. Should a child, an adult place his feet in them, they will fit. Take them out and they disappear again as though nobody ever walked there” (324). Like the ghost’s footprints, the written words remain, a reminder of that which had to be “dis(re)membered” in order for the community to re-member itself.

National Taipei University of Technology

NOTES

¹That Plato’s text remains strictly ambiguous on this point is Derrida’s contention in “Plato’s Pharmacy,” where the designation of writing as *pharmakon* serves him as a point of entry for elaborating the logic of the supplement.

²For Michaels, this conception of our relation to the past is part and parcel with the identitarian ontology which has debilitated political thought since the late 1960s.

³Of course, writing is also directly implicated in the subjection of African Americans, as its possession is both the criterion and the means by which the white masters define their humanity against the animality of their slaves—a circumstance that is impressively dramatized in the much discussed scene where the new master at Sweet Home, known to the reader only as “schoolteacher,” asks his nephews to list (in writing, and using the ink which Sethe had prepared)

Sethe's "animal characteristics" (228; for an analysis of this scene, as well for the question of Sixo's descent, cf. Keizer 108-09). However, literacy's power to supplant oral forms of sociality is not predicated on the role which it plays in racist ideology and can therefore be treated as a separate issue.

⁴Which then, of course, have to be re-collectivized in different ways—for examples, cf. Benedikt Anderson.

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Attitudes Towards Death in Middle English Lyrics and Hagiography

MATTHIAS GALLER

'How ben may yt
At ye to deth as gladly go
As to a feste?'

The attitude of the bulk of thirteenth- to fifteenth-century English lyrics towards death is captured in the refrain of a well-known poem by John Dunbar: "Timor mortis conturbat me."¹ Middle English and Middle Scots death lyrics focus on the frightening aspects of death and dying.² Pointing the listener or reader to the passing nature of happiness on earth, they warn of death's omnipotence, its suddenness and mercilessness. Dreadful and nauseous aspects of death and dying are described, like mankind's fear of death, the dying man's bodily and spiritual sufferings in the hour of death, and the putrefaction of the body. The majority of the poems can be used as evidence supporting the view of the late Middle Ages proposed by the Dutch scholar Johan Huizinga, who described the period as a time dominated by pessimism, hostility to life and obsession with death.³

Telling the lives of Christians who managed to overcome their human weakness, Middle English hagiography proposes a fundamentally different attitude towards death. The genre shares with the lyrics and many other medieval texts the attitude of *contemptus mundi*, the disregard for life on earth; but as saints' lives are dedicated to the description of the life and death of outstanding personalities from the history of faith, their treatment of death and dying produces different results. While the lyrics point to the contrast between man's life on earth, which he typically wastes in worldly pleasures, and his death bringing an end to it, in hagiography the saint's life and death form a

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unity. The martyr's sacrifice of his life consummates his testimony of faith during lifetime. In their death, saints proceed from life on earth (which they, unlike the rest of humanity, never felt very much attached to, anyway) to perfection in heaven. In this essay I want to focus on the striking differences in the treatment of death and dying in order to say more about the way Middle English genres interrelate with one another and possibly find out more about the reasons for these discrepancies.

We may suppose that the mostly anonymous authors of both genres were clerics, such as John Lydgate, John Audelay, James Ryman and Thomas of Hales. The death lyrics were written at a time when European intellectual life was dominated by Christian tenets. The impression we get from the texts, however, is that the warnings of the approaching end of our existence on earth, of the power of death and the sufferings of hell do not come up time and again because people were particularly religious, but on the contrary, they suggest that clerics saw the need to confront a growing religious indifference. Saints' lives and death lyrics are complementary as the former provide believers with models of a Christian life and death meant to inspire them to a life of piety in imitation of the saint, whereas the latter seek to impart to listeners and readers a fear of death and hell in order to give religious observance some further impetus. For this reason, Rosemary Woolf likens the function of the death lyrics to sermons, the main difference being that medieval religious lyrics apply the language of poetry to address listeners who might otherwise not be touched.⁴ The lyrics want to make listeners reflect on mortality, on their own future death and, by spreading fear, cause them to reform their way of life, while accounts of the glorious life and death of saints bring comfort and hope to believers.

In the lyrics, death is pictured as something quite commonplace, banal, devoid of all heroism. It forms an inextricable part of our human existence. One Middle English poem illustrates death's omnipresence by suggesting that it is hidden in man's shoe ("þar deth luteth in his swo / to him fordo").⁵ It accompanies, so to speak, our

human pilgrimage on earth wherever we go and will not be shaken off. According to another poem it lies in man's glove ("Deth is hud, mon, in þy gloue").⁶ Furthermore, death as described in the lyrics is something thoroughly distasteful and stands in stark contrast to the beauties of life on earth. This is taught by a poem from the first half of the fifteenth century, "The Signs of Corruption," which has a woman, beautiful and rich during her lifetime, give a detailed description of the putrefaction of her body: "Wormis fynden at me greet prow, / I am hire mete, I am hire drinke."⁷ A snake breeds in her back, the light of her eyes has gone out and her intestines rot. Her hair turns green, only grinning teeth remain in her skull:

In mi riggeboon brediþ an addir kene,
Min eizen dasewyn swiþe dymme:
Mi guttis rotin, myn heer is grene,
Mi teef grennen swiþe grymme.⁸

Her former beauty has faded; her fingers and feet, eyes, ears, arms and legs fall apart. She urges the living to face up to the transience of human beauty in time, inconvenient though it may be, and direct their thoughts to the last things.

The lyrics show a fascination with this formidable natural force which disregards human hierarchies and subjects even the highest members of society to its commands. In "Knight, King, Clerk Wend to Death," one of the Middle English *Vado-mori*-poems, a knight, representing physical power, a king, who occupies the top of the social hierarchy, and a clergyman, representing human intellect, mourn their impotence when faced with death. The king comments that in death worldly honour and happiness become worthless. He is subject to the human fate ("þe kynde wai") like everyone else:

I Wende to dede, knight stithe in stoure,
thurghe fyght in felde i wane þe flour;
Na fightis me taght þe dede to quell—
weend to dede, soth i 3ow tell.

I weende [to dede], a kynge I-wisse;
 What helpis honor or werldis blysse?
 Dede is to mane þe kynde wai—
 i wende to be clade in clay.

I wende to dede, clerk ful of skill,
 þar couth with worde men mare & dill.
 Sone has me made þe dede ane ende—
 beese ware with me! to dede i wende.⁹

Knowing that death treats people the same regardless of their position in society may comfort some and frighten others. In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries death was seen as the great leveller of social inequality. It is the time when the well-known dances of death were painted on church walls across Europe, illustrating the almightiness of death and the equality of people from all walks of society when faced with it. The *topos* of death the leveller features in Middle English lyrics as in this one, which stresses that the powerful, the strong, the young and the beautiful are just as prone to death as anyone else:

[...] nis king ne Quene
 þat ne sel drinke of deth-is drench. [...]
 Ne mai strong ne starch ne kene
 a-ȝlyde deth-is wiþer-clench;
 ȝung and old and brith an-siene,
 al he riueth an his streng.¹⁰

As opposed to this, hagiography, in its description of the saint's death, shows how different they are from the rest of mankind. The passage describing the saint's death is the climax of each legend, the apotheosis of their saintliness and longed-for end of their suffering on earth.¹¹ Dying for Christ at the hands of the enemies of Christianity, a martyr seems to find the fulfilment of his life in this kind of death as an ultimate testimony of faith. Only few saints die of a natural death at high age, no saint dies of sickness or hunger, in consequence of an accident or warfare or during childbirth. These common causes of death in the

Middle Ages do not seem to concern saints. They stand above 'ordinary' death just as they are raised above ordinary mankind in their familiarity with God. In order to spice up the account of a saint's death, authors like to dwell on how his or her antagonists use all their ingeniousness to increase the martyr's suffering. Technical appliances like the wheel of St. Katherine typically fail to work and the executioner needs to resort to beheading.¹²

The Willingness to Die and the Fear of Death

The most prominent theme of the lyrics is the transience of life on earth. Worldly affairs lead people astray, yet fortune is fickle and lifts her favourites up in order to laugh at them later when they fall. The world's truth is painted, i.e. only an illusion, and turns into deceit:

This febyll world, so fals and so vnstable,
Promoteth his louers for a lytell while,
But at the last he yeveth hem a bable
Whene his peynted [trowth is torned in-to gile].¹³

Even though hagiography shares with the lyrics the attitude of *contemptus mundi*, its focus lies on how the saint reacts to this insight and aims at spiritual fulfilment. Aspiring to be unified with God, saints despise attractions of the world such as wealth, power and marriage. They oppose the transience of this world with their constancy in faith. The legends of St. George, St. Katherine of Alexandria and St. Margaret of Antioch, the three most popular saints in medieval England, stress the martyrs' determination to die for their faith. In Alexander Barclay's *The Life of St. George*,¹⁴ for example, the saint's constancy is contrasted with the fickleness of a multitude of Christians intimidated by Dacian, governor of the city of Diaspolin in Persia. The ruler threatens the city's Christians with torture and death should they refuse to sacrifice to heathen idols. George is saddened at his fellow

believers' renouncing their faith for fear of death and chooses martyrdom. He gives his money to the poor, sells his armour—thus divesting himself of his previous role as a knight—and publicly professes his faith. The reason he states for the voluntary sacrifice of his life is his thankfulness for God's saving mankind on the cross, for which his death is only a small gift in return. George is determined to die in order to manifest his devotion to Christ, just as he ventured his life when he was fighting the dragon earlier on. All creatures have to die sooner or later, he argues, and life on earth is of small worth only. Through his martyrdom, he wants to "fortify [God's] right," which he considers more important than his life. The Christian knight applies the knightly code of honour to questions of faith:

[...] no thyng shall tourne my mynde
 From this byleve though I shulde deth indure
 Deth is laste ende of euery creature
 The noblest dede that longyth to a knight
 Is for to dye to fortyfye the right. (1788-92)

Likewise, the legend of St. Katherine stresses the martyr's readiness to sacrifice her life by contrasting her steadfastness with the weakness of other Christians. The apostasy of numerous frightened believers prompts Katherine to openly confess her faith to Maxentius, the ruler of Alexandria. In the course of the legend, Katherine manages to proselytise fifty wise men, who have come to Alexandria in order to disprove her convictions. She later even converts her antagonist's spouse and two hundred knights. In medieval hagiography, characters like the martyr, the antagonist, the antagonist's spouse, the court official, the prison ward and the executioner can only be either good or bad. Good characters let themselves be converted to the Christian faith and follow the martyr into death. As a result of their dispute with the saint, the fifty sages confess their Christian belief and remain steadfast when faced with the emperor's threats. Having burnt all of them on the stake, Maxentius tries in vain to make Katherine abandon her faith. He flatters her, he argues with her, he threatens violence and

finally tortures her, but Katherine remains firmly disposed to die for her saviour:

for I desyre to deye for hyme,
fra lestand deide þat can me wyne¹⁵

St. Margaret seeks a martyr's death even before she first meets her would-be seducer and antagonist Olibrius, governor of Antioch. Her youthful age stands in contrast to her uncompromising readiness to receive death for her Christian belief. In Bokenham's version, the governor offers her his love, which she, as we would expect, refuses. She wants to remain a virgin and die for Christ in recompense for Christ's death on the cross:

I nowise doute, for cristys sake
That for alle men deyed, deth to take.¹⁶

The saints' willingness to die stands in sharp contrast to the fear of death we find articulated in the death lyrics:

Lade, helpe! Ihesu, merce!
Timor mortis conturbat me.
Dred of dep̃, sorow of syn,
Troblis my hert ful greuysly.¹⁷

It seems to be natural for the poetry of a century troubled with the plague to address mankind's fear of death frequently. Seeing entire communities die during the spread of the Black Death (around 1348) made people feel as if they were in the hands of an arbitrary and hostile power. The Church Fathers distinguished between two kinds of religious fear, the *timor servilis*, meaning the fear of punishment in the other world, and the *timor filialis* or *castus*, meaning man's fear of losing God's paternal love. It sounds paradox that Christianity, which teaches the good news of the resurrection of Christ, would also teach believers to fear death. This contradiction may be solved by pointing out that faith in the resurrection brings hope only to those who have a

clear conscience. The fact that everyone will have to give an account for their lives after death makes the sinner—which we all are, according to St. Augustine¹⁸—afraid. Medieval Christianity, however, believed in God's mercy for those who repented, even if this change of mind occurred only in the hour of death. The religious lyrics of the period wanted "to dispel the comforting remoteness by emphasizing both the uncertainty and the inevitability of death"¹⁹ and shake people out of their relaxedness about faith in order to save them of damnation inflicted upon them as punishment for a sinful life.

In some way or other this fear is discussed in almost every one of the poems referred to as 'death lyrics.' The fear of death and speculations inspired by our ignorance of the future destiny of the soul can be found in religions and cultures worldwide and seem to be universal to mankind. Whereas Old French death poetry is more intellectually challenging, early (thirteenth century) Middle English poems are of a meditative character. In the fourteenth century, especially in the poems found in the Vernon Manuscript, Middle English lyrics gain in philosophical depth. "Think on Yesterday" pictures death as an aggressive neighbour who keeps threatening to attack someone, who therefore stays indoors to keep safe. In the same way, death poses a constant threat to mankind. We know that we will be 'attacked' some time, but we do not know when this will be:

Wel þou wost wiþ-uten fayle
 Þat deþ haþ manast þe to dye,
 But whon þat he wol þe a-sayle,
 Þat wost þou not, ne neuer may spye.²⁰

Death hangs over man's life like the sword of Damocles. Unlike animals, man is conscious of his precarious situation between this world and the other and tries to come to grips with this problem by reflecting upon it ("*penke* of *zuster-day*").

Quite differently, saints' lives look at death as something to be wished and waited for. Martyrs not only gladly lose their lives in following Christ, they even seem to joyfully await their cruel deaths.

The saint's confidence is often set in contrast to the mourning and despair of anonymous admirers. We get the impression that, throughout the legend, the martyr consciously aims at death as the culminating point of a life in succession of Christ. Life on earth is a time of temptations and trials, whereas death brings the end of all suffering and leads towards the apotheosis of their faith and to their reception into God's presence. This joyful acceptance of death by the martyr remains a mystery for his or her antagonist. Maximus, who has been ordered to guard Cecilia's spouse Valerian and Valerian's brother Tiburce in prison, broaches the question of death and asks them about the reasons for their unnatural joy:

'[...] how ben may yt
At ye to deth as gladly go
As to a feste?' quod valeryan þo:
'If þou wylt to us make promys
To beleuyn, þou shalt seyn, I-wys,
Aftyr oure deth oure soulys vp wende
To þat ioyful blys wych neuere shal ende.'²¹

Maximus is so impressed that he also converts to Christianity. Bokenham's St. Katherine even urges her tormentors to speedily torture and execute her. She feels that she has been called by Christ into heaven, for which she gives her life on earth only too willingly (7080-85). Katherine's joyful expectation of martyrdom contrasts with the mourning of bystanders. A number of women have followed her to the site of the execution and weep over the young woman's death. Katherine calls upon them to cease their mourning and rejoice with her instead:

'O nobyl wyuys & wedwys & maydyns ying,
Leuyth your heuynesse & your wepyng,
& lettyth no wyse youre entencyoun
Be besy for to lettyn my passyoun,
But rather ioyith & makyth good chere
That my lord, my loue, no lengere here

Wyl me suffryn, but to hys house
 Home with hym ledyn as hys owyn spouse.'
 (*Lyf of S. Kateryne* 7285-92)

As the martyr may expect a glorious reception in heaven, life on earth becomes worthless for her. Understanding its futility, however, is in no ways painful as it is in the lyrics. Katherine wants to leave this world, which makes her "suffryn," as soon as possible and enter God's kingdom, the place where she feels that she belongs and where she will enjoy a privileged status as God's "spouse." The *South English Legendary* describes a bewildering, almost paradoxical scene preceding St. Margaret's death: Malchus, the executioner, cannot find it in his heart to kill the beautiful and innocent girl. A light from heaven surrounding the martyr makes him sense her holiness. He would rather ascend with her to heaven than load himself with guilt for her execution. Anticipating her glorious reception in heaven, the saint, however, is as little pleased at the executioner's pricks of conscience as at her well-wishing friends' advice. She thus urges him to speedily proceed, after which both the saint and her executioner die simultaneously. It is a pity that we never learn what becomes of Malchus's soul.²²

Likewise, saints who die a natural death rejoice at the approach of their lives' end. The greater the pains St. Edmund suffers, the happier he feels. He holds no doubt that he is going to be received in heaven soon:

þe more is body i-pined was: þe ner was þen ende;
 And þo is ende-day was I-come: he wuste 3wodere wiende.
 Euere þe more þat he was in sicknesse and in wo,
 Þe gladdore he was, for he wuste 3wodere he scholde go,
 And þe more he was in loye [...].²³

With the help of pope Urban and an angel, St. Cecilia manages to convert her spouse Valerian to Christianity. Tiburce, Valerian's brother, is also willing to join the band of Christian believers, which is growing fast, yet needs to act in secrecy for fear of persecutions. He

does not seem to be disinclined to join them, but he has misgivings because of the dangers that arise with belonging to a persecuted sect. Pope Urban is wanted by the emperor and whoever is caught in his company might lose his life, a risk Tiburce is not prepared to run for his new faith. In order to convince him, Cecilia tries to explain to him her understanding of the Christian gospel. Thanks to Christ's death and resurrection and the promise of eternal life for his followers, life on earth has become meaningless. Life in heaven, in contrast, not only lasts forever, it is immeasurably more joyful than life here in this world. Later in the legend, the two men are caught burying the bodies of Christians murdered by the myrmidons of governor Almachus. They now need to explain their faith to their persecutors: Christ's followers, they say, who suffer torture and death here on earth, are rewarded in heaven with eternal bliss. Pagans, in contrast, are threatened with eternal pain in hell:

For we now here in þis lyf present
 Suffren myscheef, peyn & torment
 Wyche sone be doon, but whan we hens wende
 We receue ioye that neuere shal haue ende.
 But ye doon euene þe contrary,
 For ioye ye han here transytory
 And momentanye; but, whan ye hens go,
 To þe place ye wende of endless wo.

(Bokenham, *Lyf of S. Cycles* 7945-52)

According to the martyrs, bliss or damnation after death indirectly correlate with the circumstances of life in this world and the manner of our death. A short life here on earth and death in succession of Christ are rewarded with paradise, while a long and enjoyable life almost automatically leads to damnation. Consequently, it is up to everyone of us to 'exchange' our happiness on earth for heaven's bliss. Saints' legends tend to simplify the message of the gospel, supposing that human notions of justice equally apply in heaven.

The claim that followers of Christ could simply swap life on earth for heaven and that a cruel martyr's death guarantees eternal bliss can

be found in a number of legends. St. Margaret, for example, is convinced that in compensation for her suffering, she will be spared the Last Judgement.²⁴ Similarly, Bokenham's Katherine promises the empress "eternal rule" in exchange for earthly power and an immortal husband, Christ, in exchange for mortal Maxentius. Then she exhorts the empress not to fear the pains of martyrdom, because they are temporary and lead to eternal bliss. According to the saint, giving away one's life in exchange for the glory of martyrdom is a "commutacyoun of wysdam" (6961-64).

Images of the Otherworld

The idea that man could 'drive a bargain' with God and exchange life on earth for heaven is found nowhere in the death lyrics. They argue that whatever kind of life one has led, no one can be sure of salvation. According to them, it is left to God's unfathomable judgement to decide whether the soul will be saved or not. Man is not granted admission to heaven automatically as a recompense for constancy in faith or for a righteous way of life. The God of the lyrics remains an unpredictable divine power beyond human understanding and the criteria according to which he grants or refuses his mercy remain hidden to us. The feeling of being helplessly subject to an incalculable and arbitrary will creates a dismal atmosphere in the death lyrics. Even the most pious await the Last Judgement filled with apprehension. The knowledge of death and the uncertainty of what might follow poison man's life on earth as soon as he starts to reflect upon it:

Wanne ich þenche þinges þre
 ne mai neure bliþe be:
 þat on is ich sal awe,
 þat oþer is ich ne wot wilk day.
 þat þridde is mi meste kare,
 i ne woth nevre wuder i sal fare.²⁵

The precariousness of life and the uncertainty of death are not the only fears addressed by the death lyrics. They go to great lengths to warn their audience of what might happen to their souls if they do not heed their advice, in contrast to the saints' lives, who reserve the threat of eternal damnation to the saints' heathen opponents. Of course, the notion of a dreadful place where the souls of the deceased are imprisoned predates the Middle Ages. Greek mythology tells of doomed figures like Tantalus or Sisyphus suffering eternal tortures in Hades. Yet at no time was the fear of hell more widespread and intense than in the Middle Ages. In order to give listeners and readers a further incentive to repent and atone for their sins, the death lyrics illustrate the tortures of hell in glaring colours. The thirteenth-century poem "Memorare Novissima Tua" describes how, step by step, the body descends from the deathbed to the floor, from the floor into the grave ("pitte") and further on into hell where never ending pains wait for it:

If man him biðocte
 inderliche & ofte
 hu arde is te fore
 fro bedde te flore
 hu rueful is te flitte
 fro flore te pitte,
 fro pitte to pine
 ðat neure sal fine,
 i þene non sinne
 sulde his herte þinnen.²⁶

The sufferings of hell are evoked as a strong warning against committing sins. The two introductory lines point to the meditative character of this thirteenth-century English poem. These short verses can easily be memorized and recited, unlike the long-drawn and profound reflections found in the Vernon Manuscript. A bulky thirteenth-century poem, "The Latemest Day," fans the fear of hell by giving a detailed description of the devil:

Wose seiye þene feind, hu lotliche he boe,
 Hornes on is heuet & hornes on is cnoe,
 Nis non þinc on liue of so ateliche bloe;
 Wose come hondur his hont ded he moste boe.²⁷

He stares wildly about, fire springs from his nostrils and his eyes shine like glowing cauldrons. In this description Satan becomes a hybrid bugbear, a mixture of man, dragon and horned beast. "Death," another poem, describes the pains of hell in a thoroughly down-to-earth imagery. The soul, addressing the body for whose guilt it has been thrown to hell, suffers hunger and coldness, while at the same time being roasted over glowing coals by Satan and bathing in boiling pitch:

For alle þine gultes
 fongen schal mede.
 þat is hunger and chele
 and fur-bernynde glede.
 And so me wule sathanas
 ful atelyche brede.
 [...]
 In a bytter baþ
 ich schal baþe naked.
 Of pych and of brunston
 wallynde is maked.²⁸

The otherworld imagined by contemporary hagiography is thoroughly different. Saints never doubt that a glorious reception into heaven will immediately follow their death. Their dying hour is not a time of self-examination, of loss of faith, doubts or anxiety as described in the *ars moriendi* booklets. Yet we never learn what paradise will be like. Heaven is surely to be imagined as something excessively precious and desirable, but no counterpart of the death lyrics' burning cauldrons is mentioned. The notion of heaven remains obscure, inaccessible to human imagination, impossible to grasp. In the version of the *Scottish Legendary*, Katherine describes heaven to the freshly converted Porphyrius in the following terms:

in þat kinrik þat is so clere,
 quhar for delyt men lewis here,
 þai sall haf euir-lestand lyff
 but payne or verray duel or striffe.
 & gif þu franis quhat thing is þare;
 þar is ese & sic welfare
 þat ma nocht wthir-ways be
 expondit na wudone to þe;
 bot all þat gud is, It is þare,
 & illthing ma þar cum neuir mare.
 & gif þu speris quhat gud þat is;
 It is sic gud, I tell þe þis,
 þat neuir ere herd, na yhet saw hye,
 na mycht in hart comprissit be
 þat god has grathit for all þai
 þat seru is hyme here, quhen þa hyne ga.²⁹

Life in heaven lasts forever ("euir-lestand"), she promises, leaving unsaid how—if at all—eternity can be imagined. The notion of heavenly bliss is even harder to grasp. "Kinrik," "ese" and "welfare" are rather vague terms, too closely associated with earthly notions to adequately describe happiness in the other world. In her depiction of heavenly bliss, Katherine stresses the *absence* of earthly suffering ("payne," "duel," "strife"). According to her, heaven can be imagined as the negation of all unpleasant aspects of life here on earth. Heaven means the presence of everything that is good and the absence of everything that is bad ("illthing"). But again, what do earthly qualities such as 'good' or 'bad' mean with regard to the other world? Descriptions of heavenly bliss therefore end acknowledging that it simply *cannot* be imagined, since it is more beautiful than anything our ears have ever heard or our eyes ever seen on this earth (723-24).

Heaven is conspicuously absent in the death lyrics. They do not recommend a particular way of life which might promise admittance to paradise after death as they would not accept that man, sinful by nature, could reach heaven by means of repentance and good deeds anyway. The fact that the decision whether our soul will be saved or damned is taken by an unfathomable God and that its destiny is beyond our control makes death so frightening. In this point, the

death lyrics seem to anticipate the Protestant doctrine of salvation. According to the thoroughly 'Catholic' genre of hagiography, people can 'qualify' for heaven through their behaviour on earth, or force a bargain ("commutacyoun") upon God—saintly life and death rewarded with paradise. Whoever sacrifices their life for Christ is a martyr and has a rightful claim to heaven, even if they have not been baptised, or do not yet fully trust the gospel's promise, like the spouse of Dacian in the legend of St. George or the fifty wise men in the legend of St. Katherine. We could try and soften the contrast between medieval hagiography's promise of salvation and the fear of damnation prominent in the death lyrics by arguing that giving one's life for Christ is already proof of a particularly strong faith, and that it is ultimately not the pains suffered, but the faith in Christ expressed through the voluntary suffering which grants martyrs their admittance into God's realm.

We would, however, unduly simplify the contrast between death lyrics and hagiography if we claim that the one spoils believers their earthly happiness by picturing death in its darkest colours while the other promises paradise as the reward for an exemplary Christian life and death. There are some Middle English death lyrics that propose alternative views on death and dying. In the literature of classical antiquity we find the image of death as peaceful sleep, as longed-for harbour or final destination of a painful journey marked by the strokes of fate. In this view, death seems to be devoid of all frightening aspects. Dividing man into body and soul, medieval Christianity thought of spiritual life, the life of the soul, as much more important than physical life and believed in the Last Judgement and a punishing God. Nevertheless, there are poems written near the end of the medieval period which look at death more positively, possibly inspired by classical literature. This fifteenth-century poem, for example, takes up the antique *topos* of death as a port of peace:

Here ys the reste of all your besynesse,
 Here ys the porte of peese, & resstfulnes
 to them that stondeth In stormes of dys[e]se,

only refuge to wreches In dystrese,
and all comforte of myschefe & mys[e]se.³⁰

Longing for death is certainly not typical of Middle English poetry. Only unbearable pains make the speaker of a poem by James Ryman wish for death ("O dredefull deth, come, make an ende, / Come vnto me and do thy cure").³¹ Despite physical pains, death remains "dredefull" in these lines. "Death, the Soul's Friend," however, is a Middle English poem with an unconventionally positive view of death. The Last Judgement and divine punishments are faded out here; still the poem remains within the context of late medieval convictions of faith. Its topic is the longing of the human soul for its maker:

Thynk & dred noght for to dy,
syn þou sall nedis þer-to;
Thynk þat ded is opynly
ende off werdes wo;
Thynk als so, bot if þou dy,
to god may þou noght go;
Thynk & hald þe payed þer-by,
þou may noght ffele þer-fro.
With an .O. & an .I., þan thynk me it is so,
þat ded sal be þi sawl frend, & erthly lyff þi ffo.³²

The poem claims that if you reflect on death you will come to lose your fear of it and regard it as your soul's friend. The listener or reader is invited four times to "thynk" instead of letting himself be guided by his emotions ("& dred noght"). Three arguments against the fear of death are mentioned: The first simply says that we shall not resist what must happen. The second sees in death the end of a life of suffering. The third argument says that God loves his creatures and that the human soul longs for its maker. Only death sets it free to return to God. The optimistic attitude of this poem springs from a positive relationship between God and man. As in mysticism, life on earth is equated with death while death turns out to be the beginning of eternal life:

Thynk þat þou ert ded alway,
 qwyllis þat þou dwellis here;
 Thynk þi lyff be-gynnis ay,
 qwen þou ert layd apon a bere;³³

Saints consider life in this world to be a time of trials imposed on them to show that they justly deserve heaven. They are happy to exchange this life for heaven. Doing so, they blindly trust the promise of Christ that those who die for him will be rewarded with paradise. The saints of Middle English hagiography are model Christians, they have overcome their attachment to this world and their fear of death. For the 'average' believer, to whom the *ars moriendi* booklets are addressed, the hour of death is a dreaded fight for salvation, whereas the saints regard it merely as the final test of their saintliness. They rely on God's assistance, who uses them as tools in order to demonstrate his power. Saints identify with their soul, regarding their body as an impediment on their way to God, as their weak side, which may be overcome by torture. Death, the moment when body and soul are separated, brings them the longed-for end of their suffering and opens the gates of heaven for them. In hagiography, death is perceived *ex negativo*, as the end or absence of life on earth. As saints long for God and do not doubt that they will be accepted into heaven, they rejoice at the approach of their lives' end.

The question remains how two different ways of looking at death were able to coexist during the late medieval period, supposedly so uniform in its religious doctrine and world view. Both hagiography and death lyrics were written at the same time and for the same audience, possibly even by the same authors.³⁴ We might suggest the explanation that the two genres focus on different periods in the history of salvation. Saints' lives relate the life and death of outstanding figures from the early history of Christianity, the time of persecutions in Rome, or from times when a Christian country such as Anglo-Saxon England was threatened by invading pagans. In ancient Rome, Christians were a persecuted minority, miracles happened and God interfered more often in the ways of the world.

The death lyrics, however, address the late medieval present, a time felt to be 'degenerate' when compared to the lifetime of the saints. Clerical authors would have wanted to provide their audience with both, saints' lives for encouragement and death lyrics as a warning. Nevertheless, there remains an irreconcilable contrast between the claim that a martyr's death guarantees admittance to heaven and the gnawing uncertainty of what will happen to the soul after death irrespective of how a Christian has led his life. We can conclude that late medieval convictions of faith were in no way as uniform as we might suppose when looking back at these centuries pre-dating the reformation. Considering other Middle English genres, such as moralities, romances and ballads, will further widen the spectrum and provide us with an amplitude of different approaches to questions of death and dying.

Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität
München

NOTES

¹John Dunbar, "I that in Heill Wes and Gladness," also known as his "Lament for the Makaris," *The Makars*, ed. J. A. Tasioulas (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1999).

²On death lyrics see Rosemary Woolf, *The English Religious Lyric in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1968); Douglas Gray, *Themes and Images in the Medieval English Religious Lyric* (London: RKP, 1972); Philippa Tristram, *Figures of Life and Death in Medieval English Literature* (London: Elek, 1976), and Matthias Galler, *O Death, thou comest when I had thee least in mind: Der Umgang mit dem Tod in der mitttelenglischen Literatur* (Frankfurt a. M.: Lang, 2007).

³Johan Huizinga, *The Waning of the Middle Ages: A study of the forms of life, thought and art in France and the Netherlands in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries*, trans. F. Hopman (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972; orig. *Herfsttij der middeleeuwen*, Haarlem: Willink, 1919) ch. 9.

⁴Woolf 67-68.

⁵Carleton Brown, *English Lyrics of the 13th Century* (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1932) no. 10 (A), ll. 29-30.

⁶Carleton Brown, *English Lyrics of the 14th Century* (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1924) no. 23, l. 31.

⁷MS Bodley 789, quoted from Woolf 317-18, ll. 11-12.

⁸Woolf ll. 17-20.

⁹Carleton Brown, *Religious Lyrics of the 15th Century* (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1939) no. 158 (A).

¹⁰Brown, *13th Century*, no. 10, ll. 7-8 and 11-14.

¹¹In "La mort et le corps des saints: la scène de la mort dans les Vitae du haut Moyen Age," *Le Moyen Age: Revue d'Histoire et de Philologie* 94 (1988): 21-50, Michel Lauwers looks at Latin saints' lives of the seventh to tenth centuries and notes that the scene of the saint's death mostly has a central meaning. The majority of the vitae dedicate a quarter of the narrative to the representation of the saint's death. This scene is the final and climactic point of each legend (22). Hagiographic death scenes are strongly stereotyped, the saints lose their individuality. Their idealised death is represented as a model of Christian dying (32).

¹²Mary's special status as mother of Christ is affirmed by her ascent to heaven. She is spared the unwelcome aspects of 'medieval' death such as pains, the five temptations during the last moments (cf. *ars moriendi*) and the putrefaction of the body.

¹³Brown, *15th Century*, no. 149, 22-25.

¹⁴Alexander Barclay, *The Life of St. George*, ed. William Nelson, EETS OS 230 (London: OUP, 1955).

¹⁵*Legends of the Saints in the Scottish Dialect of the Fourteenth Century*, ed. William M. Metcalfe, vol. 2, Scottish Text Society 23 and 25 (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1896) *L. Katerine*, 474, ll. 1101-02.

¹⁶*The South English Legendary*, ed. Charlotte D'Evelyn and Anna J. Mills, EETS OS 235, 236 and 244 (London: OUP, 1956 and 1959) *The Legend of St. Margaret*, ll. 66-67.

¹⁷*The Poems of John Audelay*, ed. Ella K. Whiting, EETS OS 184 (London: OUP, 1931) no. 51, 1-4.

¹⁸St. Augustine supposes that since the fall of man, we have been under the necessity to sin. We cannot *not* sin ("non posse non peccare"), saying that we have been left with the freedom *to* sin, but not with the freedom to decide against it (Augustine, *De natura et gratia* 49.57, PL 44.274; *De correptione et gratia* 12.33, PL 44.936).

¹⁹Woolf 75.

²⁰Brown, *14th Century*, no. 101, 157-60.

²¹*Legendys of Hooly Wummen by Osbern Bokenham*, ed. Mary S. Serjeantson, EETS OS 206 (London: OUP, 1938) *Lyf of S. Cysyle*, 7998-8004.

²²*The South English Legendary, St. Margaret*, 303-08.

²³*The Early South English Legendary*, ed. Carl Horstmann, EETS OS 87 (London: Trübner, 1887) 590-94. Second quoted line: "And although his last day had come: He knew where he would go."

²⁴Bokenham's version, ll. 598-602.

²⁵Brown, *13th Century*, no. 12 (A): "Three Sorrowful things."

²⁶Brown, *13th Century*, no. 13.

²⁷Brown, *13th Century*, no. 29, 81-84.

²⁸"Death," *An Old English Miscellany*, ed. Richard Morris, EETS OS 49 (London: Trübner, 1872) no. 23, ll. 195-200 and 209-12.

²⁹*Legends of the Saints*, ed. Metcalfe, vol. 2, *L. Katherine* ll. 717-32.

³⁰Brown, *15th Century*, no. 164, 4-8.

³¹"Die Gedichte des Franziskaners Jakob Ryman," ed. Julius Zupitza, *Archiv* 89 (1892): 167-338, no. 95, 1-2.

³²Brown, *15th Century*, no. 163, 51-60.

³³Brown, *15th Century*, no. 163, 61-64.

³⁴John Lydgate, for example, is the author of saints' lives and of a Middle English version of the *Dance of Death*, which, in its views on death, is very close to the lyrics.

“Betray’d to Shame”: *Venice Preserved* and the Paradox of She-Tragedy

ELIZABETH GRUBER

Introduction: Murdering Women

As is well known, when English theaters re-opened during the Restoration, women were allowed to act in them. This innovation would seem, initially, to be an unqualified boon for women, with a material gain (a new career) being made available to them. And yet, as critics such as Jean I. Marsden have shown, the phenomenon of actresses may actually have intensified women’s objectification.¹ For example, Marsden observes: “In a social system that had already identified women as commodities for homosocial exchange, the advent of the actress presented an opportunity for visual representation of this exchange” (9). Ironically, then, the freshly-minted career of actress generated new mechanisms whereby women were transformed into tradable goods. In any case, capitalizing on a cultural fascination with actresses, Restoration and eighteenth-century dramatists created a new dramatic form: she-tragedy. This sub-genre of plays, as Marsden has commented, showcases “the suffering and often tragic end of a central, female figure” (65). Paradoxically, perhaps, the female protagonists of she-tragedy assume center stage only so that their suffering and victimization can be emphasized.

An especially potent vehicle for examining how the doomed women of she-tragedy differ from the murdered (or murdering) women of Renaissance drama is provided in Thomas Otway’s *Venice Preserved* (1682), which helped to inaugurate the genre of she-tragedy. But even as it heralds a new genre, Otway’s play likewise hearkens back to an earlier text: Shakespeare’s *Othello*. *Venice Preserved* can be grasped as a

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deliberate response to and adaptation of Shakespeare's play. More specifically, *Venice Preserved* re-constitutes the relationship between domestic and political concerns, and this new calibration of *Othello*'s tensions seems designed to rescue the genre of tragedy from incursions by less-lofty subject matter.² When *Venice Preserved* is examined alongside its Shakespearean predecessor, the politics of she-tragedy shift into focus. Perhaps surprisingly, Otway's adaptation reasserts tragedy as a masculine space, and as the site of male privilege and prerogative.

Defining Adaptation

Because I am proposing to read *Venice Preserved* as an adaptation of *Othello*, a definition of adaptation is in order. Rather than viewing adaptation as merely a patchwork of similarities, or as a straightforward set of allusions to a 'primary' source, it is more productive to conceive of adaptation as a particular textual energy, a mode of transformation that highlights connections between texts and the conditions in which and for which they are produced. Interestingly, Otway's revisionist efforts prove to be similar to the principles of adaptation employed by Shakespeare in his re-working of source-materials for *Othello*.

Earlier definitions of adaptation tended to award preeminence to 'original' sources rather than their derivatives or descendants. For example, in his analysis of literary genealogy, Harold Bloom examines the ways in which poets must, necessarily, respond to the work of their predecessors. Fashioning an Oedipal myth out of "the relationship of works to their literary predecessors," Bloom suggests that writers (suffering from the anxiety-principle) attempt the "symbolic slaying" of the influential authors preceding them (9-11). In the first edition of *The Anxiety of Influence*, Bloom contends that Shakespeare is exempted from the fear provoked by having to compete with literary progenitors. Bloom writes: "Shakespeare belongs to the giant age

before the flood, before the anxiety of influence became central to poetic consciousness" (11). Casting Shakespeare as reigning deity of the writers' Eden he imagines, Bloom suggests that texts are progressively more fallen the further they move from the sublimely creative moment in which the specter of influence was negligible. With Shakespeare as perpetual anomaly, each new generation of writers is painfully aware of falling from literary grace.

Traditionally, much of the critical work examining Shakespeare's use of sources has upheld Bloom's ranking-system and accepted his designation of Shakespeare's texts as exceptional. For example, we might consider Kenneth Muir's analysis of the relationship between *Othello* and its primary source, a chapter included in *Hecatomithi* (Ten Tales) by the Italian writer Giraldi Cinthio. Muir observes that in the Italian version of the tale, "Disdemona is a virtuous lady of great beauty who falls in love with the Moor, not out of lust or feminine appetite, but because of his virtues" (123). In the original text, the ur-Iago falls in love with Disdemona and subsequently concludes that she has not rejected him in favor of the Moor but because she prefers the Moor's second-in-command (who becomes Cassio in *Othello*). In Cinthio's narrative, therefore, the Iago-figure has a clearly defined motive for engineering discontent and catalyzing murder. Conversely, because Shakespeare's villain lacks a convincing or coherent motive, *Othello* ventures into new psychological and psychic spaces. While Muir acknowledges the primary difference between the two versions of Iago, he contends that Shakespeare was prompted to re-vamp Cinthio's text because he was captivated by "the dramatic possibilities of making a noble hero kill the woman he loved" (127). Notably, therefore, Muir professes to have isolated *the* factor that motivated Shakespeare to retell Cinthio's story. Summing up the relationship of *Othello* and its source, Muir concludes that Shakespeare "converts a sordid melodrama with a commonplace moral into a tragedy of love" (139). As we might predict, Muir identifies poetry as the principal magic Shakespeare uses to accomplish metamorphosis. Although Muir does not speak of adaptation *per se*, his reading does establish

relations between writings and retellings. Therefore, Muir's work does generate an axiom of adaptation, which is as follows: a superior writer (i.e., Shakespeare) revives an already existing story by bathing it in the purifying waters of his genius and artistry. What is missing, in this account of adaptation, is an acknowledgement of how adaptations respond to specific social, cultural, or political milieus.

Muir's assessment of *Othello* and its source stands in jarring contrast to the analysis offered by Barbara Everett. She begins with a warning: "the true source of a poet's creativity is a subject perhaps both over-large and over-hypothetical" (66). Having issued this caveat, Everett goes on to suggest that the problem of identifying the origins of creativity "can be translated into approachably smaller matters of fact by asking of Shakespeare's finished text of *Othello* a few questions so simple that it is surprising they have not been asked before" (66). She continues: "if we read the play the first word that we meet after the opening stage direction is the speech-prefix *Roderigo*" (66-67). This linguistic fact leads to Everett to her first question: "Why should the dramatist have bestowed on his Venetian gull a Spanish name?" (66-67). Everett provides an answer to her own query, which is worth quoting at some length:

Roderigo, who does not exist in Cinthio, depends wholly on his role as "feed" (in all senses) to the character called in Cinthio the Ensign: here made not the friend of the Moor but his subordinate, almost his servant. The gull provides the necessary social extraversion for this underhand character newly called Iago. Roderigo has a Spanish name, in short, because Iago has. (67)

At this juncture, Everett acknowledges that an even more intriguing question arises: "How then does Iago come to have a Spanish name?—and such a Spanish name at that?" (67). 'Iago' is, of course, the Spanish equivalent of 'James.' And, as Everett notes, this would have been a rather tantalizing fact to Shakespeare's contemporary audience, given that 'James' was the name of the newly-crowned monarch. Not incidentally, St. James, or Santiago, was likewise the patron saint of Spain, a designation awarded on the basis of what

Everett describes as “somewhat apocryphal historical events,” the chief among them being an appearance at an eleventh-century battle during which Spain decisively defeated Moorish troops (67). In light of this military success, Santiago was awarded the nickname “Moor-killer” (67). Commenting on the significance of these historical details, Everett suggests: “if ‘Roderigo’ came into Shakespeare’s play because of Iago, then ‘Iago’ came into the play because of Othello—the Moor-killer along with the Moor” (67). Everett’s careful attention to Shakespeare’s linguistic innovations allows her to show *Othello*’s imbrication in politics, and her reading demonstrates that the Spanish nomenclature Shakespeare employs capitalizes on his audience’s awareness of past tensions between England and Spain. Something akin to an archaeological impulse guides Everett’s discussion of *Othello*. Focusing on Shakespeare’s play as an adaptation, Everett uncovers significations that might otherwise go unnoticed by contemporary readers lacking knowledge of early modern global politics.

When we compare the two readings by Muir and Everett, a definition of adaptation begins to crystallize. Muir’s assessment reproduces the bias inherent in traditional source study, which means that Shakespeare’s alterations are described in terms of poetic genius, a stance that fails to illuminate the workings of adaptation. By contrast, Everett’s reading draws attention to the interface of text and context, as she shows how Shakespeare’s invigoration of his primary source for *Othello* fed off of (and likely also nourished) a specific political reality. Following Everett, adaptations have a special capacity to cross geocultural boundaries. In so doing, they envision or open up political contexts that would not have been anticipated in their source texts. Studying adaptations can, therefore, help to spotlight those elements that speak to particular social, cultural, or political issues. *Othello*, for instance, records Renaissance England’s dread of Spanish incursions, a point that shifts into focus especially when Shakespeare’s play is read alongside its primary source.

Venice Preserved as Corrective-Counterpoint

Venice Preserved provides additional evidence of this magic. More specifically, in capitalizing on his audience's interest in political intriguing and conspiratorial high jinks, Otway replaces *Othello's* marital anxieties with concerns more expressly martial in nature. In her analysis of *Venice Preserved*, Jessica Munns points out that in the wake of the Rye House Plot, which was supposed to be a scheme to assassinate Charles II and his brother James, Restoration audiences demonstrated an "enthusiasm for discovering plots against the state" (167). In the adaptation, tensions between domestic obligations and public duties become a principal structural device. Whereas *Othello* quickly dispenses with overtly martial concerns, in *Venice Preserved* the fomenting of rebellion fuels the plot. Instead of presenting marital concerns, or the demands of domestic life as an alternative to political intriguing, Otway's adaptation uses its primary female character as a means of disrupting political machinations.

From virtually its opening moments, *Venice Preserved* telegraphs its engagement with *Othello*. Both plays, for example, use clandestine marriage as catalyst and plot device. As Munns observes, "*Venice Preserved* [...] like *Othello*, opens with a description of a runaway marriage highly displeasing to the bride's father" (245). The rediscovery of familiar characters is one of the pleasures of reading a text as an adaptation, and Otway's deployment of the runaway-marriage plot readily suggests analogues for *Othello*, Iago, Desdemona, and her father Brabantio. Having left her father Priuli's house secretly, in order to marry Jaffeir, Belvidera is an apt counterpart of Desdemona. This means, in turn, that Jaffeir can be likened to *Othello*, and that Priuli is a descendant of Brabantio. Surely a re-writing of *Othello* needs an Iago. Otway obliges with the character of Pierre, Jaffeir's best friend. Pierre's status as villain, however, is certainly open to debate.

Venice Preserved complicates the whole question of heroes versus villains, because its warring factions, senators and rebels, both earn opprobrium. Or, as Kerstin P. Warner comments, "The rebels are as

greedy and tyrannical as the senators they plot against" (2). Still, some readers of *Venice Preserved* have tried to discern in it clear illustrations of heroism or villainy—an endeavour apparently not made easier over time. In 1777, as Warner notes, "British soldiers stationed in New York called for a revival of *Venice Preserved* as an expression of their Tory sympathies, while in the same year, in London, the play was banned for its 'dangerous republican tendencies'" (120). These clashing interpretations graphically illustrate that empathy has a political component. It seems altogether fitting that an adaptation of *Othello* would de-stabilize the categories of hero and villain. Shakespeare's play, after all, broke with tradition by featuring a tragic hero who occupies the position of cultural outsider and alien.

If readers of *Venice Preserved* must wrestle with the issue of where sympathies or loyalties are to be directed, this dilemma replicates the situations confronting the respective heroes of *Othello* and *Venice Preserved*. In Shakespeare's play, Othello is forced to choose between trusting his increasingly guilty-seeming wife and placing his faith in Iago. Similarly, in *Venice Preserved*, Jaffeir wavers between loyalty to his wife (who is the daughter of a senator) and loyalty to his friend Pierre, who urges participation in the fomenting rebellion. To be more precise, Jaffeir must divest himself of distractions that hinder devotion to overtly political causes. Evidently Belvidera is the chief such distraction. After she follows Jaffeir to a meeting of fellow conspirators, Jaffeir instructs his would-be allies:

Take her from my heart,
 She'll gain such hold else, I shall ne'er get loose.
 I charge thee take her, but with tender'st care,
 Relieve her troubles and assuage her sorrows. (2.3.192-95)

With this speech, Jaffeir articulates the incompatibility of domestic obligations (in this case, Belvidera herself) and political engagement. As his wife leaves with her protector, Renault, Jaffeir offers this pledge of fealty to the conspirators:

To you, sirs, and your honors, I bequeath [Belvidera],
 And with her this [i.e., his dagger], when I prove unworthy—

You know the rest—Then strike it to her heart,
And tell her, he, who three whole happy years
Lay in her arms, and each kind night repeated
The passionate vows of still increasing love,
Sent that reward for all her truth and sufferings. (2.3.197-203)

When Belvidera objects to Jaffeir's pledge, he dismisses her by saying, "I've contrived thy honor" (2.3.208). Effectively transferring his authority over Belvidera to another man, Jaffeir reprises a scene from *Othello*, wherein the hero directs Iago to care for Desdemona.

As fans of *Othello* (or any other savvy readers) would predict, Jaffeir's plan turns out to be ill conceived. The morning after she has been entrusted to the care of Renault, Belvidera reports:

I'm sacrificed! I am sold! betrayed to shame!
Inevitable ruin has enclosed me!
No sooner was I to my bed repaired,
To weigh, and (weeping) ponder my condition,
But the old hoary wretch, to whose false care
My peace and honor was entrusted, came
(Like Tarquin) ghastly with infernal lust.
O thou Roman Lucrece!
Thou couldst find friends to vindicate thy wrong;
I never had but one, and he's proved false;
He that should guard my virtue has betrayed it;
[...]. (3.2.1-11)

Belvidera's classical allusion recalls a narrative that features the very confusion of personal and political concerns which defines—and destroys—her relationship with Jaffeir. Pursuing implications of Belvidera's invocation of Lucrece, it seems that *Venice Preserved* does offer a pointed critique of absolute (monarchical) power's excesses. After all, in Livy's *History of Rome*, the story of Lucrece's "ravishment" (and suicide) functions as incentive for Rome to reject the yoke of colonial tyranny and found a republic.

If Lucrece is to be accepted as a female exemplum, it seems that the good woman whose honor is assailed has no option other than suicide. As if to challenge the cultural ideal that requires suicide of (female) rape victims, which seems a tacit admission of their guilt, Bel-

videra assigns responsibility for her plight to Jaffeir.³ Although the attack on Belvidera occurs off-stage, her reappearance in a disheveled and unnerved state serves to eroticize her suffering. As Marsden suggests, showcasing the bodily effects of violence threatened or perpetrated against female characters was a staple feature of Restoration and eighteenth-century drama. Marsden reports that plays from this period often treat rape (or the threat of rape) as “an explicitly sexual situation that foregrounds the sexuality of the actress” (76). To draw out implications of Belvidera’s plight, it is useful to contrast it with Desdemona’s murder. It, too, is suffused with eroticism. Consider, for example, that Othello stands over his inert and sleeping wife and states: “I will kill thee and love thee after” (5.2.18-19). This moment, described by Edward Pechter as “overtly necrophiliac,” hints that Desdemona will be at her most desirable once she is dead (144). Perhaps this is because, in death, Desdemona best attains the Renaissance ideal for women: she is “silent, chaste, and obedient.”⁴

In Shakespeare’s play (if not in recent film versions), Desdemona is a passive and seemingly acquiescent victim—as Alan Sinfield suggests, Desdemona never really opposes her murder; by contrast, as we have seen, Belvidera levies an accusation at Jaffeir.⁵ For a short duration, Belvidera’s admonitory words seem to take effect. Specifically, Jaffeir becomes convinced that the Senate must be informed of the rebels’ plot. At this juncture Jaffeir shifts allegiance once more, with loyalty to Belvidera supplanting fealty to the conspirators. This turn of events, however, fails to please Jaffeir, who almost immediately regrets his decision to reveal the conspiracy. Actually, he exhibits an almost hysterical reluctance to betraying his fellow rebels. Rather melodramatically, albeit with a degree of prescience, Jaffeir punctuates his journey to the Senate, where he plans to reveal the plot, with these words:

Where dost thou lead me? Every step I move,
Methinks I tread upon some mangled limb
Of a racked friend. (4.1.1-3)

This plaintive speech is addressed to Belvidera. Commenting upon his wife's role in compelling him to reveal the plot, Jaffeir likens himself to a "lamb" that is led by "the enticing flattering priestess" to "sacrifice" (4.1.87-90).

The final scene in the play highlights the theme of loyalty versus betrayal, as Jaffeir vows his love for Pierre and grants him one last favor. Even before hearing what Pierre desires of him, Jaffeir declares:

Thy wishes shall be satisfied.
I have a wife and she shall bleed, my child too
Yield up his little throat, and all t'appease thee—
[...]

(5.3.84-86)

Here Jaffeir expresses a nearly frenzied desire to prove that his friendship with Pierre trumps all other relationships. Jaffeir's statement is bizarre, and we might well ask why two male characters' bond can best be demonstrated through the murder of a woman and her child. Of course, Jaffeir's violent promise makes more sense if *Venice Preserved* is read as an adaptation of *Othello*. In the earlier play, the hero makes a "sacred vow" to Iago, promising his friend endless fealty (3.4.461). In a way, Jaffeir's strange vow reprises the 'betrothal scene' between Othello and Iago. In Otway's version, however, the violence with which Jaffeir threatens Belvidera graphically illustrates how male friendship is ratified by the destruction of a woman.

Pierre and Jaffeir's relationship is to be sealed in blood, but it will be their own. Pointing to the wheel that is to be the instrument of his torture and death, Pierre asks his friend for a nobler end. His last hope for evading the ignominy—and the grotesque suffering—of torture rests with Jaffeir. Jaffeir obliges, killing Pierre and then stabbing himself. The ghost of *Othello* looms over this conclusion, as Shakespeare's hero, too, stabs himself after killing his beloved. *Venice Preserved* makes it much easier to believe that murder is performed in the service of love, because the speedy death Jaffeir imparts to Pierre does enable the latter to escape torture.

Death does not quite spell the end of Jaffeir and Pierre's relationship. In tandem they return, seemingly as ghosts or apparitions, just long enough to scare Belvidera. She may not be scared to death, exactly, but the ghostly visitation precedes (if it does not precipitate) her demise. With her dying words, Belvidera cries:

They have hold on me, and drag me to the bottom.
Nay—now they pull so hard—farewell— (5.4.28-29)

It does seem that Jaffeir and Pierre drag Belvidera to her death, but their motives remain mysterious. The heroine's demise might be intended as a reversal of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, with Jaffeir unable to fade into oblivion without his wife. Or, alternatively, the death of Belvidera may be intended as poetic justice, signalling her punishment for encroaching upon Jaffeir and Pierre's relationship and muddying political waters with the force of her desire.

In a spectacle that clearly seems to be tinged with horror, Belvidera appears to glimpse what awaits her after she dies. This moment powerfully re-invokes *Othello*. Shakespeare's hero, like Belvidera, 'sees' his own destruction just prior to experiencing it. Speaking almost literally over the dead body of his wife, Othello focuses attention upon his own life. He recalls an episode in which he had dispensed with an enemy of the Venetian state, detailing an incident in which

A malignant and a turban'd Turk
Beat a Venetian and traduc'd the state. (5.2.354-55)

From Othello's description, it is clear that the "turban'd Turk" metonymizes evil and is opposed by the implicitly 'good' Venetian. Demonstrating his association with the good, Othello narrates his actions with these words:

I took by the throat the circumcised dog,
And smote him thus. (5.2.356-57)

Othello's words showcase his understanding of the slippage in his status: formerly an avenging force on the side of Venice, Othello now

becomes the evil in need of containment. Ania Loomba convincingly shows how Othello is, finally, a “near schizophrenic hero,” one who “becomes simultaneously the Christian and the infidel” (48). In *Venice Preserved*, it is Belvidera who functions as the evil that must be contained. She constitutes a disruption, with her very presence apparently threatening the creation and maintenance of overtly politicized bonds between men. As Belvidera herself states, she is “betrayed to shame,” the unwitting victim of political machinations and complex webs of loyalty that perpetually exclude her. In this example of she-tragedy, the female protagonist is a ‘present-absence,’ a catalyst of but never fully a participant in the action.

Lock Haven University
Lock Haven, PA

NOTES

¹My essay endeavors to build on Marsden’s fine analysis of actresses as commodified sexual spectacles. Whereas Marsden mainly focuses on the ways in which actresses transformed material conditions, my argument centers more on the evolution of tragic conventions.

²*Venice Preserved*’s curious intermingling of personal and public concerns has elicited a somewhat dissatisfied readership. For example, Aline Mackenzie Taylor notes that while *Venice Preserved* is “the play on which Otway’s fame rests most securely,” praise of it is always “tempered with censure, if only a vague suggestion that despite its passion, there is something in it which is fundamentally not quite right” (195). Taylor explains the source of readers’ displeasure as “the political bias of what is otherwise a tragedy of private life” (195). It might be more fitting to re-state the play’s difficulties in this way: while *Venice Preserved* wishes to eschew the personal or domestic strife of *Othello*, it actually ends up exposing the interweaving of domestic and political concerns.

³Belvidera’s indictment of Jaffeir may resonate persuasively with contemporary readers; however, it is not at all clear that Otway’s original audience would have sided with Belvidera. After all, as Deborah G. Burks has demonstrated, throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, “The dual nature of rape as violation and pleasure was embedded in the very terms used to identify the crime: rape and ravishment” (7). The advent of actresses seemed to invite spectacles of female suffering. As Marsden comments, actresses were subjected to the “audience’s

gaze, established as desirable, and then driven into prolonged and often fatal suffering" (60).

⁴See Suzanne W. Hull, *Chaste, Silent & Obedient: English Books for Women 1475-1640*, for a thorough examination of the promulgation of feminine ideals.

⁵See Alan Sinfield, *Faultlines*, for a discussion of Desdemona's seeming inability to speak in her own defense, even when her murder is imminent. A curious parallel in criticism of *Othello* and *Venice Preserved* concerns contempt for their respective heroines. For example, in his monumental and influential study, *Shakespearean Tragedy*, A. C. Bradley comments that Desdemona's suffering "is like that of the most loving of dumb creatures tortured without cause by the being he adores" (179). Belvidera is rendered in uncompromisingly scornful terms by Lord Byron, who describes Otways's character as "that maudlin bitch of chaste lewdness and blubbering curiosity," and he claims to "utterly despise, abhor, and detest" her (qtd. in Munns 187).

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The Person from Porlock in “Kubla Khan” and Later Texts: Inspiration, Agency, and Interruption

LAURA M. WHITE

Of late, literary criticism has focused on the socio-cultural agency of artistic production, writing in the material elided by the classical tradition of the Muse on the one hand and the Romantic figure of the autonomous genius on the other. We no longer read inspiration by the light of the Muse's presence, or by the wan light cast by the candle in Chatterton's garret; “inspiration” as a concept has come to seem an illusion that covers up the full story of the processes by which art comes into being, in which artists respond to large currents within their culture. Thus, older ideas about inspiration have been overshadowed by a focus on artistic production as a complex series of negotiations between an artist and his or her culture, a turn much at odds with twenty-four centuries of thought about inspiration in the Western tradition. The gap between current explanations and those of the past reveal a central problem in aesthetics—how is art really created? Coleridge's 1816 “Kubla Khan,” with its accompanying narrative about how the poem came into being and how its writing was prematurely stopped by a knock on the door, offers a figure that represents the cessation of inspiration: the person from Porlock. The person from Porlock stands for the interruption of inspiration, and this figure's popularity in many subsequent narratives by authors writing in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries shows that the issue of inspiration and its agency continues to vex our collective imagination. After all, the power to stop inspiration must be innately related to the forces that make inspiration possible at all. Who is the person from Porlock, and what gives him the power to stop inspiration in its tracks?

To answer this question, a short review of how the Western tradition has understood the genesis of artistic creation is necessary. This tradition oscillates between two strands, a belief that art follows God-sent inspiration and a belief that art results from the application of craft and design.¹ Ancient Hebrews believed inspiration was prophetic and God-given; the Hebrew prophets either serve as a mouthpiece for God directly, or pass God's words on to the people, through a highly charged vatic poetry. In the oldest Greek sources, notably in Homer and Hesiod, divinity is also the source of all song, though for the Greeks that divinity is Apollo or the Muses. Plato links the poet and the prophet directly: "the good lyric poets [...] are not in their senses when they make these lovely lyric poems [but] are possessed [...]. Herein lies the reason why the deity has bereft them of their senses, [...] the god himself [...] speaks, and through them becomes articulate to us" (534a-d). Aristotle, by contrast, focused on the rational, craft-based qualities of art, those elements open to analysis and criticism. In the Hellenistic period, both sides of this debate flourished: those who argued with Plato that art was at heart divinely inspired were opposed to those who stressed artisan rules, following Aristotle. The Aristotelian tradition was dominant by the time of the Roman critic Horace, and the aesthetic values of skill, finish, and order continued to hold enormous sway throughout the middle ages and the Renaissance.

But the inspirational, prophetic tradition continued in force as well, primarily because the orthodox Christian perspective held that inspiration comes from God, the wellspring of and authority behind scriptural texts as well as works which deal with the sacred, from Dante's *Commedia* to Milton's *Paradise Lost*.² From Sidney, whose 1595 *Defense of Poetry* gave due reverence to the prophetic, through the neoclassical re-emergence of Horace, chiefly through Boileau's 1674 *Art Poétique*, these two traditions continued to play themselves out against each other. Pope's purely ironic invocations to the Muses give way, for instance, to the reawakened prophetic tradition that arises through Blake and other Romantic figures.

Romantic ideas of inspiration tend to take a distinctly individualistic, autonomous bent. For example, when Coleridge laments the passing of his visionary capacities, he laments “the passion and the life, whose fountains are *within*” (“Dejection: An Ode”; my emphasis). As Terry Eagleton has argued, during the Romantic era, we begin to see a now “familiar emphasis: a stress upon the sovereignty and autonomy of the imagination, its splendid remoteness from the merely prosaic” (20). The transcendental nature of the imagination offers a “challenge to an anaemic rationalism” (Eagleton 20), but it also offers the self and nature as the divinities which produce this transcendence in lieu of traditional ideas of the divine, whether Hebrew, Greek, or Christian. And, as Coleridge found, the Romantic denial of the world’s influence can be a self-confounding strategy, for the autonomous imagination can end in ostracism. This prophetic but de-sacralized strand reaches later apogees in Rimbaud, who at sixteen wrote that “I am working to make myself a Seer. [...] The point is to arrive at the unknown by the dissolution of all the senses” (1), as well as in Swinburne, Whitman, Dickinson, Allan Ginsburg, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton and in so many others.

The tradition which sees the imagination as craft and calls to the Muses as shrewd but cynical strategies on the part of cagey artists also takes an important turn as we move into the more recent past, where the emphasis on craft transmogrifies into an emphasis on the social production of art. As we know, the last several decades of criticism have focused on the role of the social in constructing individual consciousness, motivation, and achievement. This movement is naturally opposed to the Romantic view of autonomously inspired creation; as Karen Burke Lefevre points out in *Invention as a Social Act*, such a view errs in its implication that invention “can be removed from social and material and political concerns, that invention moves from the inside out, and that invention is a process occurring within an introspective, isolated writer” (13-14). As Linda Brodkey has suggested, the model of author as creative, autonomous genius has served much of the nineteenth and twentieth century to inform the

scene of writing, framed as the "solitary writer alone in a cold garret working into the small hours of the morning" (397). We seem to have left behind this scene of solitary writing and have turned instead to "reinstate some of the tensions between readers, writers, and texts that [...] the scene of writing artfully suppresses" (Brodkey 397).³

These dual traditions thus currently stand as a tension between the Romantic idea of individual inspiration on the one hand and the socio-cultural idea that the artist writes in response to complex exterior forces—class, gender, economics, ethnicity, nationality, industrialization, globalization, and so on—on the other. To move beyond the irreconcilable opposition of these two views one might simply ask the poets themselves about the sources of inspiration, but doing so is not unproblematic.⁴ In practice, there have proved to be significant drawbacks to relying on artists to provide definitive answers. Firstly, the workings of inspiration are mysterious and resist explanation regardless of whether one follows the Romantic or the sociocultural view; that is, both ineffable sources "within" *and* complex responses to social conditions are difficult to trace and chart. Secondly, artists for various reasons tend to fudge the issue, either because of a dislike of critics and other busybodies—like Faulkner, who openly prevaricated about what he'd been up to in his writing—or because they feel violated by uncovering such private processes. Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, an artist's understanding of the workings of the imagination is necessarily constructed in part by the cultural ideas about imagination at hand, ideas from his or her own time or pressing, powerful ideas about the imagination from the past. A contemporary poet like Denise Levertov, for instance, has described the workings of her inspiration in terms that are entirely Romantic; she speaks of

poems which seem to appear out of nowhere, complete or very nearly so; which are quickly written without conscious meditation, taking the writer by surprise. These are often the best poems; at least, a large proportion of those that I have been 'given' in this way are the poems I myself prefer and which readers, without knowledge of their history, have singled out for praise. (7)

We should give this explanation due weight, but our culture is generally too suspicious of the autonomous model of Romantic inspiration and too aware of the social forces which partly inscribe us to accept an explanation such as that here offered by Levertov as the final word.

On the other hand, no twentieth-century critical movement has the power to tell us much of anything about the experience of inspiration so many poets have described: not New Criticism, with its careful avoidance of the personal; not structuralism, with its explicit swerve away from specific textual experience towards broad patterns of imagination; not reader-response or reception theory, where the interest lies rather in the "horizon of expectation" audiences hold; and last, certainly not in post-structuralism or deconstruction, where the author's authority has been destabilized so radically as to leave authorship undone, with no "self" *per se* to receive inspiration in the first place, indeed, with nothing left but "bare, ruined choirs where late the sweet birds sang."⁵ On the face of it, psychoanalytic criticism should hold some answers, naturally interested as it is in interiority, in the inner workings of the self. But psychoanalytic criticism has been saddled by Freud's "scientific" determination that wish-fulfillment lies at the heart of creative work, and that the artfulness of art is but a "bribe" to allow readers and viewers to guilt-free enjoyment of what are no more than day-dreams.⁶ In fact, so little has twentieth-century criticism, broadly considered, had to say about "inspiration" that if one looks up the term in the Modern Language Association International Bibliography, one will find that the bulk of the references point to inspiration in a very narrow sense, that is, when one text has been "inspired" by another, in titles such as "Hopkins's 'Pied Beauty': A Note on its Ignatian Inspiration," or "Source of an 'Inspiration': Francis Newman's Influence on the Form of 'The Dream of Geron-tius,'" and these articles generally date from the nineteen-seventies or before.⁷ This fact is one sign among many of how limited are modern views of inspiration and its agency, forces still compounded within

the centuries-old tension between vision and craft, individual and world.

All of which leads to "Kubla Khan," or rather, to the preface to "Kubla Khan," written by Coleridge for the 1816 publication of the poem, the first time it appeared in print. Here is the *locus classicus* for a narrative about prophetic vision—and its loss. The explanation is as famous as the poem itself, and shapes how the poem itself is understood. Coleridge tells us that in an opium dream, he found himself on the receiving end of several hundred lines of poetry, awoke and started madly to transcribe, was interrupted by a knock at the door from "a person on business from Porlock," and, on returning to his desk, found that the fifty or so lines he'd written down thus far were all he could remember. The preface thus asserts that the poem is a fragment, a record of a vision truncated, even, in Coleridge's words, a "psychological curiosity" which the author brings to the attention of a larger world only because another poet—Byron—has urged him to do so.

Read innocently, the preface stands as a potential disclaimer, though whether for the poem's blasphemy, triviality, incoherence, or ineptitude is a matter of disagreement among critics.⁸ A few critics doubted Coleridge's explanation from the start, however, partly because of unifying strategies in the poem itself, and partly because the preface's story seems too disingenuous. As early as 1818, Thomas Love Peacock felt Coleridge's tendency to embellish and hence argued against taking his account very seriously:

It is extremely probable that Mr. Coleridge, being a very visionary gentleman, has somewhat deceived himself respecting the origin of "Kubla Khan"; and [...] the story of its having been composed in his sleep must necessarily, by all who are acquainted with his manner of narrating matter of fact, be received with a certain degree of skepticism. (290; qtd. in Hill 79)

The matter was settled, at least in one sense, by the discovery of the Crewe manuscript in 1934, a document in Coleridge's hand dated 1810 which gives his earlier explanation of the poem: "This fragment with a good deal more, not recoverable, composed in a sort of Reverie

brought on by two grains of Opium, taken to check a dysentery, at a Farm House between Porlock and Linton, a quarter of a mile from Culbone Church, in the fall of the year, 1797." Not only does this account differ from the preface's (the composition takes place in a reverie, not after a full-fledged opium dream, and there is no hint of the person from Porlock at the door), the Crewe manuscript also has several variants from the published 1816 version, variants which argue eloquently against the notion that the 1816 version represents the poem exactly as it was initially composed in a sort of automatic trance.⁹

I would argue that "Kubla Khan" is more than the poem: that the cultural and literary artifact which has had such enormous influence in the world of the imagination, is rather the full 1816 preface-cum-poem.¹⁰ The preface unifies the poem into an allegory of creation, focusing on the figure of the poet, who becomes imagined as a demonic seer transported beyond the realm of the human. For if we take the preface's account seriously, it seems to tell us that *some* of the poem as we have it was written "without any sensation or consciousness of effort," but that *some* of it came after the fatal interruption—the "eight or ten scattered lines and images," the "still surviving recollections" which the Author "has frequently purposed to finish for himself." The full picture does not reshape itself back to the scene of Kubla Khan's pleasure dome. What follows the stanza break after line 36 is a new vision pulled from recollection—a vision removed geographically and temporally, back to the origins of ABCs: of Abyssinia (present-day Egypt), and of Mount Abora (Amara in the 1810 fragment, a mountain in Milton's Eden). Were this vision, that is, the vision of the Abyssinian muse and her song, to be restored the poet would be able to restore the vision of Kubla Khan's paradise, but we also know that this restoration is an impossible precondition. All the speaker can do at this point is reiterate key terms from the lines of the vision given him in the language of dream, the fragments left to him ("That sunny dome! Those caves of ice!"), before moving to the last conditional vision, that of the speaker as transformed poet-seer.

Here, structurally, we mirror the preface, for this third vision is closest to that set out in the extract from "The Picture" which Coleridge provides as a self-quotation in the preface. In this earlier poem, the vision lost is that of a Narcissus, whose mirror image in the pond is disrupted by a stone; the vision renewed is the sight of one's face:

soon
The visions will return! And lo, he stays,
And soon the fragments dim of lovely forms
Come trembling back, unite, and now once more
The pool becomes a mirror. (96-100)

We return to the origin of the whole document, preface and all, that of the poet-figure lost in trance. But this last mirroring, this last achievement, is also only conditional, for as many critics have noticed, lines 42 and following pose an extended subjunctive:

Could I revive within me
Her symphony and song
To such a deep delight *'twould* win me,
That with music loud and long,
I would build that dome in air [...]. (42-46)

The framing effects of the preface thus create a mirror in which possible visions reflect back and forth in an infinite regress. As David Perkins has argued, "both the poet of the introductory note and the one of the concluding lines have lost their inspiration; the difference between them is that the modest, rueful writer of the introductory note scarcely hopes to recover it, while the speaker of the poem imagines himself as possibly doing so and creates a sublime image of himself" (99).

This mirroring, even with its ironic reverberations and regressions, is needed to create the unity Coleridge himself saw as the end of poetry. Everywhere in Coleridge's critical writings one can find his insistence on organic unity as a key aesthetic standard. As he wrote in a letter, the purpose of all poems and of imagination itself is "to convert a *series* into a *Whole*: to make those events, which in real or

imagined History move on in a *straight* Line, assume to our Understanding a *circular* motion the snake with its Tail in its Mouth" (Coleridge's emphasis; *Letters*, 4: 545; qtd. in Wheeler 39). Coleridge here references the Greek idea of the *ouroboros*, that self-devouring snake who symbolizes infinity (exactly that: from the figure eight of a snake with its tail in its mouth we derive our mathematical symbol for infinity). This *ouroboric* structure works only if the preface exists to foreground the problem of creation, to invoke the idea of lost vision, and to have the person from Porlock intrude just as a stone is thrown into a pond—all so that, waveringly, we can begin to see the reformed, watery face of the poet in his transports, a vision *we* must see with "holy dread." But this mirrored unity comes only if the person from Porlock is imagined into being. Thus, the key question is not whether or not the preface's story is true, but why it had to be written. Coleridge supplied his person from Porlock to insist on the interior visionary force that compelled the poem into being, a force which forestalls criticism about the poem's incoherence; the person from Porlock also unifies the poem, creating a unified allegory of creation in which the visionary poet of the last lines coheres with the visionary poet of the preface.

In "Thoughts About the Person from Porlock," Stevie Smith, the British modernist poet, provides a response to Coleridge's preface, dilating on her sense of the falsity of Coleridge's account:

Coleridge received the Person from Porlock
And ever after called him a curse,
Then why did he hurry to let him in?
He could have hid in the house.

It was not right of Coleridge in fact it was wrong
(But often we all do wrong)
As the truth is, I think he was already stuck
With Kubla Khan.
He was weeping and wailing: I am finished, finished,
I shall never write another word of it,
When along comes the Person from Porlock
And takes the blame for it.

Smith's comment on the problem of inspiration has many of the markings of comic verse: short, highly rhythmic lines, fantastic and playful diction, simple rhymes, repeated lines, and an air of the nursery rhyme and children's tale. But it scans badly, with some lines missing a foot or more from what we are led to expect, and there are other fallings-away from the regularity of comic verse we associate with the poetry of, say, Ogden Nash. The rhymes are haphazard or half-hearted (in the first stanza, for instance, "curse" and "house," or in the tenth stanza, "amen" and "end"). There are run-on sentences—for example, note the extraordinary confabulation in the thirteenth stanza:

I wish I was more cheerful, it is more pleasant,
Also it is a duty, we should smile as well as submitting
To the purpose of One Above who is experimenting
With various mixtures of human character which goes best,
All is interesting for him, it is exciting, but not for us.

These mistakes, if so they are, might be better read as dramatically enacted "flubs," conscious errors to underscore the problem of inspiration. Why wail to be let out of a poem, Smith suggests, unless it's not all it should be, unless inspiration itself is waning? The sins against metrical and other expectations of form stand as figurations of the problem of a botched poem, a poem that seems to go on and on without knowing how to stop. One way the poem keeps going, of course, is simply by repeating lines, as Smith does for the first time in the seventh stanza, after setting up the person from Porlock's lineage:

May we inquire the name of the Person from Porlock?
Why, Porson, didn't you know?
He lived at the bottom of Porlock Hill
So had a long way to go.
He wasn't much in the social sense
Though his grandmother was a Warlock
One of the Rutlandshire ones, I fancy,
And nothing to do with Porlock.

And he lived at the bottom of the hill as I said
And had a cat named Flo,
And had a cat named Flo.

The repetition of an entire line is a device common to comic verse, to ballads, and to other traditional poetic forms. But the seventh stanza is an odd place in which to begin repetition; rather, this repetition seems yet another way in which the poem errs on purpose. This particular line ("And had a cat named Flo, / And had a cat named Flo") bears repeating, as it were, for two reasons: first, the invoked cat will link with the fantastic genealogy Smith invents for Coleridge's visitor ("his grandmother was a Warlock, / One of the Rutlandshire ones, I fancy") to suggest that the person from Porlock had something *witchy* to him, a demonic presence not unlike those in "Kubla Khan" itself. Second, the cat's name, Flo, suggests by homonym exactly that quality which Smith's and Coleridge's poems both seem to lack—"flow." We might even go so far as to consider this cat aptly named if it is indeed a witch's familiar whose task is to abet the interruption of poems!

By the end of Smith's poem, the person from Porlock has begun to take on increasingly serious associations, though the poem remains at some level comic. Smith laments,

I long for the Person from Porlock
To bring my thoughts to an end,
I am becoming impatient to see him
I think of him as a friend.
[...]
I am hungry to be interrupted
Forever and ever amen
O Person from Porlock come quickly
And bring my thoughts to an end.

Here, the person from Porlock becomes reconfigured with new strands of association: both that of the end-time Christ and the figure of death. Like Coleridge, whom Smith imagines "wailing, 'I am finished, finished,'" the poem's speaker describes coming to the end of inspiration as if it were coming under a death sentence; by the last lines, the speaker directs herself to becoming "practically unconscious," doing Coleridge's putative opium dream one better. For Smith, the death of inspiration becomes the death of identity, and the figure of Porlock becomes a projection of her drive to creative *thanatos*.

The person from Porlock has had a surprisingly robust later life, not just here in Smith's mordant poem. In many late nineteenth and twentieth-century texts (by authors as diverse as Arthur Conan Doyle, Louis MacNeice, Alan Isler, Douglas Adams, A. N. Wilson, Kurt Vonnegut, and Robert Pinsky), he has taken his place as a powerful trope for how artistic inspiration ebbs and wanes, for how implicated the artist generally is in the loss of the creative vision (Fulford 73-74). For example, in a late Sherlock Holmes story, *The Valley of Fear*, a mysterious informer named Fred Porlock arrives to give Holmes crucial information about the archvillain Moriarty. Doyle signals that the name is particularly worth the reader's attention: "[Porlock] is a nom-de-plume, a mere identification mark."¹¹ It has been plausibly suggested that the figure of Porlock here represents Conan Doyle's own obsessive desire to be done with the Sherlock Holmes stories, a desire which ultimately led him to send Holmes over the Reichenbach Falls in Moriarty's clutches. Porlock here is the wished-for interruption intuited later by Stevie Smith, not the presumably unwelcome interruption Coleridge recounted.

Or the figure of Porlock may take on an even larger, apocalyptic role. Douglas Adams's 1987 *Dirk Gently's Holistic Detective Agency*, a science fiction fantasy, begins with the annual (but fictional) Coleridge dinner at a Cambridge college, the keynote event of which is always the several hours-long recitation of the epic poem "Kubla Khan" in all its multi-hundred-line glory (Adams imagines that after the last lines we know, "For he on honeydew hath fed / And drunk the milk of Paradise," have been ceremonially intoned, the Cambridge audience settles back for the much longer, "altogether much stranger" section of the poem; 43). Later, we learn that the finished, epic-length "Kubla Khan" encodes an apocalyptic secret which has the potential to finish off the human species, and so through a time machine, Adams's protagonist must travel back to Coleridge's farmhouse, knock on the door, thus becoming himself the person from Porlock, and pretend to sell a form of eighteenth-century insurance: thus is humankind saved to see another day. These and other later figurations of the person

from Porlock as a necessary and welcome anti-Muse are part of a widening of post-Romantic explanations of inspiration. As Robert Fulford points out, “depending on the writer who uses it, Porlock can mean an interruption, an evasion, an excuse not to work, or death” (75). Plainly, the reconfigurations of the person from Porlock represent competing explanations for how inspiration as such is to be understood, and by what agency it operates.

One further recasting of “Kubla Khan” deserves extended attention: E. M. Forster’s short story, “The Road from Colonus.” Here we find a particularly salient narrative about interrupted inspiration, a narrative in which the role of Porlock is performed by British tourists. As many critics have recognized, “The Road from Colonus” takes for its primary source *Oedipus at Colonus*; Forster continues the modernist project of demythologizing the realm of the visionary and prophetic, the ground of Sophocles’s play. In Sophocles’s drama, Oedipus, now banished from Thebes and blind, comes to a sacred grove at Colonus in the company of his daughter Antigone; there he undergoes a spiritual transformation and then dies. In Forster’s story, Oedipus becomes Mr. Lucas, a desiccated elderly Britishman, traveling across Greece with his daughter and a group of other British tourists. Forster underlines his project of deflationary allusion directly: “Ethel was his youngest daughter, still unmarried. Mrs. Forman always referred to her as Antigone, and Mr. Lucas tried to settle down to the role of Oedipus, which seemed the only one that public opinion allowed him” (101).

However, another key allusive text for the story has gone unrecognized (as far as I have been able to determine), that of “Kubla Khan.” For the story also concerns the forcible interruption of an inspired trance, with Mr. Lucas, a tourist, standing in for Coleridge the poet. Mr. Lucas, who has found all of Greece disappointing thus far on his tour—“Athens had been dusty, Delphi wet, Thermopylae flat”—comes to the “Khan” (yes, that’s the name of the place), a small outpost in the modern Greek hinterlands furnished with asphodels, a sacred grove of plane trees, and from deep within the grove’s central

tree, a deep-welling fountain (101-02).¹² There he is overcome by the genius of the place, lost in a swoon of vision which brings him close to the flashing eyes and floating hair of Coleridge's final poet-figure in "Kubla Khan":

The water pressed up steadily and noiselessly from the hollow roots and hidden crevices of the plane [tree], forming a wonderful amber pool. [...] Mr Lucas tasted it and it was sweet, and when he looked up the black funnel of the trunk he saw sky which was blue, and some leaves which were green; [...]. His eyes closed, and he had the strange feeling of one who is moving, yet at peace—the feeling of the swimmer, who, after long struggling with chopping seas, finds that after all the tide will sweep him to his goal. So he lay motionless, conscious only of the stream below his feet, and that all things were a stream, in which he was moving. [...] To Mr Lucas, who, in a brief space of time, had discovered not only Greece, but England and all the world and life, there seemed nothing ludicrous in the desire to hang within the tree another votive offering—a little model of an entire man. (103-04)

This passage reveals a thoroughly Romantic view of inspiration; Mr. Lucas is overwhelmed by transcendence available in one particular spot of nature, a place that unites tree and fountain. But though Mr. Lucas wishes to stay—forever—, his touring companions, including his daughter, try to dissuade him: The inn there is infested with "something worse" than lice, he is told, and he will miss "all [his] engagements for the month" in London if he misses his travel connections (109). Mr. Lucas is stubborn, however, and is helped in his resistance by the inhabitants of the Khan, and by the Khan itself:

The Greeks said nothing; but whenever Mr. Lucas looked their way, they beckoned him towards the Khan. The children would even have drawn him by the coat, and the old woman on the balcony stopped her almost completed spinning, and fixed him with mysterious appealing eyes. [...] The moment was so tremendous that he abandoned words and arguments as useless, and rested on the strength of his mighty unrevealed allies: silent men, murmuring water, and whispering trees. (109)

Finding him obdurate, Mr. Lucas's companions carry him forcibly away on the back of a mule; as he is hauled off, he looks back: "The Khan was hidden under the *green dome*, but in the open there still stood three figures, and through the pure air rose up a faint cry of

defiance or farewell" (111-12; my emphasis). The story concludes with Mr. Lucas re-established within the bourgeois comforts of suburban London, where he has lost all chance at richer human experience, and where the news of the catastrophe that befell the Khan the very night of his forced withdrawal (the sacred tree, felled by lightning, killed all inside the inn) has no power to move him. Forster depicts him at this point as entirely soul-dead; for instance, he has returned to his former dislike of running water and as we leave him is composing a letter to the landlord that complains about the sounds of water in the pipes. His Antigone is left to enunciate the irony: "Such a marvelous deliverance," his daughter says, "does make one believe in Providence" (114).

The allusive dependence on Coleridge's poem is marked: the Khan takes its name from Coleridge's title figure, the sacred landscape that so tempts Mr. Lucas includes the key features of Coleridge's visionary pleasure dome, romantic chasm, and fountain from deep below the earth, and Mr. Lucas becomes a temporary, if thwarted, seer, similar to the poet-figure we must "beware, beware" at the close of "Kubla Khan." More important, however, is the shared trope of narrative—and visionary—interruption. Like Coleridge's person from Porlock, Mr. Lucas's daughter and fellow tourists operate to truncate the violent end Mr. Lucas seemed fated to experience in the Khan (had he stayed, he would have re-enacted the end of Sophocles's *Oedipus*). Though they save him from death, his life thereafter seems Life-in-Death, the fate reserved for another of Coleridge's protagonists, the Ancient Mariner. Though Forster's story is not a fragment, it points toward a narrative that cannot reach its fated close.

This reworking of "Kubla Khan" in "The Road from Colonus" both participates in and challenges Romantic ideas about inspiration. Forster himself elsewhere is a straightforward proponent of these ideas. Speaking of the "lower personality" which creates art, he explains:

It has something in common with all other deeper personalities, and the mystic will assert that the common quality is God, and that here, in the ob-

scure recesses of our being, we near the gates of the Divine. [...] As it came from the depths, so it soars to the heights; [...] as it is general to all men, so the works it inspires have something general about them, namely beauty. [...] What is so wonderful about great literature is that it transforms the man who reads it towards the condition of the man who wrote, and brings to birth in us also the creative impulse. Lost in the beauty where he was lost, we find more than we ever threw away, we reach what seems to be our spiritual home, and remember that it was not the speaker who was in the beginning but the Word. ("Anonymity" 83)

And elsewhere, Forster describes the process of creation specifically in reference to Coleridge and "Kubla Khan":

[If] the breathing in is inspiration the breathing out is expiration, a prefiguring of death. [...] How precisely [this] describes what happened in "Kubla Khan"! There is conception in sleep, there is the connection between the subconscious and the conscious, [...] and there is the surprise of the creator at his own creation. [...] He spoke and then knew what he had said, but as soon as inspiration was interrupted he could not say any more. ("Raison d'Être" 112)

Thus Forster sees "Kubla Khan" as a particularly salient example of the unconscious operations of inspiration, and is willing to ascribe inspiration to either inchoate forces within the "lower personality" or spiritual forces beyond the self, or both.

However, when Forster re-tells "Kubla Khan" in "The Road from Colonus," a strain of modernist skepticism intrudes, in keeping with the demythologizing purpose of the story in general. Not only does Forster's retelling of "Kubla Khan" leave behind many of the complexities, fragmentations, and mirroring effects of Coleridge's allegory of creation, it also anticipates the displacement of agency contemporary criticism enacts. Here the person from Porlock, the anti-Muse, is society itself and society alone: the social pressure, demand for propriety, and xenophobia of British tourists. The "porlocking" is not internally caused nor does it operate as a symbol of internal processes, as we have good grounds to suspect was the case with Coleridge, who probably invented the person from Porlock to explain his own *aporia*. In fact, modernist demythologizing means that while something in Mr. Lucas, perhaps (in Forster's terms) his "lower personality," calls

forth his inspiration, he loses that inspiration strictly through the interference of others. More importantly, once lost, he becomes a dead soul. Unlike Coleridge, whose vision retreats but who continues to ache for its presence and to write a complex narrative of vision regained, lost, and then regained through artistic unity, Forster's protagonist is left entirely unconscious of his loss once he is removed from the pagan realm of the sacred. Inspiration is taken away completely by outside forces. The protagonist's inspiration is produced, constructed, local, a point Mr. Lucas seems to infer:

When he stood within the tree, he had believed that his happiness would be independent of locality. But these few minutes conversation [with his daughter] had undeceived him. He no longer trusted himself to journey through the world, for [...] old wearinesses might be waiting to rejoin him as soon as he left the shade of the planes, and the music of the virgin water. (105-06)

But he does leave, though not of his own free will, and thereafter is not vouchsafed the generative agony of Coleridge's many laments over lost vision. There is thus a reduced level of interiority in Forster's representation of inspiration and interruption. The last lines of the story tell us that Mr. Lucas does not even hear his daughter's tale of his miraculous escape: "Mr. Lucas, who was still composing his letter to the landlord, did not reply" (376). What Forster has achieved by partly displacing the agency of both inspiration and interruption rebukes the Romantic idea of inspiration; Forster has presaged in this story the more materialist explanations of inspiration now current, while the great waters rushing through the tree in the grove have been reduced to annoying sounds in the plumbing.

Both "Kubla Khan" and "The Road from Colonus" do claim transcendent sources for art. However, I find Forster's achievement less humanly plausible than Coleridge's projection of the person from Porlock. Though Forster's depiction of the transcendent has power here, power even to annihilate, as when the sacred tree falls on the Khan's inhabitants, nonetheless we have a transcendent constrained by modernist skepticism and by Forster's view of the power of the

social. Denying Mr. Lucas interiority after his interruption, denying him even any consciousness of his former vision, indeed makes for a brutal deflation of the Romantic project. Mr. Lucas is not even allowed the sentimental half-shadow of Romantic loss, in other words, nostalgia. But the brutal deflation seems bought at the cost of believability, and perhaps humanness itself, for the strength of the vision with which we are presented should have had more staying power than it is in fact given by the close of the narrative. Coleridge was almost certainly dishonest about how he exactly came to write—and to stop writing—"Kubla Khan," but the highly self-referential allegory of creation that Coleridge's poem-and-preface enact seems to get closer to the mystery of inspiration and the equal mystery of its loss than does Forster's story, with its vision that disappears as if it had never been, with no residue but a wry narrative irony, an irony closer to Stevie Smith's purposely inelegant mangling of the problem of Porlock in her poem. Mr. Lucas's selfishness and pettiness at the end of the story make it impossible to read his loss as a tragedy, for he has come to be a person who does not have adequate moral stature for a tragic fate; he is no Oedipus and is suited only for irony. At any rate, "The Road from Colonus" takes its place in an ever-growing line of twentieth-century texts which recalibrate "Kubla Khan," Coleridge in his farm house, and the person from Porlock. The line of these texts will grow, I prophecy, simply because we continue to need tropes for our continued re-imaginings of inspiration and its loss, and our continued reappraisals of the agency of art itself.

University of Nebraska
Lincoln, Nebraska

NOTES

¹I have relied here and in the following on Leavitt's survey of the history of inspiration, particularly pages 4-26.

²In orthodox Christianity, this perspective has been unchanged since the early verdicts of the Councils of Florence and Trent; *vide* what Pope Leo XIII set out in

his 1893 encyclical *Providentissimus Deus*: "For all the books which the Church receives as sacred and canonical are written wholly and entirely with all their parts, at the dictation of the Holy Ghost; and so far is it from being possible that any error can co-exist with inspiration, that inspiration not only is essentially incompatible with error but excludes and rejects it as absolutely and necessarily as it is impossible that God Himself, the supreme Truth, can utter that which is not true" (Ihr 335).

³This position holds all the more true when we attempt to understand what gets in the way of inspiration, for traditional assumptions about writers' authority—as it is underwritten by cultural authority—can be pernicious along lines of gender. See Cayton for a discussion of the unequal position women can find themselves in *vis à vis* writer's block.

⁴One might even ask the critics where they get their inspiration. Materialist critics, of course, can be rather scathing about the inspirational aspects of literary criticism; *vide* Terry Eagleton on the issue: "Many literary critics dislike the whole idea of method and prefer to work by glimmers and hunches, intuitions and sudden perceptions. It is perhaps fortunate that this way of proceeding has not yet infiltrated medicine or aeronautical engineering; but even so one should not take this modest disowning of method altogether seriously, since what glimmers and hunches you have will depend on a latent structure of assumptions often quite as stubborn as that of any structuralist. It is notable that such 'intuitive' criticism, which relies not on 'method' but on 'intelligent sensitivity,' does not often seem to intuit, say, the presence of ideological values in literature" (198).

Note that Eagleton thinks the more apt comparison for the critic should be the engineer rather than the artist. It is a shame, certainly, that finding ideological values in literature should be so commonly opposed to the very notion of inspiration or creativity; creative genius as such tends to constitute the scandal that cannot be named in most materialist criticism.

⁵The history of literary criticism in the last half of the twentieth century has veered from "master" discipline to "master" discipline, as Paul de Man pointed out in the essay "Criticism and Crisis" (1970)—from sociology to anthropology, to linguistics, to psychoanalysis. From the vantage point of 2007, we can add to de Man's list the disciplines of philosophy, economics, and history, each "condemning to immediate obsolescence what might have appeared as the extreme point of avant-gardisme briefly before" (3-4). These interruptions de Man sees as fruitful, even inevitable, given the essential self-referentiality of texts, for he argues that something in the fundamental nature of the literary text keeps breaking through any illusions of continuity in the critical tradition, pointing instead to the intervening awkward but generative "void" between text and reference. The interruptions, as one newly-adopted discipline overmasters the next, follow from the incapacity of each model to contain what literature is and what it is not. It is not merely the void between text and referent that impels the heady push on to "newer" critical strategies; it is also the usually unarticulated acknowledgment of the insufficiencies of any given approach to explain ineffable artistic processes

and their sources. For a sympathetic discussion of the trope of interruption in de Man's reading of critical history, see Saunders, especially 49-52.

⁶Freud too, however, works to explain inspiration from an initial stance of his (and our) incapacity in the face of creativity: "We laymen have always been intensely curious to know—like the Cardinal who put a similar question to Ariosto—from what sources that strange being, the creative writer, draws his material, and how he manages to make such an impression on us with it and to arouse in us emotions of which, perhaps, we had not even thought ourselves capable. Our interest is heightened the more by the fact that, if we ask him, the writer himself gives no explanation, or none that is satisfactory" (419).

⁷These representative articles are by Bernad and Mulcahy, respectively.

⁸See Mellor, 157-58, for a development of the argument that the preface protects Coleridge from a charge of blasphemy by focusing on the poem's triviality or "curiosity"; see also McFarland, 224-25, who argues that the preface is meant to be read against the preface to "Christabel," and thus to present "Kubla Khan" as comparatively less marked by creative individuality. Wheeler, on the other hand, suggests that the preface operates as an "advertisement," whetting the reader's appetite for a psychological sensation or oddity (14). Other views of the preface's function can be found in Magnuson, Milne, and Levinson, among others. Magnuson argues that the preface operates as a narrative frame which establishes the process of the imagination as the theme of the poem (40). Milne also sees the preface as setting the agenda for the poem, even announcing the poem as an allegory for poetic creation (19), while Levinson sees the preface as a unifying strategy, again to focus the reader's attention on the creative process (98).

⁹For the extended argument that "Kubla Khan" was quite consciously composed, based on the textual evidence of the Crewe manuscript and on medical evidence about the effects of opium, see Schneider, esp. 88-89.

¹⁰Here I have been particularly influenced by David Perkins, who argues at length for the symbiotic relationship between preface and poem. He argues both that "the nonexistent lines haunt the imagination more than any actual poem could" (97) and also that "the introductory note gives the poem a plot it would not otherwise have, indicates genres to which the poem belongs, and presents images and themes that interrelate with those of the poem" (99).

¹¹See Scheideman. The reversal from unwelcome to welcome interruption of literary creation is underscored by Holmes's calling Fred Porlock "Friend Porlock" once in the American edition. As Scheideman argues, "Doyle would have considered [Porlock] a friend indeed if contrivance in involving Holmes with Moriarty would have freed Doyle's desk for [writing what he wanted to write, historical fiction.] [Porlock] appears to be a writer's inside joke, although his purpose was 'sinister—in the highest degree sinister'" (20).

¹²Admittedly, the "Khan" in Forster's story and the "Khan" in "Kubla Khan" do not mean the same thing—Forster's "Khan" is an inn, while Coleridge's is the title of a ruler, the title taken by the real historical figure of the Mongol military leader, Kublai Khan (1215-94).

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Self and Other: Narrativity in Xinran's *The Good Women of China* and *Sky Burial*

AMY LAI

In the past two decades, a number of Chinese diaspora writers have attained worldwide fame and sparked the interests of historians and literary critics. Nobel Prize winner Gao Xingjian aside, one of the most prominent figures is Jung Chang, author of the best-selling and award-winning memoir *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China* (1990), while Xinran (her full name Xinran Xue) is a much more recent example. Also born in the 1950s and an emigrant to the United Kingdom, she is the author of *The Good Women of China* [*Zhongguo de haonuyuan*] (2002) and *Sky Burial* [*Tianzang*] (2004), both of which were originally written in Chinese, before being translated into English and other languages and sold all over the world.

Despite the popularity and high appraisal of Xinran's works, to date no critical study of either of them has been documented. This is probably because they have generally been categorized as auto/biographical literature and social documentaries, appreciated more for the realistic portraits which they offer of Chinese women as well as their socio-cultural and historical backgrounds, than for the literary and aesthetic values which are by no means lacking in these genres. This essay aims to explore the images of Chinese women, but especially how the first-person narrator, or "I," interacts with the female characters in a genre that traverses fact and fiction. It will pay particular attention to the narrative structures, which help to bring out the concepts of "sameness" and "difference" in the representation of female subjects.

The Good Women of China is a collection of true stories gathered by Xinran when she worked as the host of *Words on the Night Breeze*, the

first radio talk show in China. The program stemmed from her obsession with the question: "What is a woman's life really worth in China?" (Lambert). After much persuasion and many meetings before getting approved at Henan Broadcasting, it ran from 1989 to 1995, first as a pre-recorded ten-minute slot subject to much editing and examination, and later in the form of hotline, enabling people to openly discuss such personal matters as family, gender and sexuality. As such, the program attempts to offer a realistic and multifaceted picture of Chinese women while fulfilling a therapeutic outlet for them, a large number of whom have lived through the chaos and general poverty in the early days of the Communist takeover and during the Cultural Revolution, to the post-Mao era and the mid-1990s, in a more liberal society with generally better living conditions.

As Liz Stanley explains, most auto/biography is concerned with "great lives" (4),¹ but the obsession with the "great and in/famous" would lead to many gaps in history, and stories of "obscure" people are very often more significant historically (8). The artfulness of auto/biography becomes a concern for feminists, as those important enough to have written their own stories, or to have their stories being written, are infrequently women, except those who are "infamous," "glamorous," and those who are "stars" and/or the wives of famous men (26). Describing the lives of ordinary women in Chinese history and labeling them as "good," Xinran not only helps to fill the gaps in Chinese history, but questions the traditional Chinese standards of a "good woman," which stipulate that she must be demure and gentle, a good housewife and a good lover, and that she must produce a son. If Xinran's criteria of a good woman are not exactly obvious from her book, then at least she stated them clearly during one of her interviews: "If we don't look down on ourselves, we are good. If we know how to love, how to give love, how to feel toward other people, then we are good" (Hong).

These good women, among others, include a girl whose only way of escaping from her sexually abusive father is to make herself sick so that she can stay at the hospital; a university student who, after receiv-

ing a kiss from her boyfriend and subsequently labeled a "bad woman" by her neighbor and parents, kills herself; a widow and caring mother who turns into a garbage collector so as to be close to her son, who is now an important government official and lives in the city; a woman trapped in a "family without feelings," whose marriage was arranged by the Communist Party, and who has been used by her husband to prove his upright character, but with neither a wife's rights nor a mother's position; a woman with a lot of "feelings but no family," who was forced to part with her lover during the revolution, only to realize that he has long married another woman with three children when they meet again after 45 years; a Nationalist Party general's daughter who, failing to flee to Taiwan, is tortured by the Red Guards and villagers and loses her mind; a "fashionable woman" whose successful career is born of her failed marriage and an unhappy romance; women in a far-off village whose only pleasure in life is the bowl of egg with water and sugar after they have given birth to a boy, and who typically have prolapsed wombs caused by the dry leaves which they use as sanitary napkins.

Xinran's debut has received generally good reviews. Julia Lovell calls the book "gripping," as it manages to catch the voices of those Chinese women "wonderfully" (Lambert). It should be noted that besides informing her reader of the circumstances in which she wrote the book, including her job at Henan Broadcasting, the difficulties which she encountered there and Westerners' general misperception of Chinese women ("Prologue," "My Journey towards the Stories of Chinese Women" and "Epilogue"), the author also includes some of her own childhood episodes in "The Childhood I Cannot Leave Behind Me," as well as the stories of her parents in "My Mother." While she leaves out her divorce from the book,² she does mention that she is a single mother who derives her "spirit" and "courage" from her son (1). Hence the book, categorized as a biography, has strong autobiographical elements. Flora Drew appreciates the fact that Xinran, while interweaving her life with those of other women, does not oversentimentalize her own predicament (Lambert). However, Lisa Gee

contends that the book "doesn't quite come off" for two reasons. First, the mediation of all the stories through Xinran, and then through translation, means that the "individuality of each woman's voice is much diminished," and Xinran's own comments on the stories, as well as her immediate reactions on hearing them, are almost like telling the reader how they should respond. Second, mixing other women's stories with her own biography—moving and interesting as it is—makes herself "a heroine in other people's life stories," though such an effect, as Gee believes, is never intentional on the author's part.

Gee's comment on Xinran's relationship with the other women in her book deserves a close study, especially with respect to auto/biography and the nature of the "I" in this genre. As Liz Stanley argues, auto/biography claims to be realistic, premised on the referentiality of the "I" or the subject of biographical research, yet both are by nature "artful enterprises which select, shape, and produce a very unnatural product" (3). Not only is the biographer an "active agent" in constructing the subjects rather than merely representing them, but there is no "coherent, essentially unchanging and unitary self which can be referentially captured" (8-9); similarly, in autobiography, the "self" is construed as "something much more than an individual": unique in one sense, it is closely enmeshed with the lives of others which offer it meanings (14). That autobiographical selves are "deeply and irresolvably fractured" (14) is augmented by the unrecoverable nature of the past, that there is no direct and unproblematic access to the past self or a succession of these selves (61). As memory is limited, fictive devices are necessary in reproducing and representing accounts of past lives, and all selves invoked in auto/biographies indeed become non-referential (62).

Critical theory offers further insights on the nature of the "I" in auto/biography, in cases where this "I" shares the world of the other characters. Roland Barthes writes of "The Death of the Author," refusing to see a piece of writing as the unique product of a single, unique mind, but rather treating it as a piece of realist ideology that masks the

social production of ideas (Stanley 16). Brian McHale (205) cites Barthes's "From Work to Text" to account for the nature of the "author" who does appear in the text.³ Barthes explains what happens to the author when he (she) inserts or inscribes himself in his text:

It is not that the Author may not "come back" in the Text, in his text, but he then does so as a "guest." If he is a novelist, he is inscribed in the novel like one of his characters, figured in the carpet; no longer privileged, paternal, aletheological, his inscription is ludic. He becomes, as it were, a paper-author: his life is no longer the origin of his fictions but a fiction contributing to his work [...]. The word "bio-graphy" re-acquires a strong, etymological sense, at the same time as the sincerity of the enunciation [...] becomes a false problem: the *I* which writes the text, it too, is never more than a paper-*I*. (161)

Following Barthes, McHale describes the ontological barrier between an author and his fictional world as "absolute" and "impenetrable," and what the author does when he writes himself into the text is to create a fictional character bearing his own name (215).

The fictionalization and fictitiousness of the autobiographical self lead us to question the nature of autobiography itself. Estelle Jelinek's *Women's Autobiography* (1980) proposes the female tradition of autobiography in realist terms (Stanley 91). By contrast, Domna Stanton's *The Female Autograph* (1984) rejects any "facile presumption of referentiality," and insists that feminism should explore the "graphing" of the "auto," or the creation of a textual self, to the exclusion of real life, or "bio," hence the replacement of autobiography with "autography" (Stanley 91-92). The writing of autography, accordingly, becomes an act of "rebellion" and "self-assertion" (92); it also produces "a divided self," as the female author takes up "a phallic pen" (93; Stanton 13-14). The autography in itself becomes a Baudrillardian world, or an intertextual reality composed by representation, bearing little relation to the social and material world within which it is located (93).

It would be far too much to suspect that the stories collected in Xin-ran's book, including her own, are fabricated, and it would not be fair to claim that they are much-exaggerated versions of reality either.

Nonetheless, except for informing the reader that those are real stories, Xinran does not place so much emphasis on the reality of the stories, as on the difficulty for her to "relive" the stories and "order" her memories, so as to articulate those stories in the written form: "Reliving the stories of the women I had met had been painful, and it had been harder still to order my memories and find language adequate to express them" (x). She goes further into the arbitrariness of this process, by likening it to a journey to the past that takes many different routes, indicating the essential fluidity of memory and her view of the past as a construct: "When you walk into your memories, you are opening a door to the past; the road within has many branches, and the route is different every time" (x).

How does Xinran construct her autobiographical "I," and how does she position this "I" in relation to her representation of other women? Though Xinran was persecuted during the Cultural Revolution, owing to her wealthy family background, her life is yet a far cry from most of the women described in her book, owing to her hard work and other circumstantial factors. Thriving at the "Black School" set up for children whose parents had been denounced, she managed to enrol in a good secondary school; she later completed two degrees at one of those military schools reserved for China's elites, before studying law in the army's political department (Lambert). In 1988 she entered a highly competitive examination and became one of the fourteen candidates to be recruited in the broadcasting industry, and in 1989 she became the head of the evening broadcast team at Henan Broadcasting.

There is no doubt that Xinran's privileged social and economic position enabled her to open a talk show and later to write about the women who are less fortunate than her. She is also privileged in terms of knowledge, especially when compared with a lot of women who have suffered from sexual repression and ignorance for many years. She reminisces on how she still refused to hold hands with a male teacher at a bonfire party "for fear of getting pregnant" (5) when she was twenty-two years old, thereby indicating that she was no longer

ignorant at the time she hosted the program and wrote the book. Nonetheless, her privileged position is deliberately and artfully subdued in other parts of the book, as is the distinction between the past and the present. In a narrative which is both autobiographical and biographical, she navigates between her life and the lives of other women, and sets up a series of exchanges which is strongly reminiscent of Hegel's dialectic. Hegel, in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, contends that subjectivity, or what he calls "self-consciousness," arises from a dialectic by which one becomes aware of one's difference and separation from the other, and as a result of the tension and the reciprocal influences based on the interaction between self and other, both move beyond a mutual recognition to a more developed consciousness than they previously had (ch. IV. A.). Nonetheless, the relationship in mutual recognition is far from an equal one, and the imbalance in power still carries on to the new, collective consciousness, or the "Spirit" (ch. VI).

Gee's contention that Xinran's book turns herself into the "heroine" among all the Chinese women described by her is an overstatement; I would rather argue that by mediating her life through the stories of those women, she also assimilates their lives to her own. Rather than maintaining her superiority to other women, she diverts our attention from the significant differences between herself and other women, as well as among them, with the help of images that emphasize sameness rather than contradictions. "The Childhood I Cannot Leave Behind Me," in which she reveals her unhappy childhood, is closely followed by "The Woman Whose Father Does Not Know Her," where she describes the female prisoner Hua'er, who has been put in jail several times for her "sexual deviance and cohabitation" (164-65), the aftermaths of her sexual abuses by the Red Guards, her mother's suicide, and her father's madness. In the former chapter, Hua'er asks whether Xinran would be able to bear the pain of listening to her story, a question that brings back the "recurring nightmares" to the latter:

I stumbled back to the officer's quarters where I would sleep that night, I was already immersed in my memories. Try as I might, I have never been able to walk away from the nightmare of my childhood. (167)

In the chapter that follows, the pains of the two women are mirrored in each other as they are sitting face to face in the prison meeting room (177). Eager to help Hua'er after learning of her tragedy, Xinran realizes that:

It is too late now to bring back youth and happiness to Hua'er and other women who endured the Cultural Revolution. They drag the great dark shadows of their memories behind them. (194)

The juxtaposition of Hua'er's story with Xinran's, as well as these reverberating images, do not draw a sharp contrast between them, but rather create the illusion that the nightmare of Xinran's childhood is as disastrous as the dark shadows that follow Hua'er.

The above images testify to Nancy Drew's remark that many of Xinran's stories have "great poetic qualities," all being "very cinematic and powerful" (Lambert). Other examples are also used to create resonances among different stories, such as comparing the relationship between the two sexes to that between mountain and river. Zhou Ting, who develops a highly successful career after her failed marriage and bad relationship ("The Fashionable Woman"), says,

"[...] Men are like mountains; they only know the ground beneath their feet, and the trees on their slopes. But women are like water. ... Everybody says women are like water. I think it's because water is the source of life, and it adapts itself to its environment. Like women, water also gives of itself wherever it goes to nurture life." (211)

This allusion is vaguely brought up by Jingyi ("The Woman Who Waited Forty-Five Years"), who conjures the hyperbolic image of a pool, formed by the tears she has shed for her lover all those years (145). In one of her interviews, Xinran expresses her fondness for these comparisons:

"There's a Chinese saying I like very much: woman's nature is like water; man's is like a mountain. Mountain and water depend on each other. Water supports life and a mountain without water can sustain no life; but water without mountain loses its nature and becomes sea. So the two always depend on each other, like two human beings—but you can't say they are the same." (Lambert)

Xinran places emphasis on the interdependence between water and mountain, hence suggesting that women's sacrifices are by no means one-sided. Despite the subtle differences in these allusions, they manage to highlight the sameness among women of diverse personalities and backgrounds; the web of intertextual references even extends beyond the book, and reinforces the affinity between Xinran and the women she depicts.

A further example is the image of the callus. It is initially used to convey the sense of numbness that arises out of prolonged pain. After Xinran has heard many tragic stories, as she says: "At times a kind of numbness would come over me from all the suffering I had encountered, as if a callus were forming within me. Then I would hear another story and my feelings would be stirred up all over again" (163). The callus temporarily insulates her from pain, but it is not impenetrable and does not stop her from relating to the women and feeling painful all over again. The image recurs as Zhou Ting explains how she has coped with her divorce and her ambiguous relationship with her current boyfriend, who returned to her only because she has become rich: "Do you have a callus on your hand? Or scars on your body? Touch them—do you feel anything?" (212). Zhou Ting's idea of the callus therefore closely resembles Xinran's, though its effect tends to be permanent. Xinran responds: "I hope the calluses on your heart will be softened by love" (213). Softening the callus is not the same as peeling it away: while the former is made possible with love, the latter is analogous to opening one's eyes and widening one's horizon, which is nonetheless risky and could lead to dire consequences. In "The Women of Shouting Hill," Xinran realizes that those women who live in a pre-modern society in the far-off village should not be allowed to know about what life is like in modern society: "To tell them about the

outside world would be like peeling away the calluses from a work-worn hand and letting thorns prick the tender flesh" (226). The callus image and its variations make Xinran's attitudes towards loving and not loving, and towards knowing and not knowing, much more ambiguous than they seem to be.

Another assimilatory device can be seen in "The University Student." Xinran, listening to Jin Shuai's description of her attitude towards love and sex ("The University Student"), is initially shocked at the generation gap between university students in their late teens and early twenties, and herself, then in her early thirties. As their dialogue goes on, their differences are narrowed in a subtle way. According to Jin Shuai, a fair share of her fellow students have become "escorts" and "personal secretaries" for the businessmen—both local and foreign—who proliferate in number in the wake of the economic reform that takes place in China. Jin Shuai informs Xinran about a friend who, betrayed by a married man with whom she had wanted a genuine relationship, relinquishes her belief in real love. At one point, it becomes difficult to tell whether the dialogues come from Jin Shuai or Xinran:

"[...] In the first letter she sent me from America, she wrote, 'Never think of a man as a tree whose shade you can rest in. Women are just fertilizer, rotting away to make the tree strong ... There is no real love. The couples who appear loving stay together for personal gain, whether for money, power or influence.'"

"What a pity that Ying'er realized this too late."

Jin Shuai fell silent, moved by her friend's fate. (45)

Though the expression of pity—which betrays a distrust of real love—should have come from Jin Shuai, a cynical young woman, the close quotation mark after the first dialogue indicates that Jin Shuai has finished talking, and the second dialogue could only come from Xinran.⁴ Such an expression might well be taken as Xinran's empathy as a listener, which is an essential skill of a talk show host, but it also makes us wonder if Xinran has become more cynical herself. By medi-

ating her life through the stories of those students, she realizes that she is not that different from these women who have grown up in the period of "Reform and Opening Up," as the "deep layer of emptiness" that plagues the young women is the result of the state repression of the earlier generations and their ignorance.

The above resonances would not have been as strong, and the confusion would not been made possible, if the voices of those women were physiological and we heard them in the same way as Xinran the broadcaster did; recorded in written form, and in a language that is more or less fluent, even elegant, these voices lose much of their distinctiveness.⁵ Yet mediating their voices through Xinran is inevitable: the letters of the girl who kept a fly as a pet, which manage to reach Xinran, are yet accompanied with her death certificate (33), which "certifies" the silence of her voice; the woman who bemoans her political marriage is too glad to have her voice tape-recorded, instead of having to her story on air (107), and the vigilant authorities finally refuse to have her story broadcasted (115); Jin Shuai even cites how Chinese men categorizes women into different kinds of fish (48),⁶ metaphors which not only dehumanize them, but also deprive them of their voices. The book, instead of offering diverse pictures of Chinese women as individuals, becomes a textual space where different selves and various images are enmeshed. These further evolve into a collective consciousness of Chinese women mediated by the narrator, which privileges the stronger party at the expense of the weaker one and represents Xinran's voice more than the other women's. Xinran's voice continues to dominate "The Women of Shouting Hill," the last story of the book: these women are the only Chinese women who claim they are "happy," but as Xinran implies, their happiness is clearly a result of ignorance. Because of Xinran's remark, the title, named after the village where they live, both evokes the storminess of the place and the "loud, resonant voices" of its people (220), and indicates that those "happy" women are indeed shouting, though their voices cannot be heard. As such, the story is appropriately placed at the end of the book and carries more urgency than it would

elsewhere; at the same time, it betrays the fact that their voices still have to be mediated by someone like her.

It should be emphasized the women's stories are enclosed by "Prologue" and "Epilogue," which detail the production of the book. In the "Prologue," Xinran describes her attack by a robber one night, and her struggle to defend the manuscript of the book. Though she "could not see a face" in the darkness, she uses the pronoun "he" to refer to the robber: "I kicked with my feet at where I thought his groin might be" (ix). The "pair of strong yet invisible hands" becomes symbolic of the invisible forces of the patriarchy and state politics from the earliest days of the PRC to contemporary China. As a journalist who struggles against these forces, Xinran negotiated between her will and the party,⁷ and even moved to England so that she could carry out her struggle further, let alone that she later got her book published in China as well as all over the world.⁸ The "Epilogue" rounds up her project in a highly satisfactory manner. It ends with this sentence: "It was as if a pen had grown in my heart" (229), strongly reminiscent of Domna Stanton's "autography," which describes writing as an act of self-assertion and rebellion, in which the author takes up a phallic pen. This statement also makes apparent the phallic image in the first story, "The Girl Who Kept a Fly as a Pet," where Hongxue, although she is not offered a private space to write (except at the hospital where she finds shelter from her father's sexual advances), has managed to get her essays published in the *Youth of China* magazines (30). Though the poor girl finally dies of self-inflicted blood-poisoning ("septicaemia") in 1975, it is as if her spirit has "reincarnated" in Xinran, who was born in 1958 and who is now able to make her tragedy known to the world. Considering the phallic image, it might not be a pure coincidence when Xinran, in one of her interviews, stresses her dedication to writing since she was a teenager: she published her first poem when she was only fifteen, and since then she had published quite a lot (Hong).

Whereas Xinran's first book advocates the "goodness" inherent in the women described and tends to synthesize the diverse experiences

of these women to evolve a collective consciousness, her second book, *Sky Burial*, manages to preserve differences in the “other” through the narrative structure, and to do so without distorting their voices.

Sky Burial, named after the traditional Tibetan funeral ritual in which the corpse is exposed to the open air to be eaten by sacred vultures, can also be traced to Xinran’s nightly radio program.⁹ The story begins in 1994, when a listener calls Xinran from Suzhou, telling her that he has just met a strange woman on the street. Xinran thus travels to the said town and meets with Shu Wen, a woman dressed in Tibetan clothing, but whose facial characteristics are that of a Chinese woman. Shu Wen informs Xinran of her story, on which the most part of the book is based. The narrative shifts to 1958: still in the third person, it tells of Shu Wen meeting her husband Kejun, a doctor in the People’s Liberation Army. Deeply in love, they get married a few years later. Soon Kejun is posted to Tibet, and after a short time, news arrives in Suzhou that he has been killed. The obscurity of the news, as well as Shu Wen’s disbelief in his death, prompt her to follow the army to Tibet to look for him. There she meets a young Tibetan woman, daughter of a land-owning family in the north of Lhasa, who has a keen interest in Chinese culture, and who has spent several years studying in Beijing. Zhuoma relates her story to Shu Wen: after her father died, she was forced to deal with the struggles between Chinese and Tibetans, and unwilling to harm either party, she set fire to her estate and eloped with her loving servant, whom she calls Tiananmen. The two couples, however, soon lost touch in the blizzard. Shu Wen and Zhuoma end up living with a Tibetan family.

As the story continues, Zhuoma is kidnapped, and probably forced to be someone’s wife, as was common along the Silk Road during that time. The time she unites with Shu Wen and others again, she realizes that Tiananman has become a lama. Shu Wen also learns from Old Hermit Qiangba the true circumstances of her husband’s death thirty years ago: during a sky burial ceremony, Kejun found a vulture attacking a living lama among the corpses, and keen to save the lama, he shot what Tibetans regard as a sacred bird. This enraged the lamas,

and in order to atone for his sins and prove that Han Chinese are also worthy of salvation, Kejun killed himself and let the lamas perform a sky burial for him by feeding him to the vultures. Old Hermit Qiangba is the lama whom Kejun saved many years ago. Although Shu Wen has long adopted the language, customs, clothing and even faith of Tibetans, she decides to return to Suzhou. She longs to see her family again, but after thirty years all the buildings have been torn down and replaced by new ones, and her family is nowhere. At the end, she cannot tell whether she is a Tibetan or Chinese, and feels lost and desolate in a strange place.

Linda Jaivin (2004) expresses her disapproval of *Sky Burial*, owing to the fact that it does not even hint at the extent of the devastation China wreaked in Tibet from the 1950s through the 1980s.¹⁰ She calls Xinran's Tibet an "almost Disneyfied version in which Sino-Tibetan conflict is more or less symbolically resolved by the self-sacrifice of a Chinese man." Nonetheless, despite the absence of strong political statements against China, the book can in fact be read as a critique of the Communist Party in various aspects, including its treatment of Tibetan people. One aspect is the demand that people must devote themselves to the Party at the expense of the family and the individual. Shu Wen calls herself "lucky," as compared with a lot of Chinese women, as she had the chance to go to a missionary school and later to Jingling Girls' College to study medicine, before going to the university to specialize in dermatology (5). It is clear, however, that she was educated more for the sake of the state than for her own personal growth, and the state-oriented purposes of education become more apparent with the description of Kejun's background. Having lost all his relatives in the Sino-Japanese War, he went to medical school with the support of the state, and worked very hard in order to "repay this debt" (6). As the state takes precedence over the family and the individual, the loving couple ironically regards separation from their loved ones—which is normally a despairing situation—as a good chance to demonstrate their "loyalty to the Motherland" (7).

If the above examples only reveal Kejun's gratitude for his nation, then the critique of China's conquest of Tibet becomes more apparent as Kejun, in his letters to Shu Wen, expresses his surprise and fear at the resistance and hostility from the Tibetans, because he had been "led to believe"—again by the Party—that the negotiations between the Chinese government and Tibetan religious leaders had been "entirely successful" (134). While his decision to take his life and thereby settle the disputes between Chinese and Tibetans (at least in that area of Tibet) has been made for the good of his nation, this act also gives him a chance to express his undying love for Shu Wen, which would have been considered "bourgeois" in Party ideology. In his last letter to her, he says:

I love you. If I am allowed into paradise, I'll make sure you live a safe and peaceful life, and wait for you there. If I go to hell for this, I will give everything I have to pay the debt we both incurred in life, working to give you the right to enter heaven when your time comes. If I become a ghost, I'll watch over you at night and drive away any spirits that trouble your rest. If I have no place to go to, I'll dissolve into their air and be with you at your every breath. (138)

Such a natural and spontaneous expression of romantic love becomes a form of resistance to the state, not to mention that the belief in ghosts and afterlife was prohibited at that time, along with the banning of Buddhism and other religions. Similarly, Shu Wen is unlike other women of her time and unlike most other victims in Xinran's former work. Her decision to leave her work unit in Suzhou in order to follow the army to Tibet, using her knowledge of medicine as an excuse, is a strongly personal move, which would have been prohibited if not for the urgent demand for dermatologists in the army. Through the eyes of Shu Wen, another criticism of the state, including its conquest of Tibet, is launched: though there are indeed "records of Kejun's death," his death notice neither mentions how he died, or accords him with the status of a revolutionary martyr (153)—and such omission might have been the result of the Party's attempt to cover up

the serious conflicts between Tibet and China which, if exposed, would have rendered their conquest of Tibet unjustified.

Jaivin expresses her surprise at hearing Xinran call *Sky Burial* a "novel," as the book and all its publicity have trumpeted it as a true story, though she adds that even when the book is read as literary non-fiction, not every detail of conversation or incident could be treated as a faithful record of fact. Peter Gordon describes Xinran's story as existing in that "strange place" where truth and fiction overlap, concluding that the "strength" of the story makes it unimportant whether the story is true or not. Indeed, Xinran, aware of the many gaps left by Shu Wen with whom she interviewed over two days, spent eight years interviewing Tibetan lamas, soldiers, generals, and ordinary people for her book and also watched over 100 hours of video made by different people (Samdup). Xinran the narrator stresses that she is only the mediator of Shu Wen's story, even though she tries to capture faithfully what she has told her over the two days they were together:

As I wrote Shu Wen's story, I tried to relive her journey from 1950s China to Tibet—to see what she saw, to feel what she felt, to think what she thought. Sometimes I was so immersed that I did not see the London streets, shops and tube trains—or my husband standing beside me with a cup of green tea. (10)

Interestingly enough, her indication that her story can only be a representation of what really happened is mirrored by Shu Wen's thoughts about Dalai Lama, his character and his involvement in the struggles between Tibet and the Chinese government from the 1950s to the 1980s, which extend to a general comment on the elusiveness of the truth and the irrecoverable nature of the past:

The truth, she thought, would always remain elusive because humans could never recover the past as it actually happened. (107)

Hence *Sky Burial* is very similar to *The Good Women of China* in the fictional and fictionalized nature of its characters and the narrator.

Their differences in terms of narrative structures nonetheless should not be overlooked. Indeed, it is necessary to explore what is known as framed narrative and its variations, which characterize both works, to illustrate how Xinran's relationship with her women characters in *Sky Burial* is significantly different from the self-other relationship in *The Good Women of China*.

McHale describes the framed narrative, or Chinese-boxes narrative, which consists of a primary world, or "diegesis," in which there is embedded a "hypodiegetic" world; sometimes there is within it a "hypo-hypodiegetic" world, and an additional "hypo" is prefixed for each level down the narratives (113). The embedded worlds may be more or less continuous with the world of the primary diegesis, as in *Wuthering Heights*, or they may be subtly different, as in the play-within-the-play of *Hamlet* (113). The latter is an example of "mise-en-abyme": first, it is an embedded representation; second, it resembles something of the diegetic world; third, such resemblances constitute some "salient, continuous aspects" of the primary world (such as the story, the narrative situation, or the style), to the effect that it reproduces and/or duplicates the primary representation as a whole (124-25).

As McHale's observes, postmodernist texts tend to suppress the "difference in flavor" that help the reader keep different narrative levels distinct in his mind: in other words, they encourage "trompe-l'oeil," misleading the reader into regarding an embedded world as the primary world, though such deliberate "mystification" is often followed by "demystification" in which the true ontological status of the supposed "reality" is revealed (115-16). The text nonetheless solicits an active involvement in the "unreal," and among the various strategies is the missing end-frame, meaning that the embedded text does not return to the primary diegesis at the end (117). McHale refers to Borges, who suggests that the Chinese-box structure of *Don Quixote* seems to imply that readers are fictional characters and that their lived reality is as much a fiction as Quixote's is (130). Similarly, Brian Richardson in his *Narrative Dynamics* contends that frames are "inher-

ently unstable," appearing "definitive" and yet "capable of being reconstructed within a larger frame"; he even postulates a "rule of the violated frame" which states that ontological boundaries between embedded worlds are regularly transgressed (330-31).

In fact, the framed narrative technique is used in *The Good Women of China*: Xinran's story makes up the primary diegetic world, whereas the other women occupy the hypodiegetic level, and despite some examples of hypo-hypodiegetic narratives,¹¹ the stories of these women are chiefly embedded in a horizontal manner along the same plane.¹² William Nelles contends that horizontal embedding has the paradoxical effect of producing an illusory realism and of undercutting that illusion (352). Yet *The Good Women of China*, in which the stories of different women are horizontally embedded with one another, does not produce this paradoxical effect. Even though the "I" might be treated as "fictionalized" and enmeshed with the other "selves" to create the total effect of a collective consciousness, the overall impression of realism is not quite diminished and the stories are as realistic as they can be. How well, then, does the theorization of vertical embedding apply to Xinran's second work? Does the framing of the stories of Shu Wen and Zhuoma create the paradoxical impression that Xinran, Shu Wen and Zhuoma are equally real, at the same time, all equally unreal?

Xinran, as narrator, mediates her identity through Shu Wen, and knows herself better in the process. At the beginning, she shares a deep affinity with the woman. When she asks where Shu Wen was born, Shu Wen emphasizes, "In your Nanjing," which is also the place where she first met her husband. Very soon, however, Xinran realizes that they are very different, and even remarks that Shu Wen is "one of the most exceptional woman" (2), which makes herself "foolish, ignorant" by comparison (3). She further expresses her disbelief that a young woman at that time should have dreamed of traveling to a place as "distant and terrifying" as Tibet, as it is quite unimaginable for women in her previous generation (and her own) to love so "passionately" (4). The story of this remarkable woman prompts Xinran to

ask herself these questions: "How would that change you?" "Who would you become?" (91) but she can give no answer. Her impression of Tibet on her first real visit takes on a symbolic significance:

But it was not until I went to Tibet again in 1995 to make a documentary that I felt I began to understand what it might be like to live there. I and my four cameramen were rendered speechless by the emptiness of the landscape, the invisible wind that swept across the barren land, the high, boundless sky, and the utter silence. My mind and soul felt clean and empty. I lost any sense of where I was, or of the need to talk. The simple words that Shu Wen had used—"cold," "colour", "season", "loss"—had a new resonance. (10)

Her paradoxical feelings towards the landscape, which are a combination of fear and attraction, is interestingly mirrored in her relationship with Shu Wen, in which friendliness and empathy do not lead to further intimacy, but are overtaken by alienation: "I longed to draw her into an intimacy that would enable me to ask the torrent of questions that I had been storing up during the day, but it was clear that Wen considered all the talk for the day to be over" (90).

Xinran, by mediating herself through Shu Wen's story, therefore recognizes the differences in the "other" woman. These differences, however, are not assimilated to the "I," but preserved and articulated by the narrative structure. After Shu Wen has learnt that her beloved husband died thirty years ago, she attempts to create a sense of anchorage and permanence at the site where he killed himself, reassuring herself that "in the months and years to come, at all times and in all places, she would be like a kite, connected by an invisible thread to Mount Anyemaqen" (143). To accomplish this, she divides her book of essays which she has written to Kejun throughout those years, carrying one half with her, while leaving the other half to Old Hermit Qiangba, so that "a part of Kejun and a part of herself would live on in Tibet" (143). If Shu Wen expects the rest of herself (and of Kejun) would live in Suzhou, then such a feeling of certainty is nonetheless undermined by the desolation that overwhelms her as she revisits that place that used to be her "home":

Wen stood in the middle of the street, paralysed by the strangeness of her hometown. She was so absorbed in thought that she heard neither the sound of the clappers nor the noise of the cars and bicycles rushing past her only inches away. All she had now were her memories. Would she have the courage to embark on a second search so late in her life? If not, where should she go?

She put her hand into the pocket of her robe where she kept the photograph of Kejun. Laying her fingers on the image that had shared the sweetness, the bitterness and the sweeping changes of her life for so many years, she whispered the words *Om mani padme hum*.¹³

Up above, a family of geese flew towards home.

Here, there were neither sacred vultures, nor sky burials. (158)

The Buddhist mantra of compassion, whispered at a time when Shu Wen suffers from a loss of direction, reminds the reader that she has long become a Tibetan Buddhist. Hence, she is very different from those women who use religion as a refuge from poverty and who change their objects of faith all the time, depending on what is "in fashion," in "What Chinese Women Believe" in *The Good Women of China* (90). However, the desolation evoked by the ending makes us doubt whether her faith really enables her to embark on her "second search" in her life, or insulates her from the pain of losing her husband.

If the book simply ended at this point, then it would have encouraged the reader to empathize with Shu Wen and even get lost with her in Suzhou, but this is not the case. The book begins with the primary, diegetic world of Xinran's life as a broadcaster, and this world gradually recedes in the first chapter "Shu Wen," as Shu Wen's story, and her hypodiegetic world, takes over. The primary world, in the form of italic text, intercedes between chapters five and six and between chapters six and seven, containing Xinran's reflection on what happened to Shu Wen and Zhuoma; the diegetic world finally takes over after Shu Wen's story ends in chapter nine. Xinran, in "A letter to Shu Wen," expresses her "gasps of admiration that the beauty of her story inspires," as well as her eagerness to know what has happened after Shu Wen left Tibet (161). Nonetheless, as Xinran earnestly begs Shu Wen to contact her through her publisher, we are made aware that the

setting has changed from China to London. Therefore, even though the letter signifies a metalepsis and a crossover from the diegetic to the hypodiegetic world, the abrupt shift in time and space does not so much create the impression that Xinran is on the same ontological plane with Shu Wen, as reinforce the fact that they live in different worlds. This is how Xinran's second book further differs from her first. The letters and phone tapes in *The Good Women of China* are desperate, but deferred attempts to reach out to the world. In *Sky Burial*, there is also an abundant use of letters—ranging from the letters by Shu Wen's parents and sister, to Kejun's which only reached Shu Wen after thirty years, and the letters which Shu Wen has written to Kejun during her time in Tibet, in her attempt to vent her love for him and dispel her loneliness. Above all, the book ends with Xinran's letter to Shu Wen. These letters are also deferred means of communication, but the deferral and ineffectiveness do not convey a sense of urgency; instead, they help to build up a lost world—one that the author has failed to describe, and interestingly, has decided to leave as it is, in order to add to the legendary status of its protagonists.

If the boundary between the diegetic and the hypodiegetic worlds fleshes out the isolation of Shu Wen from Xinran, what about the relationship between Shu Wen and Zhuoma? It now becomes obvious that Zhuoma's story is a "mise-en-abyme" of Shu Wen's. Like Shu Wen, Zhuoma is a highly intelligent woman, and her passion for freedom and romance makes her forsake her inherited estate to follow her will to love and live: "My property and my role as head of the estate meant little to me any longer. And so, I decided to walk away from the fighting in the hope of finding freedom" (42). She serves as a stark contrast to Saierbao, the woman of the Tibetan household which they stay with. Described as an "extremely calm and dignified woman who seemed to savour all her chores," Saierbao is no doubt a tough woman; but as a wife who is shared by two husbands she remains a model of female exploitation in Tibet (61). Zhuoma's relationship with her lover is also sad. Though Tiananmen, unlike Kejun, has managed to survive, by the time they reunite, they cannot even touch each

other, as his the life was “pledged to the Buddha” (112). The fact that Zhuoma has named her servant and lover after the Tiananmen Square now becomes significant: though the Tibetan woman's longing and admiration for Chinese culture is unquestionable, her final estrangement from him signifies the ambivalent relationship between China and Tibet, as much as between Shu Wen and Zhouma. While there is a strong sense of intimacy and affinity between the two women, Zhuoma finally separates from Shu Wen, as she stops at Beijing and does not accompany her to Suzhou. Just as there is a boundary between the diegetic and hypodiegetic worlds, the narrative puts a stop to the crossover between the hypodiegetic and the hypo-hypodiegetic worlds, and the two remarkable women are isolated from each other.

The effects of the narrative embeddings now become obvious. While the multiple frames are usually violated and tend to create the impression that the embedding worlds are as fictitious as the embedded ones, this is not what the multiple embeddings do in *Sky Burial*. Xinran's diegetic world sounds realistic, but the stories of Shu Wen and Zhuoma are so different from Xinran's that they are not completely imaginable, and even attain a legendary status. It is their distinctive and legendary nature, as gleaned through the eyes of Xinran, which resists integration to any collective consciousness such as the one articulated in *The Good Women of China*. In addition, neither Shu Wen's nor Zhuoma's story is given any real closure, not to mention that their thoughts and feelings are never fully articulated. In this way, their voices can avoid being fully appropriated by Xinran, the narrator; as such, they are mediated in a relatively undistorted manner.

* * *

Esther Tyldesley, translator of *The Good Women of China*, and co-translator of *Sky Burial* (with Julia Lovell), appreciates Xinran's first book for the variety of lives it describes. She says, “Our current idea of China is terribly homogenous, based on the *Wild Swans* model, but intellectuals from good families aren't typical—the peasants are typical and Xinran has talked to them, so her book offers a much broader

canvas" (Lambert). This remark would not be quite applicable to the author's *Sky Burial*, which only focuses on the lives of two women, both of whom embark on life paths that no common woman—Chinese or Tibetan—would ever dare to tread. Focusing on the lives of only a few women should not make an auto/biography any less worthy than one that focuses on many. With the use of narrative structures, as well as tones and images, and through the intervention and mediation of the auto/biographical "I," the author not only reveals the interesting processes of interaction between self and other and of identity formation, but guides the ways with which the readers construct pictures of Chinese women, whose lives cannot be circumscribed.

Hong Kong

NOTES

¹Stanley's book focuses on the Western scene, and with the notion of "great lives" she refers to those of white middle and upper class men who have achieved success according to conventional standards (4).

²In her interview, Xinran said that many Chinese men do not treat women as "full human beings," and she talked about her ex-husband, who thought he respected her, but who never believed that women had the same value and spirit as men do (Lambert).

³McHale's *Postmodernist Fiction* studies the narrative structures in postmodernist fiction, but his ideas can lend special insights into reading auto/biographical texts.

⁴Interestingly, in *Zhongguo de hao nuyuan* (2003), the Chinese version, there is no quotation mark at the end of the first dialogue, hence indicating that the expression of pity that follows is by Jin Shuai (66).

⁵My remark was inspired by Beth Newman's study of the narrative voices in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (145).

⁶Lovers are swordfish; secretaries are carp; other men's wives are Japanese puffer fish; and wives are salt cod (48).

⁷She talks about her radio program: "At the beginning, everything was an experiment, because before 1988 there had been only one voice for radio and TV. So before we had any idea what was allowed, we tested it out: very carefully at first, gradually getting bolder." Nonetheless, she was fully aware that she was "working in the gap between two walls...one side was the Communist Party and the

other side was my own soul. I began to find the burden overwhelming" (Lambert).

⁸It was bought by Shanghai Joint Publishing House in 2002 and got published in 2003.

⁹Indeed, she included this story in the first draft of *The Good Women of China*, but later considered it special and inspiring enough to deserve a brand new book on it alone (Yuan).

¹⁰These include the demolition of temples, looting of treasures, imprisonment and torture of monks and nuns, and other serious human rights abuses—some of which continue today and are all documented by international human rights monitors.

¹¹One example is the story of Yulong, which is embedded in Hongxue's story in "The Girl Who Kept a Fly as a Pet."

¹²William Nelles differentiates between two kinds of narrative embedding: "vertical" embedding, in which narratives at different diegetic levels are inserted within each other, and "horizontal" embedding, in which stories at the same diegetic level are recounted by different narrators following one another (351).

¹³This is the most frequently recited Buddhist mantra in Tibet. Embodying the compassion and blessing of all the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, it invokes especially the blessing of Avalokitesvara (Goddess of Mercy), the Buddha of Compassion, which liberates all sentient beings from sufferings of the different realms of samara. In Shu Wen's story, the six syllables also make up the names of the six children of the family which the two women stay with (54).

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Bennett's *The History Boys*: Unnoticed Ironies Lead to Critical Neglect

JOHN J. STINSON

Any one, or a combination of the following, may be the reason why Alan Bennett's play *The History Boys* (2004) has received virtually no serious attention to date from academic critics: it's an unusual hybrid; it's middlebrow; its politics are dubious; it's hard to label; it has attractive surfaces but no depth; it's not sure about what it wants to say; and why should a seventy-year-old playwright make a breakthrough to genuine accomplishment? (Of course, these are only surmises based on some probabilities: no one has reason to write about why s/he has not written about the play.) The disparity between the effusive praise from newspaper and periodical critics on both sides of the Atlantic, and its neglect in the academy, is not an unprecedented phenomenon, but it is an interesting one nonetheless. Without any insinuation that this alone validates claims to genuine merit as dramatic literature, we might, purely observationally, note that the play won the Tony, the Drama Desk, the Olivier, the Outer Critics' Circle, and the London Critics' Circle awards for best play (July 13; "Royal Performance").

Excessive modesty on Bennett's part does not help his case with those critics who feel, legitimately enough, that it is their job to dig deep beneath surfaces. About his first play, *Forty Years On* (1967), a play set within a boys school, Bennett has written, "I listen to the BBC Critics. They all say it is very funny, but what it is about, what I am trying to do, is there a message? Nobody knows, and I certainly don't" (*Writing Home* 416). The general judgment of reviewers and literary journalists is that *The History Boys* (2004) is funny, endearing, and meaningfully serious, and that, indeed, this second play set in a boys school does have a message or messages. This time Bennett has

made no move to dissuade critics from the idea of 'message'; that is to say, no dissuasion outside the text of the play itself. The idea of reviewers generally, and, it seems, of most audiences, is that the message lies in an unequivocal endorsement of all save one or two of the ideas, teaching methods, attitudes, and sympathies of Hector, the charismatic teacher operating within a liberal humanist tradition. While this view of the play is not outlandish or hopelessly naïve, it does, despite the critics' beneficent intentions, deny the play much of its irony, nuance, dialectical force, and ideational density and compression.

Whatever the ultimate merit of *The History Boys* as a piece of dramatic literature, it has a much more complex and ironic structure than has been commented on to date, and it is, in fact, the skillfully embedded ironies that give the play a weight and depth that do indeed make it a respectable contribution to serious theater. The play's deep ironic structure not only saves it, unquestionably, from didacticism and sentimentality, but also, in my contention, makes it ideationally challenging and intellectually humorous. Failure to apprehend the full depth and extent of the irony within the play causes a significant depreciation of its worth as dramatic literature. If the irony goes unrecognized, the play then seems only to make the totally unsurprising point that substance and integrity are to be preferred to superficiality and expediency, and that there is no problem in distinguishing the genuine from the counterfeit. Critical neglect seems almost justified if, in fact, the play's intellectual content is as thin and dubious as all that.

The History Boys, a play full of performances of various kinds, is, in fact, a play about performance(s), including a bit of self-reflexivity as Bennett encourages us to interrogate his own performance in the writing of the play. People who begin to contemplate the meaning of this play sooner or later come to realize that it cannot simply be an endorsement of all that Hector seems to represent. At this point, though, they may meet, at least temporarily, a quandary. Assured critical judgments about any element of the play may seem at first to be in doubt because of questions about slippery and ambiguous per-

spectives and the extent of ironic dimensions. I hope to show, however, that the play is in fact remarkably cohesive: that Bennett is not only making a statement about modern relativism, but also causing his viewers/readers to recognize their own conflicting attitudes. With the performances in the play being pleasing and arresting, and the issues raised all being especially timely or timeless, Bennett has positioned himself well to make his thematic point. The correspondence between the play's form and its content has been carefully prepared.

Hector: An Ambiguous Hero

What can be said about Hector's ideas and his performance in the classroom? How do these figure within the conflict of the play? If Hector is, as he seems to be, the protagonist, what are the forces against which he must struggle? Are these forces fully represented by Irwin and the Headmaster? To what extent are audiences and readers encouraged to bring their own frames of reference to some highly vexed and fraught issues of our own moment in history? Does the author even suggest that his own frames of reference and shaping of materials are not necessarily the most reliable?

In Act Two the Headmaster (always capitalized in the play) has a brief but intense scene with Mrs. Lintott, the history teacher. He says,

Shall I tell you what is wrong with Hector as a teacher? It isn't that he doesn't produce results. He does. But they are unpredictable and unquantifiable and in the current educational climate that is no use. He may very well be doing his job, but there is no method I know of that enables me to assess the job that he is doing. (67)

The Headmaster's words are, in the first decade of the twenty-first century, even more pertinent than in the early 1980s, the time in which the play is set. Honest though the Headmaster's remarks may be, teachers in the audience today, whether in the U.K. or the U.S., have had near-visceral reactions because of the issues he has raised. Most will immediately feel the oppressive weight of, as they perceive

it, a bloated bureaucracy that sits on them insistently, forcing compliance with niggling, ill-conceived regulations and a lock-step conformity. Terms like *standards, assessment, accountability, learning outcomes, and annual measurable objectives* seem to many more like weapons trained on them than just noun descriptors. The sheer topicality of such issues carries with it a punch and resonance it otherwise might not have, and many audience members, having, for example, already-formed attitudes about the troublesome ramifications of the No Child Left Behind Act in the U.S., find themselves ready to embrace Hector, a heroic rebel and maverick as they are prone, especially at first, to see him.

Hector's first entrance in Act One is onto an empty stage; Bennett provides these directions:

Though the general setting is a sixth-form classroom in a boys school in the eighties in the north of England, when Hector first comes in, a figure in motor-cycle leathers and helmet, the stage is empty.

His sixth formers, eight boys of seventeen or eighteen, come briskly on and take Hector out of his motor-cycle gear, each boy removing an item and as he does so presenting it to the audience with a flourish.

LOCKWOOD (*with gauntlets*) Les gants.

AKHTAR (*with a scarf*) L'écharpe.

RUDGE Le blouson d'aviateur.

Finally the helmet is removed.

TIMMS *Le casque.*

The taking off of the helmet reveals Hector (which is both his surname and his nickname) as a schoolmaster of fifty or so. (3-4)

This is a portentous entrance to be sure. It reveals the unity of the group and the boys' totally easy but respectful attitude toward their teacher, and David Denby is correct when he remarks that the young students' theatricality is a means toward self-realization (186-87). But, more than that, the stylized, nearly ceremonial quality of the scene suggests something heroic about Hector, even apart from his name's suggestion of the noble Trojan hero. The ritualistic quality makes the audience see Hector as something much like a medieval knight faithfully attended by his young squires after he has just ridden back within the castle walls following an adventure, the boys' naming each

article in French as they divest him of it, bringing perhaps the suggestion of French romance. Additionally, the boys' presentation of each item "to the audience with a flourish" (4) breaks the fourth wall and slyly encourages audience members to feel as one with this unified and happy group. In fact, the ritual we have witnessed, although brief, is of the kind termed a "rite of integration," designed to establish an emotional unity or community bond, in this case each of the boys with the others, and all of them with the audience (Trice 656-57). We get the feeling that Hector is lovable, laudable, and imposing.

With the large cast of characters and the number of ideas present in the play, we cannot expect any kind of in-depth characterization of Hector, or any of the other characters. What characterization we have, though, does suggest real flesh and blood, and even the blank spaces add to verisimilitude in that there is an unknowability about real people that we "know." Since this is a drama set in a classroom, some attention is drawn to teaching methods, objectives, cultural suppositions, societal assumptions, preconceived attitudes, and valorized opinions. As it is also an English play, there is the inevitable matter of social class, the resonance of which has been diminished in recent years, but by no means altogether eliminated.

Because Hector seems to be enclosed within an aura of approval adeptly set up and managed by Bennett, the audience is prepared to accept as "right" Hector's enjoinder to the boys that they abandon their ambitions (ignited by the Headmaster) of getting into Oxbridge, and instead set their sights on one of the civic or newer universities. Although Hector gives a theatrical emphasis (including a line from the mouth of Othello) to what he says, he is absolutely serious when he comments on Dakin's announcement that "We're all going in for Oxford or Cambridge" (6). Hector responds:

"Wash me in steep-down gulfs of liquid fire." I thought all that silliness was finished with. I thought that after last year we were settling for the less lustrous institutions ... Derby, Leicester, Nottingham. Even my own dear Sheffield. Scripps. You believe in God. Believe also in me: forget Oxford and Cambridge. (6)

The very few and quite vague hints we are given might lead us to suppose that the boys come (like Bennett himself¹) from lower middle class backgrounds. But, whether this or working class, consider the likely viewpoint of the boys' parents. Their sons have a chance of being admitted (and, later, we learn: more than just a chance; they are indeed all admitted) to Oxford or Cambridge. Oxbridge will probably provide for these boys a better chance at upward social and economic mobility than ever enjoyed by anyone else in their family. Hector actively and openly discourages them from thinking about Oxbridge. One might suppose he would be heartily in favor; the ancient universities were often thought to emphasize learning for its own sake while the newer universities were deemed to shift toward practical knowledge. What, then, causes his disapprobation?

Hector might well argue that some other British universities come close to Oxford or Cambridge in academic and overall excellence. 'Proof,' for or against this proposition, entails a long, complex, vexatious, and inconclusive argument that will serve no purpose to enter in here. We might, however, note that *The Times Higher Education Supplement* has annually been surveying "1,300 academics in 88 countries. They were asked to name the best institutions in the fields that they felt knowledgeable about." After a tabulating process the universities are placed in a ranked list of the "World's Best Universities." In 2006 Harvard was #1, Cambridge #2, Oxford #3, and Imperial College London, #9 ("World University"). There is no question that a certain degree of arbitrariness goes into such rankings, but they seem useful if only to provoke discussion. At the same time, aren't they complicit in the tendency to commodify everything, and is it this, perhaps, that Hector (whose exact political beliefs are unknown) deplores? But there may be another reason for Hector's dismissal of Oxbridge for his boys. We learn that Hector was a graduate of Sheffield (6), although, as he tells Mrs. Lintott (9), he tried for admission to Oxford. One may hypothesize that, consciously or subconsciously, Hector wants to avoid the blow to his ego that would occur if his boys were to surpass him, and, obviously, the ego of the

teacher/performer must be fed regularly and never denied. In his book *The Lessons of the Masters*, cited by Bennett in his "Acknowledgments" page (v), George Steiner contends that the Master never wants his students to surpass him (6). The master/disciple relationship, Steiner says, is firmly based on power, and he relates it to teaching in this way: "Teaching could be regarded as an exercise, open or concealed, in power relations. The Master possesses psychological, social, physical power" (4). Steiner's book can speak to the play in several ways; but Hector surely seems one of several characters in the play who are psychologically needy. Another way in which a combination of psychological need and abuse of power is seen is Hector's near-insistence that each day a different boy ride home from school with him on the back of his motorcycle while he "fiddles with" their genitals, surely an abuse of position and trust in today's world. That Hector is able to rationalize his groping of the boys is not unusual for a Bennett protagonist. As Duncan Wu (writing before the appearance of *The History Boys*) puts it: "Bennett's protagonists typically lack the awareness that would enable them to comprehend their foibles, and rectify the wrongs they inadvertently commit against others. Tunnel vision is their besetting sin, and it usually implies a more profound failure" (7).

Some audience members who are familiar with fictions, films, and plays about schools and teachers may put *The History Boys* in the pigeonhole of the 'great teacher' script, their choice likely dependent upon which other works within this category they are familiar with. A very partial list includes *Goodbye, Mr. Chips*; *The Browning Version*; *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (the novel by Muriel Spark, as well as the play and film versions by Jay Presson Allen); *The Dead Poets Society*; *Dangerous Minds*. A sophisticated reader/viewer of *The History Boys* who sees no irony whatsoever in Bennett's representation of Hector is likely to see the play much in the way that Robert B. Heilman saw (in this case rightly, I would contend) *The Dead Poets Society*. Heilman's indictment of that film is that it's "old-fashioned melodrama gussied up to look like educational criticism. First you've got this guy on a

white horse charging in to save the place. So you need some black hats to make him look like a hero instead of a moral egotist" (417). In Heilman's judgment the teacher-hero, Keating, "has cast himself as the gutsy, charismatic, infallible, one-in-a-million guide against the system" (418), a "self-romanticizing egotist" (419): "[h]e alerts the young to circumambient evils and neglected truths while colleagues and administrators drudgingly stick to formalistic ruts. He hints that he has to pay a price. The role forced upon him tends to be the central one in the Passion Play. He struggles to push for truth but it is hard going against centurions, Pharisees, money changers in the temple and so forth" (419).

Viewers who find Keating wholly admirable will probably feel that Hector is nearly so too. Others, whose thoughts about Keating run along a track similar to Heilman's, may either find Hector a false and pretentious creation in a rather poor play, or they might find him an ironized figure in a play more subtly balanced than at first appears. The latter group would no doubt see the representation of Hector as a noble and formidable knight as an early and strategically placed indicator from the author that we must have serious reservations about him. The directions tell us that he is a man of "studied eccentricity" (4), suggesting, perhaps, a certain quotient of fakery in him. He is a teacher nearing retirement age² who begins to lose out to a much younger man (Irwin) in powerful sway over the boys (thus definitely vincible?), and who breaks down one day (65) and cries in class (a recognition of his own weaknesses or imposture resulting in pathos?). After a while, Hector may begin to seem something less than the repository of strength, wisdom, and virtue that he appeared to be at first. Some may be inclined to see Hector as a pitiable type, a homosexual who came to maturity in a U.K. where homosexual acts were still a crime, living now in a sham heterosexual marriage, as indicated by his telling the headmaster that his wife probably won't care at all about his fumbling with the boys (52).

If some audience members have few doubts about Hector while in the theater, they might find themselves confronting some upon later

reflection, perhaps after reading the play or reading a thoughtful commentary. This has been suggested by Nicholas Hytner, the director of both the stage and film versions of *The History Boys*:

On stage, the central argument can seem unfairly weighted in Hector's favour, as if there were no disputing Housman's dictum, quoted in Hector's first lesson, that "all knowledge is precious whether or not it serves the slightest human use." The truth is that much of what Hector teaches is entirely self-indulgent, and his insistence on inflicting on his class the culture, high and low, of his own youth, is at least questionable. (*History Boys: the Film* xiii).

The last three words that I have quoted, i.e., "at least questionable," may seem to some both a bit of waffling and a tacit admission by Hytner that Bennett's play lacks clarity and logically supported development of argument. Such a judgment, though, rests on the supposition that *The History Boys* is, or should be, a drama of Shavian argument. With a good deal of redesign the play could be that, but it would then have a ponderousness that the present play, agile, well-paced, and multi-formed does not. Note that Hector and Irwin have only the most fleeting moments of direct verbal tilting. The audience is left to imagine the lines that a vigorous debate would take, and over which issues one man would score points over the other.

The Hector/Irwin Opposition

Irwin, no villain and no fool either, might, despite his youth, win a decision over Hector in a debating contest. Irwin is adept at 'performance,' at examinationship, at winning. But by no means should he be viewed as reprehensible, and Bennett does, in fact, allow Irwin, intellectually arrogant but psychologically vulnerable, to engage our sympathies. (Stephen Campbell Moore, portraying Irwin in London, New York, and on-screen, has won near-unanimous praise for his sensitive conveyance of this mixture.) Presently a supply teacher, he is a young man in hopes of a permanent job; at the outset

he is given a gruff and condescending greeting by the headmaster, and, yes, while his forte is technique for passing examinations, he mirrors in this the author himself. When Bennett was only seventeen, he had published in *The Owllet* magazine a playful piece titled "Examinationship (or the art of succeeding at examinations without actually cheating)" (Games 32). But, less than three years later, he put his examinationship skills to work not for public amusement but personal gain. Bennett writes in the "Introduction" to *The History Boys* that in preparing for a scholarship examination at Exeter College, Oxford (which he was to win), he arrived at some practical and effective techniques. For one, he

reduced everything I knew to a set of notes with answers to possible questions and odd, eye-catching quotations all written out on a series of forty or fifty correspondence cards, a handful of which I carried in my pocket wherever I went. (xxiii-xiv)

For another, he

also twigged what somebody ought to have taught me but never had, namely that there was a journalistic side to answering an examination question; that going for the wrong end of the stick was more attention-grabbing than a less unconventional approach, however balanced. Nobody had ever tutored me in examination techniques or conceded that such techniques existed, this omission I suspect to be put down to sheer snobbery or the notion (here ascribed to Hector) that all such considerations were practically indecent. (xv)

Hector closely adheres to the idealized picture of the great teacher in fiction, theatre, and film, and he plays that role steadily and, it seems, without change. Steadfast or, perhaps, stubborn, in his methods, he evinces a paradox: he is both flexible and unchanging. He appears never to have a lesson prepared, but rather 'wings it,' showing his flexibility, and this day-to-day classroom adaptability is an ego-enhancing practice he will not change. Irwin, on the other hand, is highly disciplined, goal oriented, mentally agile, and acutely intelligent, although also a bit of a fraud: he is not, as he had claimed (11), an Oxford graduate at all (99). An advocate of the expedient and

practicer of the pragmatic, Irwin might be the better of two very good, but differently accomplished teacher/performers.³

Whether Irwin's advice to the boys to enter an exam question by the back or side door is a "trick" or not, it does strongly encourage critical thinking and imagination, a gathering of informed perspective, and artfulness. Late in the play he explains to Dakin that "Thinking about what might have happened alerts you to the consequences of what did" (90). He is a kind of creator even if he is not quite innocent of the charge of having prostituted his talents, of practicing and abetting the cheap, the 'flash,' and the meretricious. But the text gives us enough reason to conclude that Bennett wishes his audience to ask themselves who has not made accommodations and compromises with the world-as-it-is. Many American academics today find themselves doing something akin to what Irwin was hired to do: when, for example, it is found out that some of their best undergraduates have no idea of how to write an effective personal statement on a graduate school application, they find themselves providing practical hints or whole mini-courses of advice. Probably the way of the world was always thus; what is interesting is Bennett's manipulation of our sympathies and perceptions to make us think—if only temporarily—that we are on the side of an absolutist purity and truth that resides within Hector.

If members of the audience feel some degree of uncertainty about the methods, goals, and purposes of those three of the teachers whom we meet (let us now add Mrs. Lintott), so too do the boys eventually come to feel this. Early in the play Hector says to Mrs. Lintott (seemingly a caustically formidable woman in her dealings with the other teachers; in her history classroom a conventional teacher with a heavy emphasis on "fact," and in her function in the play something of a *raisonneur*) that "You give them an education. I give them the wherewithal to resist it" (23). Hector says this in a lightly bantering way and Mrs. Lintott appears to take no offense, but Hector's egoistic self-regard for being a last bastion of the true and the good and his refusal to be a 'team player' surely makes him act in ways that pro-

duce some dissonance, cognitive and otherwise, in his students. When Hector and Irwin, at the Headmaster's order, jointly teach a class, the boys are discomfited and thrown off balance; they need to find out whose class it really is so that they can get their bearings and set the proper mode for their responses (70). Of course, this brings up another question: At what stage in the educational process are students ready, intellectually and emotionally, for sharply divergent approaches grounded in wholly different philosophies? And this is one of those places where, in rereading the play, we wonder to what extent the classroom is a microcosm of England or the Western world of today. Diverse views and histories pull strongly at us from all directions, and an historically unprecedented degree of readiness seems to be demanded of us in a world where change seems to come almost instantaneously. Ambiguity and undecideability are not terms that apply only to literary criticism or theory.

Various Kinds of Performances

Forty Years On, Bennett's first play, produced in 1968, is set "in a public school in the South Downs" (*Plays One* 27) and, as Bennett has written, and critics have noted from the first, "the school itself [is] a loose metaphor for England" (*Plays One*, "Introduction" 77). More to the previous point, however, much of the play consists of the school play that lies within the larger play. Bennett may have been ingenuous when he wrote in 1991 that "the form of *Forty Years On* is more complicated than I would dream of attempting now. It is a play within a play in which the time-scale of the first play gradually catches up with the time scale of the second, one cog the years 1900-1939, the other 1939-45, and both within the third wheel of the present day" (*Plays One* 9-10). But, in 2004, with *The History Boys*, Bennett recovered his daring. Here, we do not quite have a play within the play, but, richly and entertainingly, we have the inclusion of scenes enacted by the boys as well as other types of performance. The first scene of the

second act (58), set five years later than that of the main action, shows a crippled Irwin, now a popular historian, delivering, from his wheelchair, his own slick script for the cameras filming a TV documentary series that is, according to Bennett in his "A Note on the First Production," titled *Heroes or Villains?* (xxix). That question mark is telling. In its pointing toward subjectivities and ambiguities of interpretation, the play is involving us thoroughly with questions about our guiding philosophies, epistemologies, and cultural foundations as they give rise to, or collide with, a current worldview, and that this questioning itself is the point.

Many other 'performances' are also present, intelligently dispersed throughout the play, giving it the buoyancy and humor that have delighted audiences, which is obviously a carry-over from Bennett's early days of comic sketch and revue writing. The longest 'performance' within the play is the brothel scene, in French, improvised by the boys in Hector's class. When the Headmaster and the newly-hired Irwin unexpectedly enter the room and find the handsome young student Dakin without his pants on, Hector, quick off the mark, says that Dakin is playing the part of a wounded soldier (not a customer in a bordello). Ideas of prostitution, false representation, self-deception, and inappropriateness—important motifs in the larger play—are presented to the audience in this comically memorable and successful scene that may both produce some subliminal reverberations and provide a bit of foreshadowing. Memorable too are the several scenes in which the students play an identification/guessing game designed by Hector. The boys perform scenes from films, sometimes with song and piano accompaniment; the films are usually from the 1940s and are generally melodramatic even if also of some artistic value. Hector must name the film. There may be a suggestion here that Hector (very much a classroom performer in his own way) has a penchant for theatricality because he comes from an age in which gay men had, of necessity, to act and pretend in their everyday lives. Irwin, a somewhat shy gay man still in the closet, also transforms himself in the classroom and performs his role of superior intellectual wit, replete

with insult and condescension, in a way that is assured and arresting in its arrogance. Whether Hector's and Irwin's propensities for classroom performance are in any way connected with their sexual orientation is uncertain, but Alan Sinfield has noted that

An essential link between homosexuality and theater is sometimes proposed but the project eludes precise definition. Kenneth Plummer argues that while all people play social roles, homosexuals are likely to be aware of 'passing,' 'presenting a self,' 'keeping up an act'; hence they have dramaturgical consciousness [...]. More often and in contradistinction to the 'passing' theory [of Plummer and others], homosexuals are simply supposed to be histrionic, flamboyant [...] one way of dealing with stigma. (43)

Irwin's style of presentation is twice referred to in the play as "meretricious," once by Irwin himself as he briefly talks with Posner (60) during the outdoor filming of his TV documentary (the proleptic scene in which we learn that Posner's life has turned out unhappily). It is unclear whether Irwin is simply acknowledging that he knew this was the view of the boys five years before when they were his students—Dakin said to him then, "We decided, sir, you were meretricious but not disingenuous" (75)—or whether he is confessing that he is indeed meretricious. There are more ironies and a puzzle, though, connected with this meeting with Posner five years in the future. It is now Posner who is deceptive and meretricious in hopes of making a bit of money from a scandal sheet: he has a concealed microphone on his person in an effort to record something that the now-famous Irwin might say about a relationship with Dakin in the past. Consider, though, this oddity. There are three basically homosexual men in the play: Hector, Irwin, and Posner. Posner, like the other two, is a performer; thrice we hear him sing in the classroom (12, 79, 106). And Posner, like them, is made to suffer. Hector is killed in the motorcycle accident in which Irwin is crippled for life; and Posner, those five years later, is the loneliest and most troubled of the former students. He "lives alone in a cottage he has renovated himself, has an allotment and periodic breakdowns [...] He has long since stopped asking himself where it went wrong" (108).

The Ending and Its Attendant Ambiguities

Whatever the reason might be for Bennett's meting out misfortune to his gay characters, he (and/or his director, Nicholas Hytner, listed as co-author of the film adaptation from the play) withdraws a good deal of the misery in the film version. Here, the most serious injury that Irwin appears to have suffered in the motorcycle accident is a broken leg (although Hector remains killed). The last time we see Irwin (*The Film* 106), he is walking easily, without wheelchair or crutches. And in the film scene corresponding to the one in the play version that represents Posner as a tortured, maladjusted loner, we have him, at a class reunion, say in answer to Mrs. Lintott's question to each of the former students as to what they are doing now, "Slightly to my surprise, I've ended up like you, a teacher. I'm a bit of a stock figure ... I do a wonderful school play for instance ... and though I never touch the boys, it's always a struggle, but maybe that's why I'm a good teacher. I'm not happy, but I'm not unhappy about it" (*The Film* 107, ellipsis marks in the original). Some may see here (more particularly in the stage version) what they think is the author's sadly retrograde attitude about sexual orientation, one involving some self-loathing on the part of the homosexual author himself (Bennett seems never to use the term "gay"). Whether Bennett intends any irony here, and if so, how it is directed, are questions that lead only to speculations of dubious value.⁴

The largest question as regards the ending is whether Hector's death and Irwin's crippling have any interpretable meaning. Does it have some logical integrity within the overall structure of the play? Or must we be forced to conclude that it is a melodramatic contrivance, a 'cheesy' ending by an author said, not entirely unfairly, to have difficulties with endings, or, as Stephen Schiff has said, with plot in general (97)? Are there convincing ways to defend the ending? Are thematic ironies at work again? Judgments about what constitutes success or 'success,' about what being 'true' to oneself means, or what it is that makes for a happy and fulfilled life are, of course, relative to

individuals, here both the characters in the play and the members of the audience. So, even the question whether the play ends happily or unhappily for the gay characters is an open one. We can note that Irwin enjoys astonishing success with what he was hired to do (all of the "history boys," eight out of eight, gain entrance to Oxford or Cambridge), and Irwin himself goes on to a very successful, albeit possibly meretricious, career as a TV presenter, his success abetted, he thinks (60), by his wheelchair. But what of Hector? It can be argued that Hector achieves his foremost wish; at least if we accept the judgment of Mrs. Lintott, who says to Irwin, "Forgive Hector. He is trying to be the kind of teacher people will remember. Someone they will look back on. He impinges" (50). Whether or not Mrs. Lintott offers, here and elsewhere, a validly objective view of Hector (I think she does), it has to be said that Hector's longtime teaching performance was successful in the eyes of the boys (even if they had begun to come more heavily under the sway of Irwin), and that his consuming desire to be remembered has been fulfilled. His sudden and dramatic death certainly aids in this. He gets, from the grave, the last lines of the play, right after receiving the testimony of Scripps about his [Hector's] type of education: "Love apart, it is the only education worth having" (109). Hector's lines, "Pass it on, boys. / That's the game I wanted you to learn. / Pass it on" (109), precisely because they are the last words of the play, appear to provide a strong ratification of Hector—that he did indeed have something well worth passing on.⁵ It is, then, of the three homosexual men, only the ending for Posner that is unrelievedly (and poignantly) sad.

Does the ending have some simple, interpretable meaning? The evidence strongly suggests that it does not. The simple formulation that Hector must die on his motorcycle because of the clear association with his *hamartia* (his sexual groping of the boys), is naïve in its simplicity. Besides, the play is definitely not a tragedy. To say that Hector must die⁶ because the values and philosophy for which he stands have been superseded by the crippled and crippling values symbolized by the now-paralyzed but soon-to-be influential Irwin has some plausi-

bility, but this jarring intrusion of the symbolic into the realm of day-to-day realism seems strained.

A variant and extension of this theory resides in the idea that the play can achieve significance only if Hector (again seen as the protagonist) dies by some conscious choice, rather than by accident. Support of a kind for this idea is given by the character Kafka in Bennett's play *The Insurance Man* when he says, "Accidents as we well know, are never an accident" (*Plays Two* 155). In this theory the motorcycle crash is seen as suicide and attempted murder. Hector, feeling that he and what he represents have been conquered by Irwin and all that is represented by him, decides that physical death is preferable to the spiritual one that he would otherwise suffer. Detesting the newly dominant ethos embodied in Irwin, Hector attempts to take him with him. A few supporting lines of evidence may be found for this theory, but, mostly, it is not sufficiently convincing. Bennett is not quite interested in psychological realism or naturalistic representation in the play. Too much argues for the simple acceptance of the accident theory, particularly if we see it as just the culmination of Hector's personal history, and we keep in mind Rudge's dictum (not really original with him) that "history is just one fucking thing after another" (85), or Mrs. Lintott's conclusion about "the utter randomness of things" (93). Besides, Hector shows no sign of personal animus toward Irwin; rather he treats him with respect and offers him understanding and kindly advice. Ironically, perhaps, we must conclude that Mrs. Lintott's randomness theory is as convincing as any other. Hector outlived his time, a long age in which absolute values were thought not only to exist, but to have a good chance of prevailing. He leaves a new world where randomness and relativism hold sway.

"Maybe this was irony"

Irony, ambivalence, and paradox are rampant in the play, giving it its intellectual texture and largely supplanting any emotional compo-

ment. Why we can still enjoy the play as much as we do, is a most useful but not easily answerable question. Peter Wolfe, writing before *The History Boys* was ever performed, briefly alluded to Bennett's use of Brechtian, metatheatrical, or postmodernist techniques (29). Does he, in *The History Boys*, deny the audience the opportunity for much emotional connection or response because he wants his audiences' minds alert, not for instruction, but for the beginning of intellectual contemplation incited by ambivalences and ironies?

Layers of irony are present in *The History Boys* in ways not always easily discernible. Bennett does, though, provide a few clues. Most significantly, perhaps, he employs a metatheatrical device to draw attention to his own artifice. In Act II Mrs. Lintott, left briefly alone on stage, turns directly to the audience and says, "I have not hitherto been allotted an inner voice, my role a patient and not unamused sufferance of the predilections and preoccupations of men. They kick their particular stone and I watch" (68). At other points Scripps and Posner serve as one-man choruses. Amidst all the many performances that we have been watching, we are now reminded that we are watching another one, that of the author writing the play. Implicitly we recognize that his performance may, like all the others in the play, be called into question. Does Mrs. Lintott, in her brief address to the audience, not make a valid point? Note all the authors mentioned, by either Hector or the boys, in his classroom: A. E. Housman, Philip Larkin, W. H. Auden, Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon, Rudyard Kipling, Franz Kafka, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Stevie Smith, T. S. Eliot, Friedrich Nietzsche, Thomas Hardy, Rupert Brooke, Shakespeare, Marcel Proust, Ludwig Wittgenstein, David Storey, Jean-Paul Sartre, George Orwell. Only one of these, Stevie Smith, is female and she chose to change her name from Florence Margaret Smith. Women writers, then, are definitely scanted, although gay and bisexual writers are perfectly adequately represented.⁷ Admittedly, the near-total maleness of this list (and its total whiteness) may not have attracted much attention as recently as even forty years ago, but Bennett is surely aware of its distinctively old-fashioned quality today, and it

serves as one more example of the subtly ironic representation of Hector. Interestingly, Virginia Woolf does happen to be mentioned, but this occurs when Dakin, talking with Scripps and Posner outside of class, describes the room he stayed in at Oxford while taking his entrance examinations. The regular resident had "an Arsenal [English football team] scarf draped around a photograph of Virginia Woolf, only I think maybe this was irony" (96). The last phrase—"I think maybe this was irony"—is a notable one because it seems slyly self-referential: as suggested earlier, anyone paying careful attention to the play has to wonder where Bennett's own irony begins and ends. The phrase might well provide an authorial alert for viewer and reader to be on the lookout for irony.

Bennett has a well-known relationship with ambivalence. Kara McKechnie, writing just before the appearance of *The History Boys*, saw it as the necessary form of tension in much of his oeuvre: "In Bennett's work, close observation often results in ambivalence. He has effectively presented himself as politically left-wing, socially right-wing, and a strong sense of being in two minds runs through his whole body of work [...]. This sense of ambivalence provides the crucial tension within Bennett's work" (McKechnie, *DLB*). This ambivalence is made explicit (with functionality and humor) in *The Lady in the Van*, a largely non-fictional play. Two characters (played by two different actors) named "Alan Bennett" appear on stage, often together, with Alan Bennett 1 facing off against Alan Bennett 2 (as they are referred to by the author) with digs, insinuations, and opposed points of view. And a character in the play called Pauline tells one of the Bennetts that she saw a "particularly perceptive review about you." Bennett responds, "Really? Saying what?" Pauline replies, "That you couldn't make your mind up." "What about?" asks Bennett. Pauline says, "Anything really. It meant in a good way" (56-57).

Bennett clearly has a nostalgia for a time past in which people were generally inclined to believe in many absolutes, and he seems to feel that many in his audience will share a sense of longing for a world now past. However, he is clearly aware that the door cannot be

slammed and held shut against the intrusions of the present, and that no one should try. Hector literally locks his classroom door, and Irwin asks the boys why he does this. Despite their respect, and even affection for Hector, each gives a humorously satiric response that shows their sophisticated and balanced judgment. Lockwood answers, "It's locked against the Forces of Progress, sir" (36). Crowther adds, "The spectre of Modernity" (36). And Akthar puts in, "It's locked against the future, sir" (36). Hector is thus the target here of some gentle and genial satire on the part of the boys and also on the part of the author himself. The nostalgia is real and is sometimes given an elegiac feel, but it is accompanied by today's recognition that this old world, seemingly so innocent, was complicit, sometimes consciously, often only vaguely, in various types of oppressiveness and unfairness, if not blatant and outrageous injustice. That it should be the homosexual Hector who seems least inclined to see yesterday's shortcomings is ironic, but in the full context of the play quite believable; another attestation to its emotional complexity.

Much the same sort of attitude prevails in *Forty Years On*. Daphne Turner is exactly right when she says of this play, "If Bennett knows that the England of 1914 deserved to die and did, the Romantic tug toward it goes deep and has to be resisted" ("North and South" 562). So while Bennett does seem to give us a character who is nostalgic for what he thought a better time, Bennett desists from sentimentalizing Hector himself. Joseph O'Mealy, writing in 2001, saw Bennett as "a writer who refuses to sentimentalize his characters by exempting them from his satiric scrutiny" (157). Hector does not avoid the satiric searchlight; Mrs. Lintott, his friend, shows herself capable of training it on him rather easily (*History Boys* 50, 69, 95).

Bennett is never heavy and never dull. His work is characterized by a kind of classical lightness and ease, a sense of never trying too hard or being too insistent. One manifestation of this is the ease with which he blends what used to be called "high culture" with "popular culture" or "mass culture." In fact, he was just slightly ahead of his time with his untroubled combination of the two; it was not really until the

arrival of "cultural studies" that this false binary was broken down. Like Stoppard, Bennett flatters his audience with a seeming assumption that they have a rather thorough knowledge of various levels of culture. Also noteworthy is the fact that Hector and Irwin, teachers with antithetical philosophies, both find a place for popular film (although, in both cases, films of the past). Hector plays, a few times each day, it seems, the film scene identification game, and Irwin advises Rudge (33) to get acquainted with the "Carry On" films (a long-running series of low budget films featuring slapstick and parody).

Irwin and Bennett Himself: Ironic Similarities

An additional reason for the play's success is connected with another bit of self-reflexivity, namely, that the advice that the seemingly amoral Irwin gives to the boys is essentially the same, very useful as it turns out, advice that Bennett gave himself in writing the play. This is a prime irony, of course, especially since Irwin initially might seem to come near to being the villain of the play:

1. Remember Irwin's advice to the boys about "useful gobbets" (48) and eye-catching quotations, and then consider how much of the play's ambiance and intellectual flavor, its aesthetic feel, is provided by quotations from poets and philosophers.
2. Recall Irwin's admonition to the students that they must hold nothing back that could be to their advantage on the Oxbridge exams (38-39), and then note how Bennett was not above relying on and revealing something of his own self both in the play and his introduction to it: that, like Scripps, he was a very religious adolescent who thought he would probably take Holy Orders (x, xiv); that, like Posner (although Bennett was then a bit older), he was hopelessly in love with another male student (xiv), and that, as with Posner, puberty came late (*Untold Stories* 130); that, like Irwin, Bennett had devised his own "flash" method for succeeding on ex-

ams, especially in history, and that it worked (xv-xvi); that, like Irwin, Bennett, during some teaching stints at Oxford after receiving his degree, “did at least try and teach my pupils the technique of answering essay questions and the strategy for passing examinations—techniques which I’d had to discover for myself and in the nick of time: journalism, in fact” (xvii). Bennett holds back little, even if it is sensitive or embarrassing, that is to the artistic advantage of the play.

3. Irwin teaches the boys how to get and hold examiners’ attention by turning some usual concepts or understandings inside out or upside down, and by teasing and beguiling the reader through irony and paradox. Note how Bennett manoeuvres the reader toward thinking Hector is a hero of sorts, then soon after something close to an old pervert, and then back toward a basically good but flawed man, and probably a fairly accomplished teacher. Most of all, the idea of a molester of boys being held up for an audience as an admirable figure is certainly a twist on what might be expected. The extent and final destination of Bennett’s irony is debatable (I conclude that the ironized figure of Hector is only qualifiedly admirable), but, in any case, the apparent approval of the near-pederastic Hector provides a twist that gets audiences’ attention.
4. Irwin, the pseudo-villain, advises Rudge that it will be a good tactic for him to get some acquaintance with popular culture through the “Carry On” films; Bennett, through the tactic of Hector’s movie identification game, involves the audience in a kind of play that pleasantly tests their own knowledge of popular culture.
5. In his professional life Irwin is all about presentation, performance, and polish. “History nowadays is not a matter of conviction. It’s a performance,” he says (35). In his introduction to *The History Boys*, Bennett maintains that the reason some students excel on examinations is that “doing well on examinations is what they do well; they can *put on a show*” (xxiii, my emphasis). Later in the introduction Bennett says he came to realize “that teaching history or teaching the self-presentation involved with the examination of

history was not unrelated to presentation in general" (xxv). People like Irwin, then, are showmen—they "put on a show." They are skilled and polished in their craft of self-presentation. The plaudits that Bennett, a professional showman, has won with *The History Boys* are due to polished craftsmanship, an unerring sense of pace, a sure balance of disparate types of material, and an unusual approach—in short, the manner of presentation is more important than the content. Some readers or viewers, feeling this is a 'play of ideas,' might find the play somewhat deficient because the ideas are shallow or underdeveloped, 'tricked up,' or, in Dakin's term, a bit "flash." Is Bennett, through his presentation of Irwin, confessing his own limitations, and also confessing that Irwin had his origins, and now has his continuance, in Bennett's own self? Or does the very form of the play, with its quick, unrelenting, and criss-crossing ironies, the final destination point of which is arguable or uncertain, prove its thematic idea about the inevitable triumph of relativism?

Shy in personal encounters, Bennett is, in his writing, possessed of the easy confidence and professional assuredness said to characterize the Oxford graduate, which Bennett, unlike both Irwin and Hector, is. Like virtually all his other plays, *The History Boys* is meticulously crafted, with irony figuring in the plan even more heavily and integrally than it usually does for this author celebrated for irony. By and large, the irony is quite successful here, although even sophisticated audiences can debate, at times, its purpose and limits. Less sophisticated audiences may be puzzled, or even oblivious of its presence. Ben Brantley, writing in the *New York Times* several years before *The History Boys*, was fully aware and appreciative of Bennett's irony, but somewhat apprehensive that it might not serve him all that well in America:

Irony, a particularly gentle variety that by no means excludes compassion, is Mr. Bennett's element, and it is an anomaly in a country [the USA] where audiences prefer their drama writ large and confessional and their comedy

on the knee-slapping side. Even in his native England, Mr. Bennett is perceived as unusually oblique. (14)

Irony and paradox are common in Bennett plays, even if not deployed quite so heavily as in *The History Boys*. It is quite different, though, from his plays in general, except for *Forty Years On*. Think of the fast pace, the exuberance of character and of speech, the general vitality and intellectual energy of the rather extraordinary characters in *The History Boys*, contrasted with Bennett's more usual characters, with "the banality of their speech" and "plebian ordinariness" (Catling 28). Whether British or American reviewers traced it all to successful ironies or not, the great majority bestowed abundant praise on the play, some seeming to equate it with a quite different kind of play, Kushner's socially-committed *Angels in America*, a means of salvation for the serious theater. Some may say that Bennett, using the 'Irwin side' of himself, found a winning formula for filling seats in the non-musical theater. Others may say that, as with Irwin, there is something fake and "flash" about this play so successfully hyped in middle-class media. Neither fakery nor shallowness, though, should be necessarily equated with stylistic polish, a smooth veneer, and skillful integration of disparate elements. Humor, 'performance,' debate, dialectic, and even bits of melodrama and didacticism are made to work together with calculated and effective smoothness throughout this play. As produced by the National Theatre, it has become a theatrical phenomenon. The play has enough complexity and intricacy to allow productive academic discussion; it is surprising that university English and theater departments have, at least in print, been silent to this point.

SUNY Fredonia
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NOTES

¹Bennett's father was a butcher in Leeds as we learn in the first paragraph (3) of his *Writing Home*. This first section of this book, "Past and Present," contains some selective and finely styled evocations of the author's early life.

²Ambiguity exists regarding Hector's age. In the play's first scene the directions tell us that he is "a schoolmaster of fifty or so" (4). Later, though, when talking with Posner about Hardy's "Drummer Hodge," Hector responds to Posner's question about how old Hardy was when he wrote the poem by saying, "about sixty. My age, I suppose" (55). It is possible that this is one of several intentional ambiguities concerning Hector.

³It seems that only one reviewer has sharp, and, as he has framed them, sensible objections to all three teachers: Hector, Irwin, and Mrs. Lintott. Warren Goldstein, a professor of history writing in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, asks, "How does a theatergoer turn to his friends, their faces aglow with pleasure, and suggest that the play was great fun, but that its portrayal of history, history education, and historical practice was not only incorrect, but deeply damaging to public conceptions of what he does for a living?" (B11).

⁴Bennett has customarily been discreetly taciturn about his sexual preference. When the actor Ian McKellan asked Bennett publicly at an AIDS benefit whether he was homosexual or heterosexual, Bennett very artfully dodged the question (Games 194). It was a surprise when Bennett, talking with Stephen Schiff, who was writing a piece on him for *The New Yorker*, revealed that in the late 1970s he had had an affair with Anne Davies, "the darkly attractive woman who had been doing his housecleaning" (Schiff 95-96). The evidence seems almost conclusive, though, that this was a stratagem of Bennett's by which he "had managed to reveal that he was gay [...] but only as a byproduct of his relationship with Anne" (Games 252). In his *Untold Stories* (2005), Bennett writes about being a victim, along with a male friend, of an unprovoked physical attack by several young Italian males on a lonely street in an Italian town at night. He writes of this friend, "I am not sure I would have called him my partner, or indeed known what to call him, though partners is what we are now" (562).

⁵Despite his mock-heroic introduction where Hector appears knight-like, maybe a Don Quixote-like figure, he should probably not be seen as fatuous or, like Jean Brodie, dangerous. Leopold Bloom, most famous of twentieth-century alienated men, is not Ulysses, but his generosity of spirit, his thoughtfulness, and his overall humanity are pronounced and worthy of respect.

⁶When I use phrases such as "some may say," I am not entirely giving way to invention. In fact, because of the absence of analytic commentary in print, I am recalling the comments, always interesting, and often very incisive, of students in two sections of my Modern British Literature classes at SUNY Fredonia, to whom I express my gratitude. *The History Boys* was on the list of assigned readings.

⁷A poem of Frances Cornford is partially quoted, but her name is never cited.

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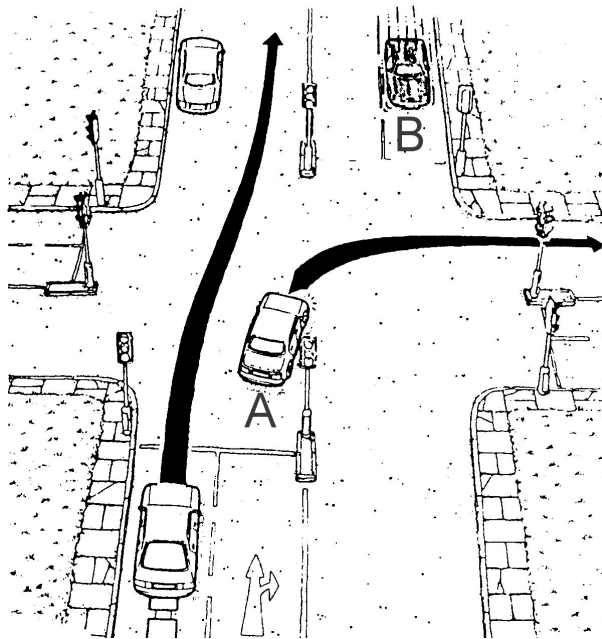
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