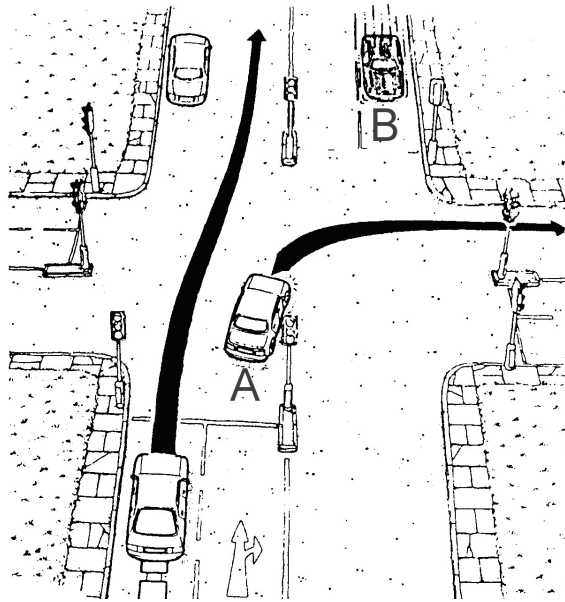


# Connotations

*A Journal for Critical Debate*



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# *Connotations: A Journal for Critical Debate*

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## Roads Not Taken

The *Connotations* symposia are a biennial event, organized by a scholarly society that has formed around *Connotations: A Journal for Critical Debate*. Members of the society are asked to offer suggestions for conference topics, and are then to vote on them. Still, the symposia are not general membership meetings of the society but anyone interested in the theme is invited to submit a proposal. The topic of our next symposium (July 31 to August 4, 2011) will be "Poetic Economy."

The one who first suggested "Roads Not Taken" as a topic is my co-editor Burkhard Niederhoff, whose ideas and suggestions will be reflected on these pages. Inge Leimberg, our founding editor, Angelika Zirker, our far more than assistant editor, Burkhard Niederhoff and the undersigned then set about to select the proposals that led to an invitation to the conference hotel of Tübingen University in Freudensstadt in the Black Forest, where we met in August 2009. Our criteria, of course, had to do with the ideas of the subject we had developed in several meetings and discussions, and which finally made their way into the proposal for support by the Fritz Thyssen Foundation, whom we would like to thank for their generous funding of the symposium and of the editing of this issue which contains a first selection of revised conference papers.

The topic of our conference was not "roads in literature," for the simple reason that we might then have just as well called it "literature." Neither is the topic just "decisions" or "decision-making processes" in literature. A variant on the topic of Hercules at the crossroads does not necessarily mean that the road not taken is actually relevant to the work in question. Some of the speakers will remember messages in which we asked them: is the road not taken really more than just a possibility mentioned; does it actually play a role in the texts you have chosen for discussion? Thus, whereas at first the

theme of our symposium seemed ubiquitous, upon reflection we came to realize that it may be quite rare, or at least that it may require careful analysis and close reading to make it visible.

Still, I think our symposium has led to tangible results and new readings because we actually found that “Roads Not Taken” combines two essential features of imaginative literature. There is, on the one hand, the representation of character determining action, or action determining character (Aristotle’s basic criteria). It seems—and this is one of the questions the *Connotations* editors have been discussing—that especially in modern and postmodern literature the relation becomes increasingly complex in so far as characters are not only defined by what they do but also by what they did not do but might have done, and that, accordingly, their question “who am I?” (or our question: “who are you?”) is not to be answered in a straightforward manner. And there is, on the other hand, the fact that any imaginative or fictional literary representation is a “road not taken” in that it shows us not what is but what might have been, or, in the words of Aristotle: “it is not the function of the poet to relate what has happened, but what may happen—what is possible according to the law of probability or necessity” (*Poetics* section 9). In this respect, the road not taken may be the road we should take, in the author’s view. At the same time, any decision by a writer about a character, an event, a description, and so on, is a road taken, and all the other options a writer has, the characters that do not appear, the events that do not take place, are roads not taken. Of course all this is only relevant to our theme—and to critical discussion in general—when the very alternative becomes part of the author’s project, i.e. when he or she shows us that the text we read is meant to be a road we have not taken (but might do so), or when the author shows us that there might have been an alternative to what we read, i.e. that the writing process is a road on which the author had to take decisions and reflect on alternatives.

A classic example that comes to mind is Aunt Betsey’s disappointment in *David Copperfield* about the news that David is a boy and not a



girl, which causes the narrator to reflect on the fact that the girl, “Betsey Trotwood Copperfield was for ever in the land of dreams and shadows, the tremendous region whence I had so lately travelled; [...]” (chapter 1). This means that she remains in the shadowy land of the imagination, does not become the “favourite child” the author calls his novel in his preface. Much of David’s painful experience, many trials and errors, the reader is made to think, would have been avoided if his aunt had taken care of her sister-in-law and her child, instead of leaving them in disappointment; but of course this would never have been Dickens’s novel, which became a famous *bildungsroman* for the very reason of David’s being very much on his own.

This takes us back to the question of how to represent what is not there and does not happen. Of course there may be characters actually imagining lives they never lived but which might have come true had they acted differently. But, as we realized, this is comparatively rare. The road not taken may appear instead, as in Beckett’s *Krapp’s Last Tape*, by a character reverting again and again to a person and a scene, in this case the girl in the punt, which might have led to a different life. The road not taken may even appear as a person the protagonist might have become, such as Steerforth or Uriah Heep in *David Copperfield*. Still we may ask ourselves where there is a road in such a case, or whether our theme does not evaporate if applied too loosely in a metaphorical sense. But even where we actually get alternative roads their status is by no means a matter of course. An example is Robert Frost’s famous poem, where the speaker imagines not so much the difference of the roads but rather a moment in the future at which he will learn that taking the road “less travelled by” eliminates the difference of the roads for by his taking that road it will have become as worn as the other. Furthermore, the view of the road not taken before a decision is made and the retrospective view upon that road appear to coalesce.

Our topic, this is to suggest, began to get blurred as soon as we believed to have come to terms with it. Through the symposium we were hoping to achieve some clarity, not least with regard to the

historical aspect of "Roads Not Taken." In fact, we came to realize that, although the nostalgic or painful reflection on an alternative life that might have been is perhaps a post-romantic phenomenon, central elements of what we discussed were to be found much earlier.

When it comes to a work in which we find both a reflection on possible paths into the future and a retrospective consideration of what might have been, *Hamlet* is my personal favourite. As to the first, one need only think of his famous "Now might I do it pat" speech (3.3), in which he imagines that Claudius might go to heaven ("fit and season'd for his passage" 3.3.86) if he kills him while he is at prayer. Hamlet abstains from avenging his father at this moment because he wants to make his revenge more lasting by sending Claudius to hell and not to heaven. Similarly, in the even more famous "To be or not to be" soliloquy, it is the imagination (or the reflection on the imagination) of a road that might be taken that will lead to Hamlet's not taking that road (or perhaps no road at all). It is "the dread of something after death" (3.1.78), the fear of "what dreams may come" (3.1.66) that will prevent him, "us," as Hamlet says, from making his "quietus [...] With a bare bodkin," a dagger (3.1.74-75). As to the second element, a retrospective consideration of a road not taken, this comes to the fore in the funeral of Ophelia. "I hop'd thou shouldst have been my Hamlet's wife," says the Queen at this moment of anagnorisis (5.1.237), when Hamlet realizes who it is that is to be buried in the grave dug for "One that was a woman" (5.1.131). Only when she is dead does Hamlet realize "I lov'd Ophelia" (5.1.264). The funeral procession shows us that it is actually a path that Hamlet did not take when he sent her, in 3.1, upon the road to the nunnery (3.1.121, 138, 141). These remarks can do little more than point out that our theme is there, in this most influential of literary texts. Accordingly, it is not surprising that the poetological side of our subject, the evocation and rejection of an imaginative road to be taken by a writer, is there too. Shakespeare evokes the path typically chosen by the protagonist of a revenge tragedy only to reject it. And he would not be Shakespeare if he did not do it in the very scene in which Hamlet most closely fulfils the

pattern evoked by the “revenge code” (Jenkins, Arden Edition 514) when Claudius is at prayer: “Eleanor Prosser [...] assembled from English literature 23 cases of a desire or plan to kill a foe in such a way as to damn his soul as well” (Jenkins 514-15). In endowing Hamlet, for a moment, with this stereotypical desire, Shakespeare shows us that he does not tread the path of stereotype, for of course this is, ironically, the last moment at which Hamlet could have acted according to the pattern of revenge tragedy and does not. Shakespeare sends him another way, to England. (The acceptance of a providential pattern will lie ahead of him.) We could go on, for even the representation of alternative roads of action by means of contrasting characters is there, in the actor playing Hecuba, for example, or in Laertes, or in Fortinbras.

The conference at Freudenstadt, and the publication of this first selection of papers, would not have been possible without the unflagging support by our staff at Tübingen University, Uli Fries, Martina Bross, Lena Moser, Hanne Roth, Eva Wittenberg and Burkhard von Eckartsberg. To them, to the Universitätsbund Tübingen, and once more to the Fritz Thyssen Foundation, go our sincere thanks.

Matthias Bauer

For the Editors of *Connotations*

State super vias, et videte, et interrogate de viis  
antiquis que sit bona, et ambulate in ea \*

JOERG O. FICHTE

In Jeremiah 6:16, quoted by the Parson at the beginning of his tale, the good way the children of Israel are to take is not specifically described. Rather, it is opposed to apostasy and idolatry. In the *Parson's Tale*, however, this way is identified as penance, and the tale itself becomes an elaborate treatise on the sacrament of penance. Thus, the *Parson's Tale* provides orthodox closure to a pilgrimage that has often lost sight of its geographic and spiritual destinies, the shrine of St. Thomas in Canterbury and the Heavenly Jerusalem. There had been "muchel of wandrynge by the weye," of which not only the Wife of Bath but many another pilgrim was guilty (Chaucer, GP I.467). The goal of the pilgrimage became shrouded. The pilgrims in Chaucer's *CT* lost their way much like Dante, who in Canto I of the *Inferno* confessed to be lost in the dark wood.

"La diritta via era smarrita" [the right road was wholly lost and gone] could serve as the motto for an experience frequently encountered in medieval literature: the loss of direction (Dante, Canto I.3). This feeling characterizes many protagonists on secular as well as spiritual quests or a combination thereof, who lose their way in either physical or spiritual landscapes. Both terrains are difficult to distinguish from one another in view of the symbolic or allegorical significance of the natural markers that should enable the questers to make appropriate choices.

A case in point is the *Queste del Saint Graal* of the Vulgate Cycle (ca. 1225-1230), a true *locus desperatus* when it comes to choosing the right

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\*For debates inspired by this article, please check the *Connotations* website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debfichte01813.htm>>.

way. Spiritual disposition, grace, election, and sometimes fortune seem to account for choices that to the ordinary reader appear to be totally out of the questers' control, a situation that necessitates explanations by clerical figures of authority, almost always given retrospectively rather than prospectively. The road taken, although the right one judged by human logic, often turns out to be the road to perdition, whereas the road not taken, appearing to be the wrong one, sometimes turns out to be the road to salvation. Yet, how is the quester to know this? The opaqueness of the situation, exacerbated by the two discursive modes informing the *Queste*, that of Arthurian romance and that of an exegetical clerical tradition, raises a host of semi-otic and epistemological questions that touch on the allegorical or non-allegorical nature of signs, human perception, free choice, and predestination. The paper will try to shed some light on these conditions and processes in the *Queste del Saint Graal* and occasionally in Malory's adaptation, *The Tale of the Sankgreal*, in the *Morte Darthur*, a work that will be referred to at critical moments of the subsequent discussion of the *Queste*.

There will be three areas of investigation: 1. The perimeters defining the *Queste*; 2. The element of choice and the prerequisites for making the right choice; 3. A case study of three knights, Melyant, Gawain, and Bors, confronted during their quest with having to make such a choice.

### 1. The perimeters defining the *Queste*

The perimeters set in the *Queste*, are, on the one hand, Arthur's mundane city of Camelot and Galahad's mystical city of Sarras, between which not only the elusive and enigmatic Grail but also the knightly individuals move, who have to make a choice of the paths before them. From the beginning of the quest, initiated by Gawain, there is a general movement from Arthur's court or the City of Man to the two places of the Grail (Corbenic and Sarras) and beyond them the Heavenly Jerusalem or the City of God, to express this trajectory in

Augustinian terms (Frese 14). So, basically the road not taken is the one that will lead to these two destinations, Corbenic and Sarras, because of the 150 knights setting out in quest of the adventures of the Holy Grail only three are successful. The perimeters, Camelot and Corbenic/Sarras, roughly correspond to the concepts of terrestrial and celestial knighthood so dominant in the *Queste*, of which there is only an echo in Malory. As it turns out, only Galahad, Perceval, and Bors will achieve the final goal, thus qualifying as heavenly knights, whereas all others are earthly knights, who are flawed to differing degrees. Their search will fall either short or far short of the spiritual goal, defined as both the adventures of the Holy Grail and its attainment. While Lancelot's search comes to a grinding halt in Corbenic castle, yet is rewarded with a glimpse of the holy object, his brother Hector only reaches the gate of Corbenic, where he is barred from entering it, and Gawain, the most reprobate of Arthur's knights, does not even get close to Corbenic. Once the quest gets underway, Arthur's court disappears from view almost to the very end, when Lancelot returns to it as a humbled hero. Instead of accompanying the Grail to Sarras, as do Galahad, Perceval, and Bors, Lancelot has to return to his old environment and, as it turns out, to his old sinful life (*Mort Artu* 3.1-10; Malory 2: 1045.10-12).

## 2. The element of choice and the prerequisites for making the right choice

It has long been recognized that the *Queste* shows influences of monastic Cistercian spirituality. Although being first and foremost a book of romance, in which quest and adventure play a central role, the *Queste* is also a spiritual search for a goal that lies beyond the confines of chivalric romance.<sup>1</sup> As Albert Pauphilet says, Cistercian theology comprises the background of the *Queste* (Pauphilet 53-84). More specifically, the work can be read in the light of Bernardian spirituality, especially his ideas on asceticism, monasticism, and mysticism. Needless to say there is an extensive literature covering



these subjects, whose findings will not be repeated here.<sup>2</sup> Rather, the focus will be on choice and the prerequisites for making the right one. The first touches on the act of choosing itself. The second concerns the moral state of the quester.

In his treatise *De gratia et libero arbitrio* (prior to 1128) Bernard asserts the freedom of choice. For Bernard (unlike Augustine) freedom of will from any necessity belongs to God and all rational creatures, whether angelic or human (*De gratia* IV.9). Will is free, even though the consent of the will to do good has to be directed that way by grace (*De gratia* IV.9). It is free because it is voluntary. God's grace does not compel. It merely makes plain to reason how the will ought to respond. So, when the will wills evil, it is responsible for its own act—no operation of grace is involved (*De gratia* VI.17). Choice is an act of judgment. It is judgement's task to distinguish between what is lawful and what is expedient or unlawful. Counsel will help to examine these matters.

Judgement is a matter of reason. In the sinner the faculty of reason cannot work properly. It is blind, because it cannot visualize the situation in which it finds itself. It is too ill to function properly. Bernard takes for granted Augustine's view that sin has the effect of clouding the mind and making it impossible to think straight. Because of sin the whole soul consisting of reason, memory, and will is confused. Yet not only reason and thus reasoning is affected by sin, which impairs this faculty, but also memory and will (*Ad clericos* VI.11). Will, however, makes a human being blameworthy or not (*De gratia* II.5).

One of the things reasoning can do is prove and disprove, that is giving some degree of certainty (proving) or taking it away (disproving). The result of the latter process is called opinion, which rests on what appears to be true but may upon the introduction of more evidence turn out to be false. Opinion is thus provisional, although often taken as certainty by those whose reasoning is limited (*De consideratione* V.iii.6). Faith in contrast has a security, which cannot in the end depend on reasoning, for it rests on authority, that is, Christ (*De consideratione* V.iii.6).

In the *Queste* the successful celestial knights are guided by faith, whereas the unsuccessful terrestrial ones are guided by opinion. Their sinful state prevents them from achieving certainty and thus from making the right decisions.

The moral state of the questers is affected most profoundly by penance, chastity, and love, subjects St. Bernard dwells on in numerous of his sermons and treatises that appear to have influenced the author(s) of the *Queste*. Among these moral principles upheld in the *Queste*, penance is of primary importance. The sacrament of penance is often discussed in Bernard's writings.<sup>3</sup> He thus adumbrates developments that culminate in the injunction to do penance at least once a year issued by the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215, that is, about ten to fifteen years prior to the assumed date of composition of the *Queste*.

Penance is the necessary prerequisite for any knight setting out on the search for the Holy Grail and the discovery of its mysteries. Penance, however, has to be accompanied by chastity, a virtue also championed by St. Bernard. To be chaste in this life is to anticipate a condition of the heavenly life. Chastity represents the condition of immortal glory in this time and place (*De moribus* 12-15). The frail vessel of our body carries chastity precariously, like a precious ointment (*De moribus* 17-19). So Bernard links chastity with incorruptibility (Evans 31).

To be efficacious, however, chastity has to be grounded in humility and love. Chastity without charity is without value: "Tolle caritatem, castitas non placet" (*De moribus* 7). *Caritas*, although an ever present concept in Bernard's writings, is treated at length in two treatises: *De gradibus humilitatis et superbiae* (c. 1124) and *De diligendo Deo* (c. 1125). *Caritas* is love that centers on Christ. As such it is selfless, that is, free of any self-serving or self-gratifying purpose. It is not owed to anyone or any institution, but it comes from within, being generated by a sense of inner necessity to love God. Charity is a process that demands constant reevaluation of one's being. It ultimately leads to a separation from the self, i.e., the sinful self, and to a complete change of one's personality in the image of true altruistic love unconstrained



by outside necessity. In the *Queste* Bors submits to this process of change.

To what extent is the choice made a conscious one? The questers, it seems, are propelled forward by accident or chance, both positive and negative. Positive, when an adventure turns out well such as Perceval crossing himself and thus ending the temptation engineered by the devil in the form of an attack on his chastity. Negative, when Gawain mistakenly kills Yvain, a fellow knight of the Round Table. *Aventure* turns into *mesaventure*. There is no or little process of deliberation. The knights enter upon a path they seem to be destined for, yet every path is the logical consequence of spiritual disposition aided by grace—in Perceval's case his trust in God, and in Gawain's case his refusal to repent and leave his sinful ways.

The very concept of adventure as something happening to a knightly individual in certain circumstances taken over from Arthurian romance seems to limit choice. The influence of divine agents in the *Queste* appears to restrict choice even more. Heavenly voices will tell the knights where to go and what to do. There is a great emphasis on God's will and His arrangement of a general plan. Although dominated by the principle of election, there is still individual moral choice. Even the infallible Galahad is granted free choice, though his moral perfection prevents him from making false choices.<sup>4</sup> There are only moral choices in the universe of the *Queste*, that is, every decision entails a right or a wrong path.

### 3. A case study of three knights: Melyant, Gawain, and Bors

The final portion of the article is dedicated to three case studies: First, a choice of crossroads by an untried young knight that depends on the understanding or interpretation of a written text: the Melyant episode. Second, a fundamental choice of two moral paths by a mature knight: Gawain (wrong path). Third, a fundamental choice of two moral paths by a mature knight: Bors (right path).

### 3.1. A choice of crossroads by an untried young knight that depends on the understanding or interpretation of a written text: Melyant

Although knighted by Galahad, the perfect knight and soldier of Christ, the young Melyant chooses the wrong way when he arrives at the crossroads. An inscription prohibits the taking of the left fork to those who are not worthy (*preudome*) of this road. There are no moral injunctions attached to the right path—still death (most likely spiritual death) may await those who embark on it (*Queste* 3-8). Despite Galahad's warning Melyant, motivated by pride in his own prowess, takes the left fork and is now confronted with the sins of pride and covetousness in the form of a golden crown. By picking up the golden crown, he succumbs to these sins. Another knight, who is then defeated by Galahad, instantly overcomes him in battle.

The significance of Melyant's choice and subsequent adventure with the knight is explained by an authority figure, a monk, by means of moral exegesis, according to which the path of the righteous and that of the sinners are juxtaposed. The untried Melyant, cleanly shriven before setting out on the Grail quest, became the target of the Devil. The knight who struck Melyant down was a sinful knight, the tool of the Devil, who was prevented from killing Melyant by the sign of the cross he had made before entering battle. Galahad easily overcame this evil knight. Melyant's major error was to mistake the meaning of the inscription. According to the monk, it referred to celestial knighthood, which Melyant interpreted to mean secular knighthood. In other words, Melyant is accused of an error in judgment: he approached the sign with a literal mind set, whereas the correct interpretation of the text demanded a spiritual reading since his adventure was no ordinary one but an adventure of the Holy Grail. Yet how was he to know this? The markers are not clear, offering no easy or safe choice to an overly confident young man. He should have been cautioned by Galahad's warning, however, after witnessing how Galahad just exorcized the Devil in the graveyard and thus demonstrated his special state of grace and the spiritual nature of

adventure. Also, the very fact that right is generally preferable to left could have guided Melyant in making the right decision. We do not know, though, what would have happened to him, had he taken the right fork and whether this way was at all available to him. He could also have stayed in place and waited for divine guidance like Perceval and Lancelot. To take no road at all is a viable alternative in the *Queste*, even though this sort of conduct is radically at odds with knightly behavior in romance literature, where knights engaging in quests and adventures are constantly confronted with choices.

In Malory, the situation is less clear. First of all, the inscription on the Cross contains two moral injunctions that appear to be similar: the left way is associated with adventure and prowess, whereas the right way promises success only to those who are good men and worthy knights (Malory 2: 883.24-30). Since Malory substantially reduces the exegetical passages of his French source, the monk's interpretation is also truncated. In Malory, Melyas becomes the Devil's target because he has embarked on the Grail quest without making confession (not in the *Queste*). The left path is that of sinners and unbelievers, whereas the right path is the way of the righteous to Jesus Christ—there is no mention of terrestrial (left path) and celestial (right path) knighthood. The fact that Melyas's adventure is an adventure of the Holy Grail receives even less attention in Malory. When Galahad knights Melyas, he admonishes him to be "a myrroure unto all chevalry," and winning prowess (characteristic of the left path) pertains to this (Malory 2: 883.9). In the *Queste*, on the other hand, success is a matter of worthiness and Melyant, a chivalric neophyte, may not yet be worthy—at least he has not yet proved his moral excellence, the yard-stick by which failure and success are measured in the *Queste*.

In the Melyant episode the protagonist obviously follows the wrong path that would have resulted in his physical and spiritual ruin had it not been for the sign of the cross that saved him from destruction. The path not taken is the one to the kingdom of Heaven or, in terms of the *Queste*, the one that accomplishes the adventures of the Holy Grail and thus leads to its spiritual experience. Barring Galahad's previous

adventure of the tomb, allegorized by the old monk in a christological manner as establishing Galahad as a type of Christ, Melyant's adventure at the crossroads is the first one by an ordinary knight to receive a moral interpretation by a figure of authority. Thus, the Melyant episode underscores both the spiritual nature of the Grail adventures and the distinction between the holy knight Galahad and the rest of the questers: success on the one hand, and failure on the other.<sup>5</sup> It prepares the reader/listener for the special mode of narration that takes place simultaneously on two levels and cautions him to look for the spiritual significance of the conventional romance adventures hidden under the literal surface, something Melyant was unable to do.

### 3.2. A fundamental choice of two moral paths by a mature knight: Gawain (wrong path)

The right path to be taken in the *Queste* is obviously the one that makes of Arthur's terrestrial knights God's celestial ones. Confession at the outset of the quest is the necessary prerequisite for successful adventures of the Holy Grail and the vision or attainment of the Grail itself. Confession should be followed by contrition, which means the penitent should feel sorry for his sinful life because he has offended God. The final step is satisfaction consisting of reparation and amendment. The sacrament of penance that Chaucer's Parson had made the starting point of his tale, a treatise on penance, and that Dante subjected himself to on his ascent of Mount Purgatory, also dominates the *Queste*. When Gawain initiates the quest after the appearance of the veiled Grail in King Arthur's court, he embarks on an "adventure" that is radically different from ordinary knightly adventures. He vows not to return to the court "devant que je l'aie veu plus apertement" (*Queste* 16.22) [until I have seen the Grail more clearly]. The key word is "apertement" [clearly or openly], that is, Gawain and the Arthurian knights joining in his vow want to see the Grail, not realizing that the adventures of the Holy Grail leading to its

attainment are not feats of chivalric prowess but tests of the moral condition of the questers. Arthur appears to be the only one who is aware of the dangers facing his knights and thus his court. He expects great harm for the Round Table—and sadly his predictions turn out to be true, since 36 knights will perish in the quest, half of them killed by Gawain.<sup>6</sup> To underscore the uniqueness of the endeavor, a messenger sent by the hermit Nascien admonishes the knights not to undertake it if not properly confessed and shriven and resolved to stay pure while undertaking it.

Car ceste Queste n'est mie queste de terriennes choses, ainz doit estre li encerchemenz des grans secrez et des privetez Nostre Seignor et des grans repostailles que li Hauz Mestres mostera apertement au boneuré chevalier qu'il a esleu a son serjant entre les autres chevaliers terriens, a qui il mostrera les granz merveilles dou Saint Graal [...]. (*Queste* 19.19-25)

[This is not a quest for earthly goods. Rather, it should be understood as the search for the great secrets of Our Lord and the great mysteries that the Almighty will reveal openly to the special knight he has chosen from among all others to be his servant. The Lord will show this knight the great wonders of the Holy Grail (...).]

The messenger's words leave no doubt: the quest is not for worldly things and will be accomplished fully, that is, culminating in a mystical translation by only one individual, whose unique status has been signaled by a number of signs (perilous seat, drawing of the sword). Gawain, however, does not seem to be discouraged by these restrictions. Like the rest of Arthur's 150 knights he vows to undertake the quest, even though he has violated the major premise: confession, as will become apparent later on, when he admits to the hermit to not having been confessed for four full years (*Queste* 54.9). He is not the only one who has left without confession. The hermit interpreting Gawain's dream of the 150 bulls declares that most of the knights setting out on the Grail quest were not confessed and thus not ready for it. In spite of being Arthur's nephew, and after Lancelot the most distinguished knight, Gawain like so many of his fellow knights is off to a wrong start. He embarks on an adventure that not only is not for him but also one for which he is insufficiently prepared. The path not

taken is the path through confession, contrition, and satisfaction to spiritual perfection. Instead he embarks on a path he is ill prepared for. And thus his grail quest turns out to be a disaster. He does not encounter any adventures relating to the Holy Grail—the lack of adventure so frequently deplored by Gawain and knights of his ilk being the sign of their spiritual imperfection. He also fails to catch up with Galahad, who during the quest becomes something of a loadstar: all questers try to join him, yet only the two pure knights, Perceval and Bors, are successful. Gawain's attempt fails, a failure that elicits the following comment from a monk:

Certes, sire, la compaignie de vos deus ne seroit mie covenable. Car vos estes serjanz mauvés et desloiax, et il est chevaliers tiex come il doit estre. (*Queste* 52.2-4)

[In truth, however, you and Galahad would not keep good company. For you are a failed and disloyal soldier while he is a proper knight.]

Gawain also kills his adversaries, friends and foes, more indiscriminately than any other knight. To Hector he admits to having killed more than ten knights, thus fulfilling Arthur's prophecy that Gawain will usher in the end of the Round Table—in the *Mort Artu* he regrets having killed 18 knights. Little wonder that he is twice upbraided by figures of moral authority. First he is called a "serjanz mauvés et desloiax" [failed and disloyal soldier], an accusation that Gawain does not refute (*Queste* 52.3-4). Thereafter he is called a "serjanz a l'anemi" [soldier of the devil] when he admits his failure to go to confession for four years (*Queste* 54.18). Because of his moral depravity he has killed the seven brothers Galahad, the "serjant Jhesucrist" [soldier of Christ], had fought but spared (*Queste* 29.20 and 36.17). Still, there is hope for him: "Gauvain, Gauvain, se tu vouloies lessier ceste mauvese vie que tu as ja si longuement maintenue, encore te porroies tu acorder a Nostre Seignor" (*Queste* 55.17-19) [Gawain, Gawain, if you want to leave behind this impure life that you have lived so long, you can still make amends with Our Lord]. Although admonished to repent for his sins, he declines: "Et il dist que de penitance fere ne porroit il la peine soffrir" (*Queste* 55.23-24) [Gawain replied that he could not bear the



burden of doing penance]. Gawain's refusal to do penance becomes the turning point in his quest. He has been shown the right way and has rejected it because the way seems too difficult. His is a conscious moral or more precisely immoral choice that illustrates once again that the characters in the *Queste* are not predestined but free to choose.

When we meet Gawain again, he has just joined Hector, another failed quester. Both complain about the absence of adventure. Each of them has a strange vision, Gawain of the 150 bulls and Hector of himself and Lancelot riding on high horses. Lancelot is thrown off his horse (of pride), whereas Hector coming to a rich man's house is barred from the banquet. A voice calls out:

Chevalier plein de povre foi et de male creance, ces trois choses que vos avez orendroit veues vos failent; et por ce ne poez vos avenir as aventures dou Saint Graal. (*Queste* 151.5-6)

[Knights of little faith and meager trust, you lack the three things you have seen here, and that is why you cannot participate in the adventures of the Holy Grail.]

They move on and meet Yvain, a fellow knight of the Round Table. Yvain is inadvertently killed by Gawain, who calls this tragic feat a "grant mesaventure" (*Queste* 153.21) [great mishap]. Both Hector and Gawain consider themselves victims of "droit meschaance" (*Queste* 154.22) [pure ill luck] and continue on their way until they meet a hermit, who explains their visions. They lack three things: charity, abstinence, and truth. For this reason they are barred from undertaking the adventures of the Holy Grail:

Les aventures qui ore avienent sont les senefiances et les demonstrances dou Saint Graal, ne li signe dou Saint Graal n'aparront ja a pecheor ne a home envelopé de pechié. Dont il ne vos aparront ja; car vos estes trop desloial pecheor. (*Queste* 160.33 – 161.1-3)

[The adventures taking place now are the signs and the showings of the Holy Grail; the signs of the Holy Grail will never appear to sinners or to anyone surrounded by sin.]

As the hermit makes clear, for both Hector and Gawain the quest has come to an end. Gawain, however, is admonished one last time to

return to the Lord. He refuses and thus proves himself to be a hardened sinner. He perseveres in his sinfulness and follows the path to damnation he set out on when he started the quest without confession. Despite all the warnings he remains obstinate and unrepentant, which distinguishes him from Lancelot, the repentant sinner, who is granted a glimpse of the mysteries of the Holy Grail, even though he is precluded from the ultimate experience of the sacrosanct.

Although Malory abridges Gawain's role, he does not change its substance. The Gawain portrait in Malory corresponds by and large to that of the *Queste*. He is equally unconfessed and unrepentant. If there is any change at all, it is one for the worse because unlike the Gawain in the *Queste* the Gawain in Malory is also called "a grete murtherar" (*Malory 2: 948.19*).<sup>7</sup> Gawain refuses to confess, even though he has professed his willingness to do so. He is unfavorably compared to Lancelot, who, though sinful, never killed nor will kill anyone on his quest. The contrast between the two knights is worked out in greater detail in Malory than in the *Queste*. Lancelot may be a sinner and unstable, as the hermit says: "And yett shall he dye ryght an hooly man, and no doute he hath no felow of none erthly synfull man ly-vyng" (*Malory 2: 948.27-29*). This prediction of Lancelot's sainted future, not included in the *Queste*, reconfirms Gawain's own assessment of Lancelot's exalted station among his peers made at the beginning of the Gawain section. Together with Galahad, Perceval, and Bors he is named as one of the four knights most likely to find the Grail (*Malory 2: 941.19-25*). Although Lancelot is not admitted to the Holy Grail, by becoming a hermit and dedicating his life to God after the destruction of the Arthurian world, he ultimately takes the path that leads him to the Heavenly Jerusalem, the proper destiny of all the Grail knights in the *Queste*.



### 3.3. A fundamental choice of two moral paths by a mature knight: Bors (right path)

After the Gawain episode the story turns to Bors, whose adventures and visions are recounted and allegorized. Before Bors takes up the Grail quest, he is first instructed on the importance of confession and then dressed in white as a sign of penance. Thereafter he receives confession and Holy Communion, that is, he is properly prepared for the adventures of the Holy Grail. First, he encounters a bird that revives his young with its blood and dies. Guided by chance, he arrives at a fortress, where he fights on behalf of a young lady disinherited by her elder sister, the wife of the deceased King Amant, against the elder sister's champion, Priadan the Black, and defeats him. In the night before the battle Bors has a series of strange visions: one is about two birds, a black one resembling a crow, and a white one looking like a swan, both of which try to enlist his aid. The other is about a worm-eaten tree trunk that can hardly stand on its own. To its right are two lilies of the valley, one of which tries to deprive the other of its whiteness. They are separated by a wise man. Shortly thereafter a tree bearing fruit in abundance issues from each flower. The wise man addresses Bors and says: "Boorz, ne seroit il fox, qui ces flors lairoit perir por cest fust porri secorre qu'il ne chaïst a terre?" (*Queste* 171.25-26) [Wouldn't a man be foolish to let these flowers perish in order to prevent this rotten tree from falling?].

The day thereafter an "aventure merveilleuse" (*Queste* 175.5) [marvellous adventure] befalls him, that in retrospect turns out to be the central episode of the Bors section: at a crossroads Bors meets two knights who are leading his brother Lionel away. His hands are tied across his chest and he is badly beaten with sharp thorns. As Bors is about to come to his rescue, he glances into the other direction and becomes aware of a young maiden being forcibly carried into a dense forest by an armed knight. The maiden prays to Mary for help and upon seeing Bors, implores him, by the faith he owes to his Lord God,

to prevent her from being taken by force and raped. He commits his brother to God's protection and sets out to rescue the maiden.

The story continues when Bors finds a bloodied corpse that looks like the body of his brother Lionel. He takes it to what appears to be a chapel, where a man professing to be a priest upbraids Bors for not aiding his brother:

Or resgarde ou il a greignor damage, ou en ce que ele fust despucelee, ou en ce que tes freres, qui est un des bons chevaliers dou monde, fust ocis. Certes mielz fust que toutes les puceles dou monde fussent despucelees que il fust ocis. (*Queste* 179.26-29)

[Consider where the most damage was done: in the rape of the maiden or the death of your brother, one of the greatest knights. It would indeed be better for all the maidens in the world to be raped than for your brother to be killed.]

Yet, there seems to be a chance of rehabilitation: Bors can still save his cousin Lancelot from immanent danger, if he does what is asked of him. He is led to a room, where his chastity is sorely tempted by a beautiful maiden, who threatens to kill herself and her companions, should he persist in refusing her. He does and crosses himself, whereupon the temptress and her minions are turned into devils. Before leaving this infernal place, Bors looks for the body of his brother. When he cannot find it, he assumes that Lionel is not dead and that he has witnessed a "fantosme" [phantom] (*Queste* 182.18). At an abbey of White Monks, the abbot explains Bors's adventures, especially the significance of his many visions and dreams.

In some instances the allegory is easy to unveil such as the bird reviving its young (a pelican) being a figure of Christ; in other instances, the process is more complicated because the crow, the black bird, stands for Holy Church, whereas the swan, the white bird, signifies the Devil. The colors seem to point in opposite moral directions. It requires some knowledge of the Bible, the Bestiaries or the *claves*, available to the members of the clergy, to decipher the correct meaning of the images. The interpretation of Bors's dreams continues: the worm-eaten tree betokens his brother Lionel, who possesses no vir-

tues, only an abundance of mortal sins. Still, his brother was saved by Christ to whom Bors had entrusted him. The two lilies of the valley are the two virgins (the male attacker and the female victim) Bors saved from losing their virginity when he came to the rescue of the damsel in distress.<sup>8</sup>

To cut a long story short, after leaving the abbey Bors meets Lionel again, who threatens to kill him for not helping him. He is prevented from committing the heinous crime of fratricide by first an old man and then Calogrenant, a fellow knight of the Round Table. In his rage Lionel kills both and would have pursued Bors, if God had not intervened and separated the two brothers. Bors is sent to the seashore, where he meets Perceval. Both Grail knights abandon their active quest and commit themselves to divine guidance:

Einsi sont li dui ami ensemble si come Nostre Sires lor avoit apareillié. Si atentent ilec les aventures que Nostre Sires lor voudra envoyer; si s'en vont tot contreval la mer une heure arriere et une autre avant, si comme li venez les meine. (*Queste* 195.9-14)

[The two friends were thus reunited according to Our Lord's plan for them. As they awaited the adventures that Our Lord might wish to send them, they drifted on the sea, now here, now there, wherever the wind might carry them.]

This is a brief digest of Bors's adventures that center on his moral dilemma at the crossroads. The alternatives of either sacrificing his brother or the maiden are equally undesirable not only by thirteenth century secular standards, according to which blood relationship overrides any other loyalties and the succor of a damsel in distress is the first and foremost duty of any honorable knight. Arthur's knights are sworn brothers but they are also sworn to come to the rescue of maidens—never mind the non-literary reality. Both aspects receive special attention in Malory, who stresses these obligations to a far greater degree than the author(s) of the *Queste*.<sup>9</sup> When Bors decides to help the maiden, he seems to place the code of chivalry above family loyalty. There is more to it, though. By the time Bors faces the dilemma, the reader knows of the paramount importance of virginity in the

*Queste*. He has already learned from the Hermit interpreting Gawain's dream of the 150 bulls, all of which but three are spotted. Only Galahad possesses "virginité," being pure in body and soul, whereas Perceval possesses "pucelage" [maidenhood] and Bors purity of mind. While Galahad and Perceval are perfect virgins, Bors has slipped once, when he was tricked into intercourse. This experience, however, did strengthen his chastity. Virginité (*virginité* and *pucelage*) and chastity are the foremost virtues in the *Queste*, and thus it is not surprising that in protecting the maiden from rape, Bors appears to have made the right decision within the moral universe of the *Queste*. The maiden, at least, is happy with Bors's choice, who declares that 500 men would have died, had the abductor succeeded in raping her—but then the maiden is no disinterested party. That he has made the right choice is confirmed by the abbot who interprets his adventures: in taking pity on the maiden and helping her he has placed the love of Jesus above natural love, the love of his brother. The emphasis on charity may be a Bernardian touch.

For Bors the decision is complicated by the opacity of the signs and visions he has encountered during his adventures and seen in his dreams. Whereas some scenes and signs can be deciphered, like the dubious nature of the chapel without "eve beneoite ne croiz ne nule veraie enseigne de Jhesucrist" (*Queste* 178.30-31) [holy water, or cross or any sign of Jesus Christ] (absent in Malory), where the Devil appears to Bors in the guise of a holy man, others cannot: the quarrel between the two sisters, for example, is a common episode in Arthurian romance reminiscent of Chrétien's *Yvain*. Its allegorical significance as a battle between the Old and the New Law is revealed only after the crossroads scene. In view of this general uncertainty about the meaning of signs, there is only one lesson he could have learned from his past experiences: appearances are deceptive, the Devil is always lying in wait, and only unwavering trust in God will lead to success.

Unlike the Bors in Malory, the Bors of the *Queste* does not know that he will achieve the Holy Grail—only the reader/listener knows this,

who has read/heard the prediction made by Perceval's aunt long before Bors has to undergo these tests in the *Queste*. He may get some indication of his moral excellence, but there is no certainty of his election as in Malory, where the hermit in the beginning assures him:

"I pray the that thou ete none other tyll that thou sitte at the table where the Sankgreal shall be" [...] "But how know ye that I shall sytte there?" "Yes," seyde the good man, "that know I well, but there shall be but fewe of youre felowis with you." (Malory 2: 955.21-27)

With this assurance in mind, the upcoming adventures are less perilous because ultimate success is assured. Consequently, Malory can reduce the visions and dreams and with it the allegorical apparatus, even though he retains the central episode of Bors's dilemma. The hermit's explanation of Bors's choice as between the love of family and the love of God, however, is omitted, an explanation that in the *Queste* links the episode with Bernardian thought.

To sum up, the roads not taken in the *Queste* are of two kinds: they either lead to success or to failure, with success being equivalent to salvation and failure to sinfulness and possibly damnation. The choice between these two alternatives, although a conscious one, must often be made long before the actual decision takes place. In the moral universe of the *Queste* disposition aided by grace is of paramount importance. Those who are positively disposed, but found wanting like Melyant, who has not yet learned to distinguish between terrestrial and celestial knighthood, will take the wrong path and fail initially. Although severely wounded by an emissary of the Devil, he will survive, however, through the good offices of the saintly Galahad. Those who are disposed towards evil like Gawain will always take the wrong path and fail, the failure being a moral one that launches the individual on the road to perdition. Finally, those who are positively disposed and found stable in critical situations like Bors will take the right path and be saved. Since most of Arthur's knights share in Gawain's nature, the Round Table is ultimately doomed, as the hermit, explaining Gawain's and Hector's dreams, predicts (*Queste*

157.6-20). This includes Arthur himself, who in the subsequent *Mort Artu* dies in the final battle. There is no suggestion or hope of his return.<sup>10</sup> The following inscription marks his splendid tomb: "CI GIST LI ROIS ARTUS QUI PAR SA VALEUR MIST EN SA SUBJECTION .XII. ROIAUMES" (*Mort Artu* 251.23-24) [Here lies King Arthur who through his valor conquered twelve kingdoms], stressing his earthly conquests rather than the mythic nature of his person and his court. Like the road that most of his knights took, Arthur's road led only to earthly, not heavenly fame. Earthly fame, however, is temporary and perishable.

The presence of figures of moral authority (priests, hermits, good men [*preudon*], and monks) in the *Queste* provides a running commentary on the significance of the signs, visions, dreams, and adventures. Whereas the protagonists only profit from their advice after they have made their choices, the chivalric audience accumulating knowledge while the quest progresses will ultimately know the difference between appearance and reality and the true nature of the signs and visions.

Since Malory has deleted most of the explanations, his knights and an audience probably consisting of the lower ranks of the gentry and wealthy members of the bourgeoisie move in a more opaque moral universe, a universe in which the adventures of the Holy Grail and the adventures of the Round Table are correlated to a degree missing from the *Queste*, where the learned discourse appears to call into question and challenge the discourse of Arthurian romance. The division between sinners and saints is less radical because Malory does not attempt to invalidate or replace terrestrial by celestial knighthood (Mahoney 391). Lancelot, once the "beste knyght of the *worlde*" [italics mine], is a case in point (Malory 2: 893.7). After initial failure he ultimately embarks on the right road and achieves sainthood, as did his son Galahad, "the holy knyght," who has always taken the right path (Malory 2: 886.26). Yet not only Lancelot is saved, there is also hope for Arthur. Although Malory equivocates when it comes to answering the question about Arthur's destiny after the final



battle, he does quote the opinion of many men who maintain that the inscription on his tomb reads: "HIC IACET ARTHURUS, REX QUONDAM REXQUE FUTURUS" (Malory 3: 1242.29). He thus prepares the way for Arthur's return, elevating the king and his court to mythic proportions and thereby justifying the way of terrestrial chivalry, whose imagined, constantly updated and revised values will take on Utopian qualities in some nineteenth- and twentieth-century Arthurian fiction.

Eberhard Karls Universität  
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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>For a discussion of the various discourses comprising the composition of the *Queste* with an emphasis on romance see Burns, chapter 3, "Fictions of Meaning and Interpretation," 55-77, and chapter 4, "Fictions of Representation," 79-150; Freeman-Regalado 91-113; and Micha 153-54.

<sup>2</sup>Chief among these are Gilson 321-47; Matarasso, especially the chapter "Quest for an Author," 205-41; Baumgartner; Bogdanow 23-46; and Pratt 69-96.

<sup>3</sup>Winkler 66-67 provides a list of works in which Bernard discusses penance.

<sup>4</sup>As Anne Marie d'Arcy aptly formulates: "The Good Knight passes unscathed through the metaphysical *Wunderkammer* of signs and initiatory rites which constitute the grail quest" (69).

<sup>5</sup>It should be stressed that Galahad, although conceived as a type of Christ, is not a savior figure because in the end he only saves himself. Salvation in the *Queste* is individual, not collective and depends on making correct moral choices. Cf. Huber 218-19.

<sup>6</sup>Cf. *Mort Artu* 3.19-20. Lacy, rightfully, points to Gawain as "a pivotal figure in the fall of Arthur" (4).

<sup>7</sup>Malory, in general, takes a dim view of Gawain. Gawain starts his "knightly" career by accidentally killing a young gentlewoman who wants to shield her defeated knight to whom Gawain refuses to grant mercy.

<sup>8</sup>For a running commentary on the significance of the various signs see d'Arcy 133-39.

<sup>9</sup>On Malory's concept of brotherhood see Ness Ihle 132-41.

<sup>10</sup>Geoffrey of Monmouth leaves his fate open, when he states that Arthur was fatally wounded and then taken to the isle of Avalon for the healing of his

wounds. Cf. Geoffrey of Monmouth Liber XI, 81-82 (253): "Sed et inclitus ille rex Arturus letaliter uulneratus est; qui illinc ad sananda uulnera sua in insulam Auallonis euectus [...]." [The illustrious king Arthur too was mortally wounded; he was taken away to the island of Avalon to have his wounds tended (...).]

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## Roads-Not-Taken, Taken by the Adapter: The Case of Biblical Samson<sup>\*1</sup>

DAVID FISHELOV

### Adaptations: Dialogues and Logical Relations

In this essay I will argue that adaptations of a literary work bring to light roads-not-taken (but suggested) by the initiating text, and demonstrate the argument by presenting three adaptations of Samson's biblical story: Milton's play *Samson Agonistes*, Ze'ev (Vladimir) Jabotinsky's novel *Samson*, and Cecil B. DeMille's Hollywood film *Samson and Delilah*. I will also show how the close relationship between different adaptations and the notion of a road-not-taken support the idea that the literary text is a multi-layered system of realized and unrealized potentialities.

The field of adaptations and rewritings is quite wide and heterogeneous.<sup>2</sup> A useful way to approach this manifold phenomenon is by discerning three basic types of dialogue held between an adaptation and the initiating text: (1) *echo dialogue*, in which a text reproduces the main elements of the originating text, creating simple, predictable adaptations, tailoring a literary text to a new medium (e.g. the cinema) or to a specific target audience (e.g. children); (2) *genuine dialogue*, when important traits of the original text are kept alongside new elements, imbuing the generating text with new aesthetic sensibilities, themes and ideological preoccupations; (3) *dialogue-of-the-deaf*, whereby the adaptation is only superficially related to the initiating text, which serves as a springboard for developing an independent agenda.<sup>3</sup> In this last type of dialogue,<sup>3</sup> an author takes poetic license to

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<sup>\*</sup>For debates inspired by this article, please check the *Connotations* website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debfishelov01813.htm>>.

an extreme, sometimes producing a work that is no longer recognized as an adaptation, but rather as a free variation, only remotely related to the initiating text.

The three abovementioned adaptations of Samson's biblical story epitomize the principle underlying genuine dialogues in a twofold way: they transcend the minimal-changes called for by the new genre or medium or target audience (characteristic of simple echo-dialogues) while maintaining a balance whereby the new elements are still related to central issues of the original text (unlike cases of dialogue-of-the-deaf).

The relationship between the initiating text and a new element introduced into an adaptation may be described in logical terms: along a spectrum from tighter to looser relations, a new element can be entailed, implied, suggested or merely enabled by the initiating text. Let me briefly illustrate these distinctions with regard to the biblical story of Samson. The biblical story explicitly states that Samson's eyes were gouged out (Judges 16:21). If an adaptation chooses to affirm the obvious fact that Samson could not see after his eyes were gouged out, it only adds an element *entailed* by the initiating text: if that which is stated in the initiating text is true, then the added element is also necessarily true. A version that exposes Delilah's only motivation as greed adds an element *implied* (but not necessarily entailed) by the biblical story. The original story tells us that Delilah was offered "eleven hundred pieces of silver" from the rulers of the Philistines (Judges 16:5), and the ensuing scene describes her attempts to learn the secret of Samson's strength, followed by her betrayal. We almost automatically assume that Delilah is driven by greed, although theoretically she might have been motivated by other reasons (for instance, a personal vendetta); hence, such an implication should not be considered an entailment.

In between 'implied' and 'enabled,' certain elements along the logical spectrum are *suggested* by a text, yielding a rich network of unrealized possibilities which nevertheless cross the reader's mind during the attempt to construe a fictional world and make sense of it.<sup>4</sup> Unlike

instances of entailment or implication, it is quite impossible to provide a precise set of constraints or conditions necessary for the use of the term 'suggested.' Still, this concept is not totally open or subjective ("for me the story suggests X, for you it suggests Y") but rather points to a set of possibilities or associations shared by many readers. Unlike a purely personal association, we can stipulate that an element is *suggested* when it is compatible with a number of explicit, entailed and implied elements of a text.

The weakest logical relation is that of *enabling*, which encompasses perhaps the widest set of possibilities. If, for example, an adaptation represents Manoah, Samson's father, as a carpenter, it adds an element that is not entailed or implied or even suggested by the biblical text but merely enabled by it (as are the possibilities that Manoah was a farmer or a shepherd or an artisan). Needless to say, the addition of enabled elements may serve different aesthetic or ideological goals. To present Manoah as a carpenter may contribute to the social setting of the story, but it could also evoke an analogy between Manoah and Joseph, Jesus's father, thus reinforcing the Christian interpretation of the Samson saga.<sup>5</sup>

A new element can also hold negative logical relations with the initiating text: it can be either *contrary* or *contradictory* to the initiating text.<sup>6</sup> An adaptation of the biblical story of Samson that ends with a scene in which Samson escapes Dagon's temple and spends the rest of his life with Delilah on the banks of the Nile, clearly *contradicts* the tragic ending of the biblical story, in which Samson dies while crashing down the temple (Judges 16:30). An adaptation portraying Delilah as a woman deeply in love with Samson would undoubtedly be perceived as adding something *contrary* to the biblical story. But since we can imagine such a possibility without directly violating the original storyline, it does not necessarily contradict it. To return to the title of this essay, it should be clear by now that some *suggested* elements are best qualified to be labelled as roads-not-taken: they are part and parcel of the initiating text's horizon of expectations. They might have crossed the author's mind while composing the text or might have

even featured in an earlier draft of the text. But rather than pursue unsubstantiated speculations regarding the author's mental or real draft (a road leading us directly to the intentional fallacy), we should focus on the reading experience, to which we can attest. We can even empirically test whether a specific possibility is part of the elusive (but not completely subjective) field of roads-not-taken. If, in response to the question, "what do you think will happen in the next scene?" subjects suggest similar answers, and the content of their answers does not coincide with the events that unfold in the following scene of the storyline, we have discovered something that is part of the reading experience; we have found a specific road-not-taken.<sup>7</sup>

Furthermore, adaptations may serve as *indirect evidence* for the existence of certain roads-not-taken in a text: the occurrence of a specific element in an adaptation or, even better, in a few adaptations, usually means that we have detected an element suggested (but not realized) in the initiating text.<sup>8</sup>

### The Side-roads Taken by Milton, Jabotinsky and DeMille

Let us now examine how these three adaptations of the biblical story of Samson—John Milton's *Samson Agonistes*, Vladimir (Ze'ev) Jabotinsky's *Samson*, and Cecil B. DeMille's *Samson and Delilah*—shed light on the notion of roads-not-taken. These three re-creations differ in language, period, genre and medium. Milton wrote his dramatic play (not intended to be put on stage) in 1671; Jabotinsky wrote his novel (originally published in Russian) in 1927; and DeMille released his epic Hollywood film (partly based on Jabotinsky's novel) in 1949 (Paramount Pictures). Interestingly enough, all three authors chose to add an episode which is *not* part of the biblical story: a belated meeting between Samson and Delilah, after he was betrayed, captivated and blinded.<sup>9</sup> Upon performing her task, Delilah altogether disappears from the biblical story. And still, questions such as "what will Samson say to Delilah if he has the chance to meet her again?" or, "will Delilah try to justify her deeds in such a reunion?" might cross

the reader's mind. They have definitely occurred on at least these three readers-adapters, compelling them to devote lengthy episodes to such a dramatic meeting.

In *Samson Agonistes*, Milton elaborates on a scene in which Delilah visits Samson in his prison cell, in an attempt to gain his forgiveness. She is initially presented by the Chorus as follows:

But who is this, what thing of Sea or Land?  
 Female of sex it seems,  
 That so bedeckt, ornate, and gay,  
 Comes this way sailing,  
 Like a stately Ship  
 Of *Tarsus*, bound for th' Isles  
 Of *Javan* or *Gadire*  
 With all her bravery on, and tackle trim,  
 Sails fill'd, and streamers waving,  
 Courted by all the winds that hold them play,  
 An Amber scent of odorous perfume  
 Her harbinger, a damsel train behind;  
 Some rich *Philistian* Matron she may seem,  
 And now, at nearer view, no other certain  
 Than *Dálila* thy wife. (710-24).<sup>10</sup>

Note how, in this first introduction, Milton uses the expression "seem" in conjunction with an elaborate simile ("Like a stately Ship [...] odorous perfume").<sup>11</sup> When we learn from the ensuing dialogue that Delilah has not come to express true repentance, we realize that this epic simile was but the first hint aimed at alerting us to the difference between appearance and reality, making us realize that eyes (and ears) can sometimes screen the truth.<sup>12</sup>

Delilah's plea to Samson is ostensibly sincere, and her speech is fraught with kind words:

With doubtful feet and wavering resolution  
 I came, still dreading thy displeasure, *Samson*,  
 Which to have merited, without excuse,  
 I cannot but acknowledge; yet, if tears  
 May expiate (though the fact more evil drew  
 In the perverse event than I foresaw),



My penance hath not slack'n'd, though my pardon  
 No way assur'd. But conjugal affection,  
 Prevailing over fear and timorous doubt,  
 Hath led me on desirous to behold  
 Once more thy face, and know of thy estate.  
 If aught in my ability may serve  
 To light'n what thou suffer'st, and appease  
 Thy mind with what amends is in my power,  
 Though late, yet in some part to recompense  
 My rash but more unfortunate misdeed. (732-47)

According to Milton, however, Delilah's words of comfort are but a façade, a further manifestation of her artful guile and wiliness. Samson does not succumb to her rhetoric, and at some point it becomes clear that Delilah's soothing words do not express genuine repentance. Towards the end of their meeting, Samson calls her bluff and in response, she says:

I shall be nam'd among the famousest  
 Of Women, sung at solemn festivals,  
 Living and dead recorded, who to save  
 Her country from a fierce destroyer, chose  
 Above the faith of wedlock-bands, my tomb  
 With odours visited and annual flowers.  
 Not less renown'd than in Mount *Ephraim*,  
*Jael*, who, with inhospitable guile  
 Smote *Sisera* sleeping through the Temples nail'd.  
 Nor shall I count it heinous to enjoy  
 The public marks of honour and reward  
 Conferr'd upon me, for the piety  
 Which to my country I was judg'd to have shown.  
 At this who ever envies or repines  
 I leave him to his lot, and like my own. (982-96)

Thus, all her pleasant words and professions of love were meant to mislead and to camouflage the fact that she still takes pride in the honours conferred on her by the Philistines for betraying Samson. After these words she leaves, and Samson poignantly addresses the chorus:

So let her go, God sent her to debase me,  
 And aggravate my folly who committed  
 To such a viper his most sacred trust  
 Of secrecy, my safety, and my life. (999-1002)

In contradistinction to the Miltonic text, in Jabotinsky's novel, written about two and a half centuries later, the belated meeting between Samson and Delilah does not take place in the prison cell but in Dagon's temple, just prior to the horrific scene in which Samson smashes it down on "about three thousands men and women" (Judges 16:27). Unlike Milton's dramatic play, in Jabotinsky's novel Delilah does not beg for Samson's forgiveness. In fact, she confronts him in order to gloat on her victory over the mighty Danite. A quick, emotionally charged exchange of words takes place between the two. Delilah, whose original name in Jabotinsky's novel is Elinoar, still full of vengeance and the desire to humiliate Samson, taunts him by posing a series of riddles (a practice he himself had been fond of in the past): "Here is another riddle," she cried. "From the outcast came a conqueress, and the eyes that once looked on her with contempt will never see again. Do you know the answer to that riddle?" (340).<sup>13</sup> When Samson attempts to ignore her and briefly responds "Elinoar? Who is she? I don't remember her," she moves on to her next riddle.

An exchange of invectives, riddles and counter-riddles ensues, until Delilah decides to pull her winning card. This time her riddle is not made up of words alone: Delilah carries a baby with her and makes Samson feel and touch it. Only then, after he asks her, "Whose child is that?" she triumphantly formulates her final and fatal riddle: "Guess! It will grow brave and strong like its father and I, since my milk has turned to poison, shall teach it to hate its father's race. And so, out of the judge and protector will come an enemy and destroyer" (341). Upon hearing these words and realizing that Delilah will raise his child as an enemy of his people, Samson undergoes a frightful transformation:

Then from the giant's throat came a strange gurgling sound that had little resemblance to a human voice. Stretching out his hands, he stepped for-



ward, but collided with one of the pillars that supported the roof above the figure of Dagon and the sacrificial altar. The woman stood her ground, laughing and pressing to her breast the child, which was now crying plaintively again [...]. But suddenly his [Samson's] excitement subsided, the smile came back to his face, and he said in his former voice, but very loudly and slowly: "Now you can all guess Samson's last riddle: In his lifetime he slew many, but more still in the hour of his death—who is that?" (341-42)

The formulation of the last riddle leads to the moment when Samson brings down the temple of Dagon on himself and on all those present—first and foremost Elinoar/Delilah and his own child. This suicidal act is thus the result of his outrage upon hearing that his own son is to be turned against his own people. Throughout the novel, Samson is presented as being on friendly terms with the Philistines, joining in their festivities, telling jokes and riddles, taking part in athletic competitions and, of course, making love to Philistine women. Even after he is captured and blinded, the Philistines and he still maintain a reasonably amicable relationship. Only at this stage, when faced with a dire and irreconcilable conflict between his role as national leader and his role as father, does he revert to basic tribal loyalties and destroys the temple, himself, Delilah, the child, and the Philistines in a fatal outburst of rage.

In Milton's version Delilah re-appears to test Samson's faith, and in Jabotinsky's novel she meets him again only to humiliate him. DeMille's Delilah, however, plays a more central role. She is deeply in love with Samson, bickering with Miriam (the proposed Hebrew bride) whom she perceives as her rival. Her passion also makes her defy the Saran of Gaza, her benefactor and partner, and, in the final scene, she sacrifices herself in order to be united with her true love. The final scene's overtones go beyond the act of a desperate woman. Samson is indirectly associated with Jesus Christ, and Delilah is portrayed as penitent and almost as a martyr.<sup>14</sup>

After Delilah discovers, to her horror, that Samson has been blinded, she falls into a state of self-torment. In a touching scene, we see her tossing sleeplessly on her bed, with the harsh words of the Saran echoing in her mind—"You cannot undo what you have done"—and

we hear her addressing Samson's God in an attempt to seek help. Thus, Delilah is not only a passionate woman in love but also a born-again monotheist. Deeply remorseful, Delilah decides to visit Samson again in his prison cell, this time without the Saran and without a guard. She throws herself into his arms asking him to do whatever he pleases with her. The fact that during her secret visit to the prison cell she is dressed in a way that is reminiscent of a nun lends her a chaste, sincere appearance. When Samson realizes that he is holding his betrayer in his arms, his first impulse is to take revenge and crush her to death. While making his first move towards this end, his chain breaks—a sign that his legendary strength has returned—and he hesitates. There and then follows an emotional and tender moment as he acknowledges Delilah's true love for him and his own love for her.

During the belated lovers' union Delilah suggests that she will help him to escape from prison and both of them will flee to Egypt—a neutral place, far from the national and religious feuds that plague their lives and hinder their love. Samson checks her fantasizing about this happy ending, pointing out that he is, after all, blind, and cannot exercise any power in the real world. At that point Samson's mind starts working on his final plan of revenge against his enemies the Philistines, this time with Delilah's help. Delilah's sentimental happy ending is rejected, and there is a more melodramatic conclusion awaiting the audience.

Thus, as the final scene in the temple of Dagon begins, we know that Samson and Delilah will in effect collaborate like a loving couple. When the camera zooms in on Delilah, she is seated next to the Saran like a queen, wearing a dress with a long peacock-like train. When Samson is brought into the hall—to be tormented, humiliated and eventually to be made to renounce his God and kneel before Dagon—Delilah expresses her desire to take an active part in the proceedings. The Saran rightly suspects that she simply wants to be close to her beloved; he warns her, "if you go to him, you cannot come back to me"—but Delilah dismisses his threat and approaches Samson.

Pretending to participate in the mocking, whipping and tormenting of Samson, she actually helps him reach the two columns that support the temple. At that point, Delilah already suspects Samson's intention, even if he does not express it. He only says to her, "Death will come into this temple. The hand of the Lord will strike." Before he starts pushing the two pillars, he wants to make sure that Delilah will escape the fate awaiting the crowds of Philistines gathered there. He asks her to leave the place and when he repeats, "have you gone?" she, still present, does not respond, giving him the impression that she has left. But she remains, hypnotized by Samson's renewed strength, willing to die, like a true martyr, with her beloved.

Thus, there are many significant differences between the ways in which the three artists portray Samson's and Delilah's belated meeting. For both Milton and Jabotinsky it is an opportunity to highlight Delilah's inherent wickedness. Her wickedness, however, is related to different themes: for Milton, Delilah's smooth talk is an emblem of Satanic temptation.<sup>15</sup> He wants his reader to see beyond beautiful appearances and connect to deep, spiritual truth. In Jabotinsky's novel, the emphasis on Delilah's wickedness is meant to warn against falling into the trap of assimilation and the abandoning of Jewish national roots. Unlike Milton and Jabotinsky, DeMille attempts to exonerate Delilah, and the melodramatic reunion of the two lovers highlights the theme of Christian forgiveness and the American ethos whereby the love of individuals prevails over religious differences and ancient ethnic roots.

Despite these important differences (and many others), the fact that all three artists decided to add a belated meeting is not, I would like to argue, a coincidence. In effect, all three followed a road-not-taken. What makes for a belated meeting between Samson and Delilah a road-not-taken in the biblical story? Firstly, we should remember that readers have a deep-rooted need for narrative closure.<sup>16</sup> The biblical story of Samson and Delilah provides only a partial sense of an ending; it moves quickly to the next scene, leaving unwoven certain threads presented in their story. Note that a significant part of the

saga's sequence (about a third) is devoted to the story of Samson and Delilah, and she becomes far more significant to the reader than the other two Philistine women he was involved with (the Timnath woman and the whore from Gaza). Furthermore, only in regard to Delilah does the biblical story explicitly state Samson's feelings: "He loved a woman in the river of Sorek and her name, Delilah" (Judges 16:4). Thus, the question as to whether her betrayal has made him stop loving her seems pertinent.<sup>17</sup> Note also that just before the shaving of Samson's hair, we are told that Delilah "made him sleep upon her knees" (Judges 16:19), implying an unexpected tenderness on her part, making us also wonder about her state of mind, feelings and motivation.<sup>18</sup> And what could be a more appropriate occasion to examine their feelings than a direct confrontation during a belated meeting?

Secondly, the story of their relationship is fraught with suspicion, deceit and counter-deceit: her ping-pong attempts to reveal the secret of his strength triggers a pendulum-like dynamics between the two. True, her fourth and final attempt is successful, but it cannot erase altogether the oscillating dynamics, making us wonder whether this is indeed 'the last word' between the two.

Thirdly, the story of Samson and Delilah clearly parallels a few episodes from his relationship with the Timnath woman (Judges 14:1-15:3): in both cases a woman attempts to extract a secret from him (the answer to his riddle with the Timnath woman; the source of his strength with Delilah); he tries to evade their persistent inquiries, but at some point breaks down and reveals the secret; they both betray his confidence, reveal the secret to the Philistines, who, in their turn, use it to harm him (forcing him to pay a very expensive wager; blinding and captivating him). After such a strong, conspicuous analogy has been established between the two stories, the reader also notes that, upon his betrayal, Samson returns to the house of the Timnath woman (Judges 15:1) in an attempt to reclaim her, only to discover that her father has given her to a friend of his. Thus, the reader can reasonably assume that Samson would also look for an opportunity to reencounter Delilah; after all, it is hard to kill old habits.

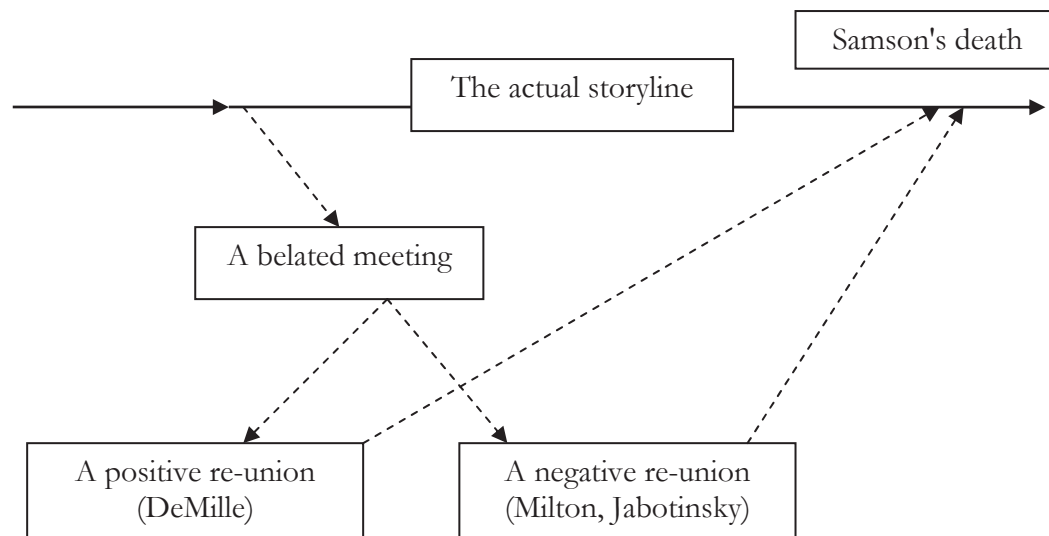
Each of these reasons is sufficient, in and of itself, to create in the reader's mind a vague expectation for a reunion of the two protagonists. With all three combined—the need for closure of an emotionally intense story, the pendulum-like structure of the Delilah story, and the detailed parallelism established with the Timnath woman episode—an expectation for such a reencounter becomes part of the story's suggested meanings; it becomes an important road-not-taken. Thus, when Milton, Jabotinsky and DeMille introduced a belated meeting scene (in DeMille's version there actually are three such scenes), they did not invent a totally unanticipated move but rather trod a road already hinted at by the biblical story.

### Conclusion (With a Few Drawings)

By way of conclusion, I would like to present three drawings. The use of these drawings does not imply that I subscribe to a structuralist approach to the literary text, let alone to any version of story grammar.<sup>19</sup> These illustrations simply sum up in a clear, graphic manner, some of the major arguments developed in this essay concerning the relationships between explicit, implied and suggested meanings in a literary text.

The first drawing (Drawing I) presents the relationship between the actual storyline as it unfolds in the biblical Samson story—represented by an unbroken arrow on the top—and the road-not-taken of a belated meeting of Samson and Delilah, as developed by Milton, Jabotinsky and DeMille—represented by a broken line.

## Drawing I



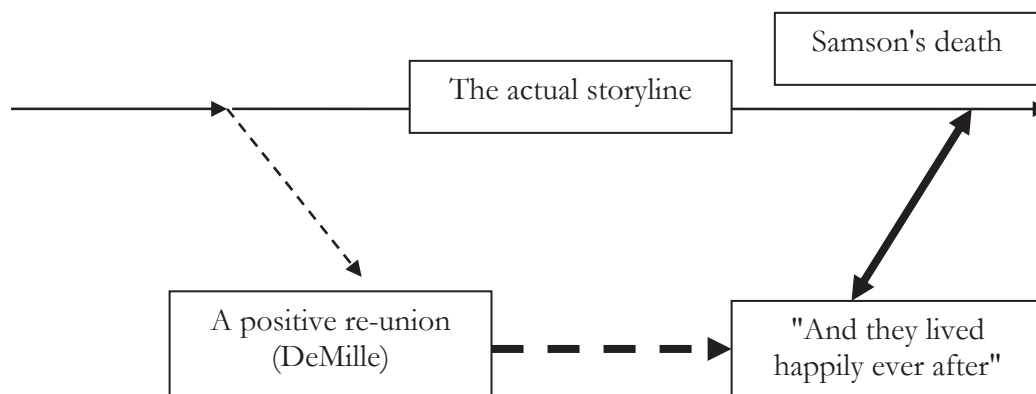
The road-not-taken of a belated meeting, hinted at by the biblical story, has been realized by the three re-creations. The three artists took it to different directions, expressing their respective ideological and aesthetic preoccupations. Note that pursuing the road-not-taken of a belated meeting does not necessarily commit an artist to developing the story along expected lines. DeMille, for example, uses the reencounter in order to acquit Delilah as far as possible and to develop her positive qualities as a true penitent and lover. Whereas such qualities are not foreseen in the biblical story and may even create tensions with it, it is important to see that DeMille is cautious not to *contradict* any explicit element of the biblical story: Delilah does betray Samson and the film leaves the catastrophic ending of the story intact, with Samson performing his horrific suicidal plan. Had DeMille opted for a happy ending in which the two lovers flee to Egypt and live there happily ever after, he would no longer be treading on a road-not-taken but would rather be paving a new road altogether.

Thus, it is important to distinguish between adaptations and rewritings that elaborate on roads-not-taken, on the one hand, and cases where an artist takes the liberty of adding elements, events, developments that are not part of the elusive but still detectable field of roads-not-taken, on the other. An adaptation that follows a road-not-taken can sometimes step into the zone of *contrary* elements, but would



avoid *contradicting* important elements of the initiating text. That is, if it is still to be considered an adaptation. The next drawing (Drawing II) illustrates this latter possibility, with a continuing line representing the actual storyline, a broken line a road-not-taken, a bi-directional thick arrow a contradiction, and a broken thick arrow an event contradicting something important on the actual storyline.

Drawing II

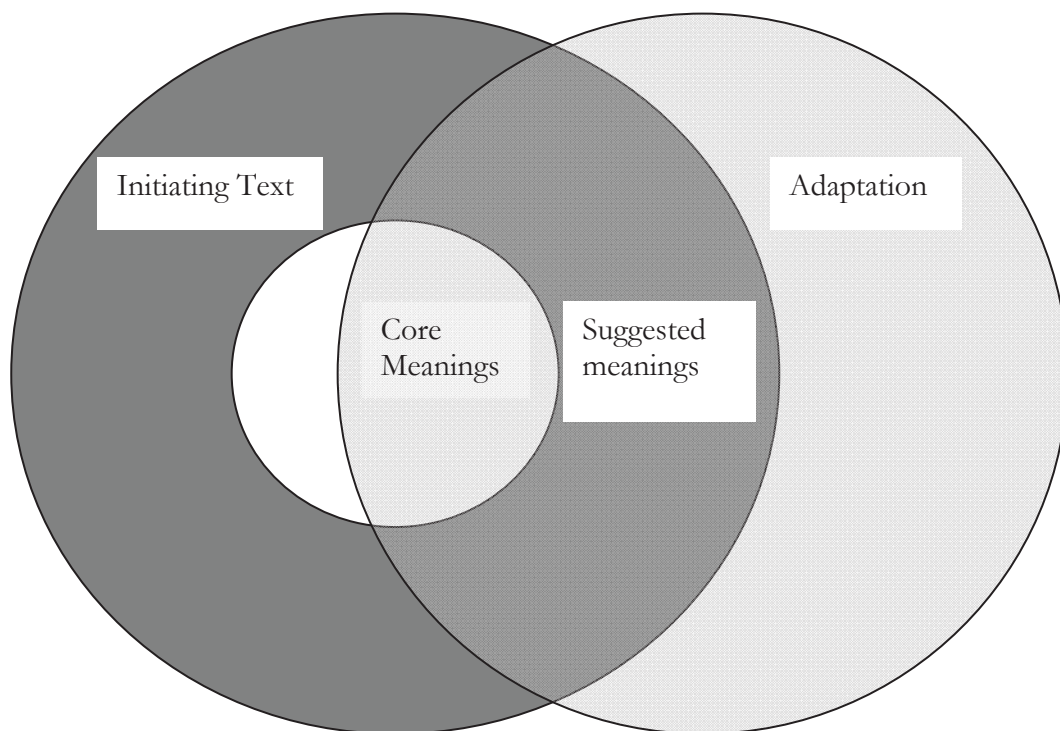


Had an artist opted to wind up the Samson story with a happy ending, he or she would be trespassing the realm of roads-not-taken. By distinguishing between the options of either following suggested meanings or introducing contradictory elements, I wish neither to praise the former nor object to the latter. To opt for the latter would simply aim at different effects than those elicited by the majority of adaptations and rewritings: a parody of the initiating text, a provocation against it, and so forth. To use previously introduced terms, most adaptations can be described as moving between simple illustrations of the principle of echo-dialogue to the creation of different versions of genuine dialogues with the initiating text. When conspicuous contradictory elements are introduced, we move to a different zone: from genuine, provocative dialogues to dialogue-of-the-deaf.

The third and concluding drawing (Drawing III) presents, from a bird's-eye-view, the relationship between a text's core meanings—explicit, entailed and implied—and its suggested meanings (or roads-

not-taken), hovering around the core. These potential, suggested meanings sometimes resurface in adaptations, highlighting the fact that a literary text is a complex system of realized and unrealized potentialities.

### Drawing III



This drawing requires three clarifications. Firstly, around core and suggested meanings one should also imagine a much larger circle, encompassing the amorphous field of elements enabled by the text. Secondly, the drawing highlights the fact that adaptations must include at least some core meanings and usually draw on a few suggested meanings; the rest consists of elements that are either part of the fluid field of enabled elements or elements that are contrary (but not contradictory) to the initiating text. The more an adaptation is faithful to core meanings, the more the outcome is simple and predictable. By the same token, the more an adapter uses only a hand-

ful of core meanings, elaborating on suggested meanings, the more imaginative the adaptation becomes.<sup>20</sup> And when a few contrary meanings are also introduced, the new adaptation turns into an unpredictable, genuine dialogue with the initiating text.

Finally, the circles represent the text's meanings as static fields, thus disregarding the important dynamic dimension of the reading process. We usually think of the reading process as an *accumulation* of meanings, but the reading process has another, complementary dimension as a continuing *elimination* of meanings; to construct meaning, we need to collect and connect specific units of information so that we are not left only with vagueness, but the very operation of specification implies, *ipso definitio*, the elimination of potential meanings. This dual perspective may become clearer by using the metaphor of sculpting: the story is constantly carving its boundaries and creates its contours out of a mass of raw material (=meanings); each and every cut with the chisel (=the author's chosen words and our mental processing of these words) simultaneously gives the artifact a specific shape (=meaning) and does away with irrelevant material, the remainders (=eliminated meanings). In other words, the reading process can be described as a kind of trade-off between a certain (and increasing) amount of information needed to provide meanings and an elimination of meanings brought about by additional information (disambiguation). The accumulated and integrated information concerning characters (who and what they are), setting (when and where the story takes place), and storyline (what and why something is happening), leaves out, *ipso facto*, an enormous body of possibilities.

Let me illustrate this process with a small example. When we start reading the Samson saga in the book of Judges, after the formulaic exposition about the state of the children of Israel ("And the children of Israel did evil again in the sight of the Lord; and the Lord delivered them into the hands of the Philistines forty years" 13:1), we read: "And there was a certain man of Zorah, of the family of the Danites, and his name was Manoah" (13:2). At that point, we can imagine that Manoah (Samson's father) is going to be the protagonist of the story

("Manoah the Judge"). The ending of this verse ("and his wife was barren, and bare not") encourages us to eliminate the imagined possibility of "Manoah the Judge" (in case it was raised) and to focus on a different frame (a story about the birth of a chosen character).<sup>21</sup> From an abstract, static point of view, the core and suggested meanings of the story can be described as representing but a small fraction of a vast field of potential meanings, and every tiny bit of added information also eliminates a number of theoretically possible meanings. Thus, for example, the second clause of 13:2 ("of the family of the Danites") eliminates the possibility that the character was of the family of Judea or of Benjamin, or of any other tribe; the third clause ("whose name was Manoah") further eliminates the possibility that his name was Terach or Shiloah or any other. Note, however, that not all theoretically possible meanings *function* in the reading process, which requires the establishing of certain relevant coordinates. There is an important difference between imagining (even hesitantly and momentarily) that the character introduced in 13:2 is going to play the role of protagonist in the unfolding story, and starting to imagine a list of other theoretically possible names for that character: to imagine the former is supported by reading conventions (introducing the protagonist at the beginning of a story), the latter seems to be just a theoretical exercise, detached from the psychological reality of the reading process. And this minute example illustrates similar processes that take place on larger and deeper levels of the story.

By the time we reach the end of the biblical story of Samson (Judges 16:31), a significant body of core and suggested meanings has been accumulated. And these meanings are there also thanks to the mirror-like process of elimination of an even greater body of potential, logically enabled meanings. Unlike roads-not-taken that may attract our imagination (e.g. a reunion scene), most of the eliminated meanings (e.g. that Manoah was of the family of Judea) do not even enter our consciousness during the reading process, and if they do, they have only a fleeting presence there.

Even after the operation of these processes of elimination, the reader is still left with large and multilayered fields of meanings, describing a unique figure which combines strength and weakness, heroism and failure, erotic drive and death-wish. Different elements in this complex system of meanings have captured the imagination of readers, translators, interpreters, artists and adapters throughout the ages. And some of these adapters have chosen to revivify the biblical story by treading on its intriguing roads-not-taken.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>I wish to thank the anonymous reader of the article and Matthias Bauer, co-editor of *Connotations*, for their useful comments, which spurred me to improve my arguments, to add a few clarifications and to avoid undesirable implications enabled by the text of my original manuscript.

<sup>2</sup>For different mappings of this field, see Gerard Genette, *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*, trans. Channa Newman and Claude Doubinsky (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1997 [1982]); Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation* (New York: Routledge, 2006), and Julie Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

<sup>3</sup>Note that whereas the term 'deaf' implies that the adapter is unable to hear the initiating text, in literary dialogue-of-the-deaf we usually witness unwillingness to hear (or a mixture of inability and unwillingness). For a systematic presentation of these three types of dialogue, see my essays "Dialogues with/and Great Books: With Some Serious Reflections on *Robinson Crusoe*," *New Literary History* (2008) 39: 335-53; "What Is, Empirically, A Great Book?" *New Beginnings in Literary Studies*, ed. Jan Auracher and Willie Van Peer (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008), 423-45; and the first two chapters of my *Dialogues with/and Great Books: The Dynamics of Canon Formation* (Brighton: Sussex Academic P, 2010).

<sup>4</sup>My discussion of entailed, implied and suggested elements draws on Monroe C. Beardsley's classical analysis of the explication of a poem—see his *Aesthetics: Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism* (New York: Harcourt and Brace, 1958) 129-47—and on the concept of gap-filling as developed by Menakhem Perry in "Literary Dynamics: How the Order of a Text Creates its Meanings," *Poetics Today* 1 (1979): 35-64; 311-61; and Meir Sternberg in *Expositional Modes and Temporal Ordering in Fiction* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1978). Note, however, that the distinction between different types of logical relations offers a nuanced tool for discerning between different elements added to an adaptation that would be



lumped together as “explication” (Beardsley) or “gap-filling” (Perry and Sternberg). Note also that, whereas gap-filling is an activity necessary for the reader to make sense of the story, to become aware of possibilities suggested by a text is an optional activity: a reader can basically make sense of a story without imagining some of its suggested potentialities.

<sup>5</sup>For the tradition of Christian interpretations of the biblical story of Samson, see Michael Krouse, *Milton's Samson and the Christian Tradition* (New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1949), and my *Samson's Locks: The Transformations of Biblical Samson* (Haifa and Tel Aviv: Haifa UP, 2000) 158-74.

<sup>6</sup>Whereas life and death are *contradictory* terms (if you're not alive, you're dead; you cannot be neither alive nor dead), black and white are *contrary* terms (something can be neither black nor white). For a systematic presentation of these logical relations, see John Lyons, *Semantics* (Cambridge: CUP, 1977) 270-80; 772-73.

<sup>7</sup>In such an empirical test we should try, of course, to neutralize as much as possible contextual features not actually suggested by the story. Furthermore, it is reasonable to assume that the results of such a procedure would be clearer and (statistically) significant when subjects would face coherent narratives and note, say, post-modern texts that frustrates the reader's expectations on every textual turn.

<sup>8</sup>Note that suggested elements that the author has ‘bypassed’ are not necessarily valuable: an author may have studiously avoided some suggested elements because they are clichés (which are later adopted in a popular filmic adaptation).

<sup>9</sup>This addition cannot be explained by certain generic conventions of the discussed three works; there are other plays, novels and movies based on the biblical story of Samson that do not include this specific scene (see my *Samson's Locks*, note 5).

<sup>10</sup>Quotations are from John Milton, *Paradise Regained, the Minor Poems and Samson Agonistes*, ed. Herritt Y. Hughes (Indianapolis: The Odyssey P, 1937). Following each quote, line numbers are indicated.

<sup>11</sup>Milton's description of Delilah-as-a-ship is partly modelled on Enobarbus's literal description of Cleopatra's barge in *Antony and Cleopatra*, see *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974) 1343-91 (II.ii.190-225).

<sup>12</sup>Note also the irony directed here towards Delilah: her flamboyant show is utterly inappropriate and futile considering that Samson is blind.

<sup>13</sup>Ze'ev (Vladimir) Jabotinsky, *Samson*, trans. Cyrus Brooks (New York: Judea Publishing Company, 1986 [1927, in Russian]). Page numbers will be indicated in parentheses after citations from this edition.

<sup>14</sup>Forshey attributes DeMille's decision to redeem Delilah to the “need for film heroines to be saved from their wicked ways”; see Gerald E. Forshey, *American Religious and Biblical Spectaculars* (Westport, Coon: Praeger, 1992) 62.



<sup>15</sup>This is one important aspect of Milton's Dalila. For the rich net of meanings, including classical allusions, associated with her character see, for example, Maggie Kilgour, "Heroic Contradictions: Samson and the Death of Turnus," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 50 (2008): 201-34, and the works she cites in her essay.

<sup>16</sup>For the reader's need for a closure, see the classical study by Barbara Herrnstein-Smith, *Poetic Closure: A Study of How Poems End* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1968).

<sup>17</sup>The biblical story's tendency to refrain from explicitly elaborating on the characters' inner world does not mean that their thoughts and feelings are not part of the world constructed by readers. Sometimes the story's silence has the opposite effect of triggering hypotheses about characters' inner worlds. For the classical discussion of the Bible's concise style, with its multiplicity of meanings and the need for interpretation, see Eric Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1953) 7-23; see also Menahem Perry and Meir Sternberg, "The King through Ironic Eyes: Biblical Narrative and the Literary Reading Process," *Poetics Today* 7 (1986): 275-322.

<sup>18</sup>The motherly tenderness of this gesture (Cf. Michaelangelo's "Pietà") is underlined by Rubens in his "Samson and Delilah" (1609-1610). See Madlyn Kahr, "Delilah," *Art Bulletin* 54 (1972): 282-59.

<sup>19</sup>For influential articulations of the former, see Gerard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1980); for an interesting attempt to apply Chomskian generative grammar to story analysis, see Teun van Dijk's *Some Aspects of Text Grammars: A Study in Theoretical Linguistics and Poetics* (The Hague: Mouton, 1972).

<sup>20</sup>The use of a cluster of elements characteristic of the initiating text is required for the work to be considered an adaptation. Featuring a hero endowed with superhuman powers is not a sufficient condition to establish a work as an adaptation of the Samson story because such a motif is common also to the story of Hercules or of Superman. It is only when this hero is involved with the enemy's woman and loses his power as a result of this involvement that there are grounds for defining the story as an adaptation of the biblical tale.

<sup>21</sup>For the dynamics of the reading process, including the raising, maintaining and eliminating of different hypotheses (or frames or headings) under which we integrate elements, see Perry, "Literary Dynamics" (cf. n4).

## Secrets Not Revealed: Possible Stories in Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White*<sup>\*1</sup>

PHILIPP ERCHINGER

### I. Preamble: The Law of Reading Fiction

Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White*, first published between 1859 and 1860, features no less than ten different narrators whose eyewitness accounts, diary entries, letters and personal statements make up the separate parts of what the drawing master and editor Walter Hartright, himself one of the chief narrators, claims to have afterwards arranged in terms of a conclusive whole or, as he puts it in his brief "introductory lines," "one complete series of events" (Collins 1).<sup>2</sup> According to Hartright, the completeness and integrity of this "series of events" has been achieved by a faithful application of what he initially refers to as "the machinery of the Law." He uses this "machinery" as a model for his own narrative organisation, suggesting that "the story here presented" is told just as it might have been told in a Court of Justice, that is, "by more than one witness," but also "with the same object," namely "to present the truth always in its most direct and most intelligible aspect" (1). Thus, right from the start, this "Law" is introduced as an operative framework for the whole novel, a powerful means of selection and justification that has been used to implement both the regularity of the narrative design and its reliability. It is introduced as a theoretical model, in other words, that has been devised to structure the practical writing and reading of the narrative text, ensuring the credibility of its statements and the economy of its effects. At the same time, however, judging by the "intro-

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<sup>\*1</sup>For debates inspired by this article, please check the *Connotations* website at <<http://www.connotations.de/deberchinger01813.htm>>.

ductory lines," the "Law" also seems a rather doubtful and corrupted instrument to be deployed for that purpose, as it cannot really "be depended on to fathom every case of suspicion" and may even, "in certain inevitable cases," be "the pre-engaged servant of the long purse" (1). Indeed, Hartright's "story" itself exemplifies a yet undiscovered "case of suspicion," as he emphasises, that has escaped the grip of the law and is still "left to be told, for the first time, in this place" (1). Whatever its merits, then, as a basic model for the organisation of the prospective narrative, the law certainly seems to be a rather unconvincing choice. On the one hand, it is represented in terms of an authoritative system of clarification and distinction, an institutional mechanism of transformation and consolidation that is supposed to convert contingent events into calculable cases, indeterminate facts into meaningful evidence, inconsequent details into well-grounded proof, suspects into convicts, intuition into justified true belief and signifying discourse into significant plot. On the other hand, however, the law is expressly declared to work in a highly unpredictable and erratic fashion, potentially serving dubious purposes and thus creating an uneasy feeling of hidden secrets and unresolved cases that its "machinery" is unable to "fathom" or clear up.

The following essay will explore the irresolvable tension between these two aspects of the law and the way this tension grows as the novel unfolds. Eventually, I wish to argue that the ambivalent attitude towards the law, as expressed in Walter's "introductory lines," reveals a general problem that is developed and negotiated throughout Collins's text. This problem may be described as the creative struggle between a single pre-conceived theoretical law—which I take as a synonym for any binding principle or plan—and the many ways in which this pre-established law may subsequently be executed, reformed and transformed in the course of time. Putting it in these terms allows for a theoretical comparison between the conduct of a legal investigation and a reader's construction of a narrative plot because just as every law necessarily needs to be enacted and interpreted by a judge in order for it to have any effect in the first place, so

every story or plot necessarily needs to be assembled and interpreted by a reader for it to make sense.

Unsurprisingly, therefore, this analogy between the application of a law and the reading of a story is, again, explicitly suggested by the “introductory lines” of Collins’s novel, prefacing the narrative to come: “As the Judge might once have heard it, so the Reader shall hear it now” (1). But whereas a legal enquiry is typically and, indeed, specifically carried out in order to reduce all the information to a single, unequivocal interpretation, always ruling out what is arbitrary and irrelevant for the benefit of what constitutes a sensible whole, a fictional text does not necessarily have to be read in the same way. For whereas a legal investigation is conducted for the sole purpose of discovering a coherent plot yielding a clear-cut decision on whether a given case conforms to a prefigured law or whether it does not, it is not at all clear for what particular purpose a fictional text exists and why it is read. It may be consumed for the sole purpose of discovering a coherent plot, and in many cases it probably is. But there is no need to assume that this is the only way the process of reading may be brought to a meaningful end. When reading fiction, in short, we cannot rely on some predetermined, positive law or rule to guide our interpretation.<sup>3</sup> Rather, I would like to suggest, the law of a fictional discourse always includes a negative element. Its real motives, grounds and purposes remain hidden and ill-defined. The law of fiction may even be deceptive.

Criticism has predominantly and often dismissively tended to regard Collins’s novels as the aesthetically inferior products of a “mere carpenter of plot” (Pykett 220), who rigorously subjects his whole process of writing to a single preinstalled plan. Following the above premises, however, I shall deliberately avoid to read *The Woman in White* as the mechanical re-presentation of some primary law that exerts its page-turning command upon the text’s discursive proceedings, compelling readers to judge the plenitude of the novel’s potential meanings solely by some paraphrase of what seems to be ‘Collins’s’ plot. Instead, willingly suspending my disbelief, I wish to

analyse the text of *The Woman* as a highly intriguing fabric of individual fictional discourses, managed, manipulated and lined up by an equally fictional editor, Walter Hartright, whose true motives and principles must, by virtue of their fictional character, necessarily remain secret and therefore, despite all his declarations to the contrary, fundamentally unreliable.<sup>4</sup> As I hope to demonstrate, this fundamental unreliability results in a novel that repeatedly exposes, questions and reverts the tacit laws and premises upon which it seems to proceed, thus exhibiting their contingency by juxtaposing them with the alternative options, 'roads not taken,' the secret possibilities and 'noisy,' 'sensational' intrusions that are likely, at any time, to distract readers from what they may feel compelled to take for 'Collins's' plot. Rather than simply accepting that *The Woman in White* is premised upon a single authoritative law prescribing the logic of its story, then, I want to look at the ways in which the text itself realises and interprets the rules and laws upon which it proceeds, questioning their validity by relating them to the secret possibilities that tend to be strategically excluded by any sole "reading for the plot" (Brooks 1984).

## II. Lake Views

As we shall see, the unreliable double role of Walter Hartright as both narrating witness, himself subject to the law, and as controlling editor, subjecting the accounts of others to the law, plays a key role in the accumulation of these secret possibilities (cf. Bourne-Taylor 110). But there is one other episode that especially threatens to unsettle, if not destroy, the whole rationale of lawful succession that purportedly governs the novel's evolutionary course. This episode is part of Marian Halcombe's diary account and assumes the form of a rather strange conversation, taking place at the beginning of the text's Second Epoch when most of the major characters, excluding Hartright, are assembled by the side of a little lake on the country estate of

Blackwater Park. "The morning," on this occasion, as we are told, "was windy and cloudy; and the rapid alternations of shadow and sunlight over the waste of the lake, made the view look doubly wild and weird and gloomy" (208). We may debate whether it is the otherworldliness of the scenery or his villainous personality that makes Sir Percival utter the remark that immediately follows this description, but his utterance should certainly be quoted in context and at length:

"Some people call that picturesque," said Sir Percival, pointing over the wide prospect with his half-finished walking-stick. "I call it a blot on a gentleman's property. In my great-grandfather's time the lake flowed to this place. Look at it now! It is not four feet deep anywhere, and it is all puddles and pools. I wish I could afford to drain it and plant it all over. My bailiff (a superstitious idiot) says he is quite sure the lake has a curse on it, like the Dead Sea. What do you think, Fosco? It looks just the place for a murder, doesn't it?" (208)

Even given that, at this point of the text, we are already in a good position to anticipate that Sir Percival will sooner or later turn out to be a most insidious rogue, this remains a fairly puzzling statement because it is almost impossible to tell what should have motivated his claim that the lake "looks just the place for a murder." We could, of course, ascribe Percival's question to some recently formed murderous intention on his part, which he decides to discuss with Fosco at this point. But it remains unclear why of all places it should be "just" this poor remnant of a lake, "all puddles and pools," that strikes him as a suitable scene for a murder, especially because, with its "wide prospect," it seems to be fully exposed. Closer to Percival's meaning perhaps, we could also read his question as a rhetorical one, mock-seriously enlarging on the superstitiousness of his bailiff in order to frighten the ladies or enhance the "wild and weird" gloominess of the possibly bewitched scenery. But this would equally leave us in some doubt as to how exactly the place and its atmosphere relate to Percival's hidden plans or the plot as a whole. Either way there seems to be something offhanded and undecided about the whole statement,



making it appear just as “half-finished” as the walking stick that Percival uses to mark out his subject. In fact, the lake is hardly a subject worth mentioning; it is not even a proper lake, but at best “a blot on a gentleman’s property,” destined sooner or later to be drained, planted over and forgotten (“I wish I could afford to drain it and plant it all over”). Certainly, it seems to be nothing sensational or important, and if the statement were left as it is, a reading for the plot could and, I suppose, readily would let Percival’s casual remark on the eerie look of the landscape pass for a harmless metaphor that is just as shallow as the lake itself (“not four foot deep anywhere”), at best underlining the uncanny, Gothic atmosphere of isolation that the text evokes in this scene. Significantly, however, there is an evident sense in which Percival’s remark itself draws attention to the vague and indistinct meaning of its subject by contrasting its very insignificance with the magnitude and depth that it might once have had: “In my great-grandfather’s time the lake flowed to this place. Look at it now!” This is not without a tinge of irony because the longer we look at the lake, the more trifling and inconsequential it is bound to become, making it even harder to see in what way it is meant to be associated with a murder. More significantly still, we do not even have to analyse the subject of the lake as closely as we might because the text itself, in the person of Count Fosco, loudly and brashly answers to its unresolved function by embarking upon a literal reading of Percival’s questionable assertion that immediately silences any speculation on a rhetorical or metaphorical sense that it might have been intended to transmit.

“My good Percival!” remonstrated the Count. “What is your solid English sense thinking of? The water is too shallow to hide the body; and there is sand everywhere to print off the murderer’s footsteps. It is, upon the whole, the very worst place for a murder that I ever set my eyes on.” (208)

Taking advantage of the obscure reasoning or motivation behind the utterance in question, Fosco integrates its meaning into a law of his own devising, “your solid English sense,” that was manifestly absent from what Percival has said. In this way, Fosco opens up a ‘road’ of

possible interpretations that was never explicitly taken by the actual utterance from which it branches off now. He assumes a law of reading that was not intentionally established in order to have Percival's text yield a message not deliberately conveyed. He interprets an ambiguous remark as if it accorded to a "solid" law of unequivocal signification, patronisingly ("My good Percival") brushing off the possibility that something does not mean what its literal "English sense" most obviously seems to express.

This is a daring move, though, because it bluntly rejects the invitation to set up a form of communicative bonding—communally extended by Percival's tagged question ("it looks just the place for a murder, doesn't it?")—in favour of open disagreement, likely to provoke an equally antagonistic response. To Sir Percival, accordingly, Fosco's "solid English sense" does not make much sense. More precisely, it is sheer "'Humbug!' as he decides to call it, "cutting away fiercely at his stick. 'You know what I mean. The dreary scenery—the lonely situation. If you choose to understand me you can—if you don't choose I am not going to trouble myself to explain my meaning'" (234). Remarkably, this still does not in the least clarify the issue. For, instead of simply disclosing the original "meaning" of his remark about the lake, Percival gestures incoherently at some kind of self-evident commonsense or no-nonsense (no "Humbug") logic ("The dreary scenery—the lonely situation") that, by virtue of being self-evident, needs no explaining. Implicitly, therefore, his vague gesture is firmly tied up with the conclusion that in obvious cases of commonsense anyone can be relied on to "choose" the right meaning anyway. But this is an utterly self-defeating conclusion because by refusing to spell out the supposedly stable law of understanding he refers to ("if you don't choose, I am not going to trouble myself to explain my meaning"), Percival once again leaves it to Fosco to state the supposedly obvious in his own terms:

"And why not," asked the Count, "when your meaning can be explained by anyone in two words? If a fool was going to commit a murder, your lake is the first place he would choose for it. If a wise man was going to commit a

murder, your lake is the last place he would choose for it. Is that your meaning? If it is, there is your explanation for you, ready made. Take it, Percival, with your good Fosco's blessing." (209)

Although Percival's original meaning has still not been disclosed at this point of the conversation, it appears fairly certain by now that the kind of commonsense that, according to Fosco, "can be explained by anyone in two words," is unlikely to match the kind of self-explanatory non-humbug that, according to Percival, anyone can immediately understand, if only he chooses to do so. If the initial meaning of Percival's claim that the lake is "just the place for a murder" indeed corresponded with Fosco's explanation, he must have had a foolish murderer in mind. But this, surely, is hard to imagine, especially if we suppose that he might himself have seriously considered committing a murder on the disputable spot.

Quite irrespective of such pseudo-psychological speculation on what might have been the 'real' considerations of a fictional character, however, there is a much more important point to this whole argument. Effectively, what the text's 'characters' are arguing about here is the question of what could explain the meaning of the lake, as it has been referred to by Percival's claim, but, notably, this question is never resolved. Percival and Fosco may agree that there is some sort of primary logic that could explain the function of the lake within a murderer's plot, but they seem to disagree markedly on the ways in which this logic needs to be applied in order to settle the meaning of the lake. What the characters are arguing about here, in short, is the right law of interpreting the lake's role within the fictional world of Collins's text. The novel stages a self-reflexive debate about possible ways of reading one of its own storytelling devices while the text's current subject, the lake scene, is suspended indeterminately between its evident shallowness and the hidden profundities of what it might turn out to mean. The Count's intervention has certainly played the leading part in triggering off this debate; for instead of simply complying with a presupposed way of reading, affirmatively overlooking any potential inconsistencies for the sake of upholding the pre-

suggested (“isn’t it?”) plot of communicative consensus, Fosco takes on the risk of polemical discord for the sake of recreating the lake’s function in his own terms.

This exemplifies precisely the kind of performative reading that I am trying to advocate here because, by way of expounding Percival’s meaning, the Count actually invents it afresh. Instead of subordinating his interpretation to the constraints of a prefigured road or plot, he vigorously pushes the discussion into a yet unexplored direction, questioning the purpose of the lake in order to transform its seemingly petty appearance into a topic of considerable depth. Indeed, in what follows, the cracked surface of the lake’s meaning increasingly gives way to other debatable issues and stories, rising up from the still unsettled grounds of its insertion into the text. Laura, for one, now entering the discussion, does not at all seem to be much interested in the question of whether the lake is a suitable location for a crime or not, as we can gather from her own contribution to the debate:

“I am sorry to hear the lake view connected with anything so horrible as the idea of murder,” she said. “And if Count Fosco must divide murderers into classes, I think he has been very unfortunate in his choice of expressions. To describe them as fools only, seems like treating them with an indulgence to which they have no claim. And to describe them as wise men sounds to me like a downright contradiction in terms. I have always heard that truly wise men are truly good men and have a horror of crime.” (209)

There are two aspects of this passage that deserve to be highlighted. Firstly, Laura’s confession that she is “sorry to hear the lake-view” associated with the idea of murder emphasises once more that it is not the lake as such that is at issue here, but the way it is viewed. Certainly, viewing the lake as a mere prop within a criminal plot is only one way of describing it. Another way of reading the lake is to explore the possible incongruities and secrets that potentially lurk hidden beneath what may look like a rather flat and paltry matter at first. Fosco’s interference, as I have argued, is a good example of this kind of hermeneutic activity because by way of interrogating Percival’s initial, seemingly self-evident suggestion of meaning, he introduces a divi-

sion into the whole subject that threatens to tear its pragmatic identity of meaning apart, allowing a variety of different readings to come into play. Thus, instead of caring any further about the appearance of the lake itself—this is the second point to be noted—Laura seems to be much more discomforted and intrigued by the strangely unfamiliar murder figures that have emerged from the Count's creative explanation of Percival's "lake-view." The distinction between "foolish murderers" and "wise murderers" questions what she has "always heard" to be true because Fosco's "choice of words" does not agree with what she has taken for the regular way of characterising the criminal type. It confuses her habits of speaking and thinking, and transfigures and upsets the sort of commonplace view that is nicely epitomised in the oft-quoted proverb "that truly wise men are truly good men and have a horror of crime." In Fosco's view such "admirable sentiments" represent no more than a set of helpful illusions and reductionist stereotypes, handily arrayed "at the tops of copy-books" (209), but ultimately wanting substantial grounds. "A truly wise Mouse is a truly good Mouse" is an equally arbitrary and thus essentially hollow construct to his mind (209), devoid of any real world reference that could prove it to be true. Therefore, when Laura asks the Count to give her "an instance of a wise man who has been a great criminal" (209), resolutely trying to fortify the proverb's claim by empirical evidence, his logic can nonchalantly turn hers upon its head:

"Most true," he said. "The fool's crime is the crime that is found out; and the wise man's crime is the crime that is not found out. If I could give you an instance, it would not be the instance of a wise man. Dear Lady Glyde, your sound English common sense has been too much for me. It is checkmate for me this time, Miss Halcombe—ha?" (209)

Rhetorically, it is difficult to defeat Fosco because he argues from radically relativistic premises: The claim of truth depends on how it is read, and there is always more than one way of reading a common phrase, just as there is always more than one way of looking at a lake. Hence every sentence may be true because no sentence by itself is.

Arguing from this position, therefore, means arguing from a position that is not fixed. It involves a perspective that always holds other perspectives in view, switching between them at will. This is why Fosco can maintain Laura's "sound English common sense" to be true while simultaneously re-appropriating it in terms of a different interpretative rule. In one language game, he can profess himself to be "checkmated," while knowing that in another one he has triumphantly won. This makes his attitude enormously flexible and versatile, but impossible to pin down, closely resembling the behaviour of the "wise man" that he refers to himself. Indeed, according to Fosco, the wise criminal represents "a subject that, strictly speaking, is not a subject at all."<sup>5</sup> He may exist, but he cannot be identified, located in legal terms or "found out." The plot that defines his true identity remains hidden and mysterious. The wise murderer, therefore, is a murderer never caught. He only exists in a negative form. He may exist or he may not. Positively, we cannot know.

In sum, then, Fosco's world view, as it can be abstracted from this lakeside conversation, his way of reading evokes a world in which nothing necessarily means what it appears to mean. Every flat surface, in this view, has many potential implications emerging from the depths of what it does not seem to be at first glance: from its negative side. This world view inevitably challenges and undermines the whole moral groundwork that both Laura and her sister Marian, who immediately rushes to assist her, firmly believe in. In Laura's and Marian's world criminals are not wise because wise men do not commit crimes. In their world, moreover, crimes, being a foolish thing, inescapably "cause their own detection" (209)—as another "moral epigram" (210) has it that Laura and Marian professedly trust to be true—because sooner or later they must inevitably be discovered by those who are wise. The moral logic that this well-defined world rests upon is obviously circular, first positing the very terms that it subsequently proves to be true. But it is exactly this circularity that also provides this world with its reassuring appearance of stability and order, conveniently shutting out everything that does not fit in with



the harmony of its internal design. In contrast to the pleasant security of this secluded space of domestic order, the moral setup of Fosco's world is pervaded by a disturbing miasma of doubt and disorder, relentlessly re-including all the alternative options, all the negatives and roads not taken, that conventional wisdom invariably, if inadvertently, attempts to block out. In his world, therefore, the whole "clap-trap," of proverbs and self-consoling sayings by means of which "[s]ociety" seeks to varnish and preclude any thoughts on the potential inefficiency of the "machinery it has set up for the detection of crime" is radically threatened to lose its safeguarding force (210). As a consequence, in Fosco's world none of these sayings can any longer be quoted without being immediately questioned. "Crimes cause their own detection, do they? And murder will out (another moral epigram), will it?" (210). These questions gesture at an unacknowledged dark side of current knowledge, admitting the possibility that the real as it is, is not quite as it is widely imagined to be. They expose the contingency of the public world order by confronting it with a version of what it might be. In short, they infuse the sphere of the legal and official with an inkling of the illegal and unofficial that any social system constitutively needs in order to render its own dealings distinct. Paying attention to this secret side requires a particular practice of viewing or reading the ways and means by which cultural distinctions are made, as Fosco emphatically makes clear:

"Read your own public journals. In the few cases that get into the newspapers are there not instances of slain bodies found, and no murderers ever discovered? Multiply the cases that are reported by the cases that are *not* reported, and the bodies that are found by the bodies that are *not* found; and what conclusion do you come to? This. That there are foolish criminals who are discovered and wise criminals who escape." (210)

Even "the few cases" that are shaped into a mediated form sometimes tend to remain unfinished and ill-explained, retaining unaccountable elements and bewildering clues that resist to fit into a logical plot. What is more, these unresolved issues testify to a whole dimension of negative cases that are never reported at all. Heeding these requires to

“multiply” that which is reported with that which is “*not* reported”. It requires to think of the negative cases in terms of possible, undetected ones that have never entered our public frames. And it requires to accept that this strategy of reading may well undermine the very basis of our established concepts. If all crimes, for example, that are not reported are taken to be possible crimes that could have been reported, or may still be reported, as Fosco tries to make everyone believe, then such common truths as the “moral maxim that Crime causes its own detection” (211) immediately fall apart because no one can any longer be certain what exactly is meant by the word crime. A crime, of course, can only cause its own detection if it is already decided what constitutes a crime and what does not; but if “crime” is demonstratively taken to encompass what it obviously, by the entrenched standards of public belief, does not encompass, then the whole concept becomes vague and its definition no longer distinguishes it from what it is not. It becomes semantically indifferent, ceasing to make a clear-cut difference. If a crime committed can no longer be clearly discriminated from a crime not committed, then crime is potentially ubiquitous because every act that appears to be harmless and trivial could still be a crime. “Yes,” says Fosco, crime may cause its own detection, but only “the crime *you* know of. And what of the rest?” (211). Discerning or perceiving no crime does not always mean that there is none.

### III. The Actuality of the Possible

This episode has two important effects on the form and interpretation of the whole novel. Firstly, it obviously creates suspicion and distrust. It suggests an undercurrent of criminal activities below the surface of the seemingly ordinary, a realm of the possible, or a possible realm that the reader is not, or not yet, aware of, although it may already be part of what we, together with the characters, take to constitute the actual fictional world. Secondly, and in conjunction with this, Fosco’s

insistence on the possible existence of the seemingly negative, on the existence of crimes not noticed, also casts some grave suspicion on the efficiency, authority and detective power of the very institution that has been claimed as a model for the narrative's form, that is, on the law. For while the law may serve as a viable medium to identify what is a crime and what is not, its very viability depends upon the presupposition that every act can ultimately be reduced to either one of these. Indeed, a legal investigation has to operate by gradually restricting possibilities, and by unswervingly interpreting all empirical evidence in terms of cause and effect. Its sole purpose is to produce a conclusive story, and yet—here is the crucial point of Fosco's argument—this involves a process of discarding some information as irrelevant that allows intelligent crimes to go unnoticed.

Fosco's argument has obvious sociological implications; it is, moreover, indicative of an issue in literary criticism that has been most inspiringly spelled out by Frank Kermode, who conceives of narrative in terms of an evolving dialogue between "two intertwined processes," namely the actual telling of a story and the possible ways of interpreting it. "The first process tends towards clarity and propriety ('refined common sense'), the second towards secrecy, towards distortions which cover secrets" (Kermode 164).<sup>6</sup> This dialogue between what is expressly said and what may be implicitly meant by an utterance is precisely what the lakeside episode fictively re-enacts as a dialogue between the characters of the narrative, suggesting that the hermeneutic activity of interpreting is itself an integral part of the story it is meant to interpret. This encapsulates a pivotal characteristic of *The Woman in White* as a whole. Right from the start, the way of reading the narrated story seems to be beset on all sides by endless possibilities of interpretation whose scope and meaning most of the characters and narrators are just as apprehensive and excited about as most of the readers who are remorselessly pushed forward by the desire to know the secret plot that underpins the increasingly disturbing tangle of signs and events. On the face of it, for example, the offer of an engagement at Limmeridge House, which sets the story in mo-

tion, appears to be exceptionally “attractive” to Walter, as he informs us after his friend Pesca has spread out the prospective situation before him, “—and yet no sooner had I read the memorandum than I felt an inexplicable unwillingness within me to stir in the matter” (11). As in Walter’s reading of the job memorandum, the process of reading Collins’s story is accompanied by a disquieting intimation of potential meanings not yet divulged that seem to lurk “inexplicably” beside and beneath the evident surface “matter,” warping and diverting the successive unwinding of the narrative’s course.

Textually, the looming presence of this “unseen Design” (257) manifests itself in a flickering “twilight” (3, 262) and nervous delay, invoking an “ominous future, coming close” (257) whose very absence has so famously exerted its spectacular, “chilling” (257) grip on many readers’ nerves.<sup>7</sup> Thus, during Walter’s last night in London, when he leaves the house of his mother and sister, whom he has just bid goodbye, he does not go home straightaway, but hesitates and stops, feeling reluctant to go to bed, and finally decides to walk “by the most round-about way I could take” since this is the path he considers to agree best with his “restless frame of mind and body” (14). Winding his way “down slowly over the Heath”—the “prettiest part of my night-walk”—, then passing “through a by-road where there was less to see” (14), he eventually arrives at “that particular point of my walk where four roads met” (14-15). Walter is deeply immersed in his own thoughts by that time, mechanically turning towards London and wandering along the “lonely high-road,” when he suddenly notices that in front of him, “in the middle of the broad bright high road,” as he puts it, “there, as if it had that moment sprung out of the earth or dropped from the heaven—stood the figure of a solitary Woman, dressed from head to foot in white garments” (15). The encounter has become emblematic for the so called sensationalism of *The Woman in White* whose narrative ways are characteristically prone, at all events, to be obstructed and distracted by unforeseen hindrances, sudden turns or the thrilling apparition of figures seeming to spring “out of the earth,” such as Anne Catherick in this scene or Count Fosco in a

later one, when he surprises Marian by turning round a corner “from the High Road” and suddenly standing before her “as if he had sprung up out of the earth” (245). Even on the “way to Knowlesbury,” the novel’s place of enlightenment, Walter is constantly pestered by two nameless spies, one of whom had just been passing “rapidly on his left side,” when the other “sprang” to his “right side,” as he tells us, “—and the next moment the two scoundrels held me pinioned between them in the middle of the road” (466).<sup>8</sup>

Certainly, then, the roads and ways of Collins’s narrative are anything but a safe and clearly demarcated place. Instead they seem to be densely besieged, as it were, by other possibilities, lying in wait to unbalance the different first-person narrators who are attempting to walk, and thereby pave the textual paths. It is important, however, that these possibilities are generated by something that exists in an eminent mode of negativity or latency.<sup>9</sup> They are generated by something that seems not to exist, in other words, so that the very possibility of its sensational upsurge is precisely, if paradoxically, generated by what is apparently not known, not perceived or not in view. This trembling mood of impending revelations, latent possibilities and negative specificities manifests itself when Laura and Marian are out for a walk near Blackwater Park. Both women, in this instance, can perceive something or someone wandering about in the misty grounds around them, but neither of them is sure what it is exactly, whether it is a man or a woman, or just a product of their nervous fancy:

“Hush!” she whispered. “I hear something behind us.”

“Dead leaves,” I said, to cheer her, “or a twig blown off the trees.”

“It is summer time, Marian; and there is not a breath of wind. Listen!

I heard the sound, too—a sound like a light footstep following us.

“No matter who it is, or what it is,” I said; “let us walk on [...]” (239)

This may count as a typical passage because it captures the permanent feeling of “something behind” or around the characters—no “matter who it is or what it is”—accompanying them in terms of an indeter-

minate potential of mischief and covert activities whose exact purposes and motives are still unclear. "In this dim light it is not possible to be certain," as Marian expresses it, unwittingly compressing the text's default mode into a single phrase (238). Something seems to be going on secretly, but one can never be quite sure what. It is wholly appropriate, therefore, that the novel is called *The Woman in White* because it is this emphasis on something that lacks colour and shape but appears to be positive that becomes embodied in the title character. In fact, from the moment of Anne's "sudden appearance in the road" which, to Walter's "rather startled" mind, seemed to be perfectly "empty the instant before I saw you" (16), the narration proceeds in the lingering presence of something conspicuously, almost tangibly absent that tends to obfuscate and blur the meaning of whatever there is to read or understand. Importantly, this want of insight also questions the accuracy of Hartright's narrating voice, as he walks "on together" (17) with the white woman "whose name, whose character, whose story, whose objects in life, whose very presence by my side," as he wonders, "were fathomless mysteries to me" (18). From this moment, then, the narrating of the story is literally accompanied by an intellectual deficiency, an experience not, or not fully, understood, a crime not noticed, a blank not filled, a metaphorical whiteness that mars the evidence and the reliability of what is deemed to be positively known.

It was like a dream. Was I Walter Hartright? Was this the well-known, uneventful road, where holiday people strolled on Sundays? Had I really left, little more than an hour since, the quiet, decent, conventionally-domestic atmosphere of my mother's cottage? (18)

After the woman in white has dramatically appeared in the middle of the road, the familiar ways of making and perceiving the world can no longer be trusted. Entering the narrative highway through a "gap in the hedge" (16), Anne's white figure cuts open the possibility of other, alternative stories, suggesting that even the conventional and domestic may not be what it appears to be. Having just escaped from a medical asylum, her appearance shows the accepted sphere of regu-



larity, order and control to be simultaneously inhabited by a subsidiary world of irregularity, disorder, madness and doubt.

As a consequence, the established framework of Walter's world-picture becomes increasingly shaken, as he subsequently embarks on his new job as drawing-master at Limmeridge house, causing his narrative imagination to grow almost as hazy as the water-colour portrait by means of which he attempts to re-create the first "vivid impression produced" on him "by the charm" of Laura Fairlie's "fair face and head, her sweet expression" (42) and, above all, her "lovely eyes" with their "clear truthfulness of look" that evokes nothing less than the ideal "light of a purer and a better world" (41). Symptomatically, in Walter's perception, Laura's "fair, delicate" demeanour (41) with her "faint and pale" coloured hair and her "truthful innocent blue eyes" is suffused with something remarkably enigmatic. The eyes shed a "charm—most gently and yet most distinctly expressed" over her "whole face" that "so covers and transforms its little natural human blemishes elsewhere, that it is difficult to estimate the relative merits and defects of the other features" (41). As a description this remains notably nondescript: the individual characteristics of Laura's figure seem to be veiled by a vague allure that is effectively not characterised, and the "relative merits and defects" of her "features" are covered and transformed by something that does, by itself, not feature among them. The fineness and beauty of Laura, it seems, is inextricably linked to a tendency of letting her disappear; for the vivid account of her presence is overshadowed by an unaccountable manifestation of absence, a dislocating "sensation" of a sense not located ("out of place") (42), ultimately suggesting no more than the bewildering "idea of something wanting" (42), but evidently not there. "At one time it seemed like something wanting in *her*; at another, like something wanting in myself, which hindered me from understanding her as I ought" (42). Paradoxically, then, Laura's character contains a component that it does not contain and yet unavoidably seems to call up. "Something wanting, something wanting—and where it was and what it was I could not say" (42). This obvious lack in Laura's appear-

ance—"an incompleteness which it was impossible to discover" (42)—turns out to be a key element, or rather non-element, in the development of the narrative because what is missing in Laura is precisely what eventually helps Walter recognise an "ominous likeness" between her and another woman who she might well be taken to be, namely Anne Catherick, the mysterious woman in white. "That 'something wanting' was my own recognition of the ominous likeness between the fugitive from the asylum and my pupil at Limmeridge House" (51). What Laura, by herself, is actually not, is precisely what, by others, she may potentially be imagined to be. What distinguishes her is also what makes her resemble another. What specifies her is the very lack of specificity that makes her appearance slide so easily into that of Anne Catherick, blurring the boundaries between the individual selves of Laura and Anne. The two women are alike precisely because neither of them is distinct enough by herself. The elusive connection between the two women thus turns into the missing link that makes possible the transformation of their identities which the narrative, as arranged by Hartright, purports to clear up.

#### IV. Possible Plots

As mentioned in the preamble, the creation and dismantling of this plot has often been regarded as the engine that drives Collins's art. Rather than in the "construction of sensational plots," however, a much more subtle achievement of novels like the *Woman in White* is to be found in what Ronald R. Thomas has called their "conversion of character into plot" (63). Indeed, the person that Laura so manifestly fails to be is exactly what the narrative's criminal plot wickedly intends her to become. Laura is to be made Anne. Consequently, this plot, invented and enacted by the archvillain Count Fosco in cooperation with his wife and Percival Glyde, involves "nothing less than the complete transformation of two separate identities" (559), as he puts it in his own narrative. A rich, married lady is transformed

into a poor inmate of a madhouse and vice versa, each assuming an identity that is obviously not her own, but that she secretly already seems to possess. For what each of them is not, is nevertheless what their mutual resemblance has suggested them to be taken for. Fosco's conspiracy realises a possible fictional world that the actual fictional world already appears to include. What Walter's world conjures up in terms of an evocative lack, is what Fosco's world tries to make real.

More significantly still, this plot within the plot is itself designed to conceal yet another secret plot. It has been invented by Sir Percival in order to hide his illegitimate birth, the discovery of which would have completely robbed him of his title and wealth. Trying to avert this discovery, Percival manipulates the marriage records and turns himself into the lawful heir of someone who is not his father, thus providing himself with a full genealogy, identity and social existence that is not his own. He bases his life on a lie, on a connection not made, pretending to be someone who does not exist. The disclosure of this plot, of course, would have totally and immediately ruined him; therefore, as soon as he suspects Laura, who has become his wife by now, to have come to know his secret, he conspires with Fosco to exchange her identity with that of Anne Catherick. In this way, passing off his wife for a madwoman, he has her shut up in an asylum, while his secret remains hidden.

Ultimately, the motivation and execution of this whole fraud is revealed. In the second half of the novel, Walter, resuming his narrative after his return from South America, assumes the role of an amateur detective, restoring everyone to their true identity. For this purpose, he hunts down a number of written documents, including, among others, the personal statements of Count Fosco and Mrs. Catherick, Anne's mother, as well as an authentic copy of the forged marriage register in which a blank space, a marriage not entered, proves Percival's crime. Altogether, these documents eventually enable Walter to make an official presentation, supervised by Mr. Kyrle, the "legal adviser of the family" (576), in which the whole plot is laid open and the case declared closed. Therefore, the novel we hold in our hands

might be read as a retrospective arrangement of exactly these legal proofs, detailing the background, planning and intricate plotting of the case in terms of “one complete series of events,” to come back to Walter’s introductory lines. Indeed, for many critics the achievement of Collins’s art mainly consists in the entertaining architecture of his novel. What defines *The Woman*, according to this view, is that the text’s apparently inscrutable flurry of signs, puzzles, particulars and possible insinuations is always underpinned by a coherent logic of events. The novel forces its readers through a nerve-racking mist of seemingly confusing details but actually never loses control of its plot. “At the end comes the explanation,” an anonymous reviewer writes in the *Saturday Review* (25 August 1860). “The secret spring is touched—the lock flies open—the novel is done” (Anonymous 83).

Again, I would like to contest such readings. They presuppose that Walter himself, in his function as chief editor, plays by the rules of the same law that he uses to model his narrative case. There is, however, a fair amount of textual evidence that strongly discredits the propriety of Walter’s editing, pointing to an immense potential of further secrets and unexplained cases that a restricted focus on the official plot version he presents us with must unfortunately discard. Therefore, contrary to an exclusive “reading for the plot,” as Peter Brooks calls it, I would rather draw attention to the possible side paths and by-ways of interpretation, the “catalysts” (Barthes 112) or “satellites” (Chatman 54), like the little lake at Blackwater Park, that point out towards the potentially fertile, though unknown, territory off the high road of what common sense calls the main plot. In this sense, Fosco’s insistence on the existence of unreported crimes may also be read as a methodological call for a hermeneutics of suspicion, deliberately exploring what is not necessary for comprehending the story, but may still be part of the text. Most irritatingly, for example, judging from Walter’s account, it is anything but plain that it is indeed Laura rather than Anne who has been rescued from the asylum to live in London with Marian and Walter, as his narrative would have us believe, and that it is Anne rather than Laura who has died in the course of the

exchange, now lying buried in Limmeridge churchyard under the name of “‘Laura, Lady Glyde’” (378). In fact, there are several indications that make us distrust Walter’s version. For instance, although eagerly protesting that “not the shadow of a suspicion” ever crossed his mind that the surviving woman really is the one whom everyone else firmly believes to be dead (380), Walter nonetheless admits that the “fatal resemblance” between Laura and Anne, formerly existing “in idea only” has now become “a real and living resemblance which asserted itself before my eyes” (400), as he puts it. “Strangers, acquaintances, friends even who could not look at her as we looked, if she had been shown to them in the first days of her rescue from the Asylum, might have doubted if she were the Laura Fairlie they had once seen, and doubted without blame” (400). If nobody except for Walter and (according to Walter’s account) Marian is inclined to believe that the woman in question is the one Walter says she is, and if, what is more, everybody is justified in not believing it, why should the reader accept it?

There are, in fact, many signs suggesting that Walter is not a trustworthy advocate of what commonsense may acknowledge as truth. For example, there is something patronisingly protective in the way he describes Laura’s appearance and behaviour after she has been released from the asylum, rendering her kinship with Anne suspiciously close indeed. Walter repeatedly emphasises the childlike helplessness, innocence and fragility of Laura, her “weakened, shaken faculties,” her “poor weary pining eyes” as well as “the faltering touch” and “feeble hand” that seems to be in constant need of guidance and support (400). Moreover, carefully trying to reawaken her lost memory and sense of personal identity, to fill “the blank in her existence” (400), Walter and Marian nurse her rather like a child than an adult woman in possession of her intellectual capacities and strength:

We helped her mind slowly by this simple means; we took her out between us to walk, on fine days, in a quiet old City square, near at hand, where there was nothing to confuse or alarm her; [...] we amused her in the evenings

with children's games at cards, with scrap-books full of prints [...] by these and other trifling attentions like them, we composed her, and steadied her [...]. (400-01)

Certainly, it does not require much effort to associate this pitiful creature with the "poor helpless woman" that has earlier been introduced under the name of Anne Catherick (92), a "half-witted," faint and "half-frightened" "child whose mental faculties had been in a disturbed condition from a very early age" (495, 50, 116) and whose "intellect is not developed as it ought to be at her age" (49). And even though we may easily attribute these "symptoms of mental affliction" (116) in both women to their common experience of being wrongly confined in an asylum, this does nothing to disclaim that, by the third epoch, they seem to have become one and the same person.

The only way to distinguish them is to rely on the authority of Walter's judgement, but, again, Walter, himself a mentally weak and traumatised man, is not at all credible.<sup>10</sup> He does not, for example, have any scruples in openly deceiving Laura, pretending that he was selling her "poor, faint, valueless sketches" of painting (442), as he calls them, just to make her feel she is doing something useful. Likewise, Walter does deliberately not tell Mrs Clements "the whole truth" (422) when he asks her to provide him with the information he needs; he modifies an important statement by Pesca, declaring that he repeats it with "the careful suppressions and alterations which the serious nature of the subject" required (534), and even Marian's diary report is not reproduced in its original form but only in terms of the notes Walter "wanted" to take when Marian read to him from her "manuscript," the original version of which she prefers to keep private due to a number of delicate passages significantly relating to Walter himself (401). The novel abounds with such apparently minor remarks, fuelling endless speculations on whether the plot actually did develop the way the text makes us believe. Does the unpublished part of the diary perhaps include any disreputable details about Walter that would further disparage the integrity of his character and his editing? We shall never know, just as we shall never know whether



any of the diary notes may count as authentic at all, even if we evaluate them exclusively within the set-up of the fictional world. In fact, there is something inherently doubtful about these notes, as I would finally like to show, that undermines the whole claim of legal truth upon which this fictional world is based.

The last piece of the Blackwater Park journal includes the record of how Marian, crouching on the roof of the house's veranda, eavesdrops on Percival and Fosco sitting below (289-305). This report is followed by an entry, headed "JUNE 20TH—Eight o'clock" (305); that is meant to account for the way the writing of the foregoing passages has been accomplished. It completely fails to do so, however, because what Marian, "drenched to the skin" from the rain, "cramped in every limb, cold to the bones" (306), has actually noted down is only that she is completely unable to remember clearly what has happened since she re-entered her room to write down what she has found out. Instead, she is overcome by a strong fever which seriously affects her mental faculties: "My head—I am sadly afraid of my head. I can write, but the lines all run together [...] and the strokes of the clock, the strokes I can't count, keep striking in my head——" (307). These are Marian's last lines, after them, the "Diary ceases to be legible," as we are informed by a "Note" that is attached in brackets. Following this note, however, is a Postscript by Count Fosco in which he enthusiastically praises, among other things, "the marvellous accuracy of her report of the whole conversation" (308) between him and Percival and "the wonderful power of memory" that the whole diary displays (308). The irony of this is unmistakable, for Fosco is, of course, the last person to be trusted as a reliable "witness" (308) to these matters. Rather, knowing that he has pried into the privacy of Marian's writing table, a host of completely different, though speculative interpretations suggest themselves: Did Fosco modify or censor the contents of the journal, adapting them to his own needs? Or did he use his extraordinary knowledge of "medical and chemical science" (560) to start off Marian's illness or affect her consciousness and memory, making her imagine things that never happened the way they are

presented by the text? As Fosco freely confesses to be fully capable of transforming the physical conditions of mental activity, this seems not at all far-fetched.

Give me—Fosco—chemistry; and when Shakespeare has conceived Hamlet, and sits down to execute the conception—with a few grains of powder dropped into his daily food, I will reduce his mind, by the action of his body, till his pen pours out the most abject drivel that has ever degraded paper. (560)

This is suggestive of what might have happened when Marian returned to her room “to execute the conception” of what she has heard on the roof outside, justifying the conclusion that parts of the diary have not been written by her conscious self. Having begun in this way, we may also wonder whether “chemistry” or mesmerism rather than marriage has been the cause for the “wonderful transformation” of Eleanor Fairlie, a talkative, “pretentious” (194) and “wayward Englishwoman” into the “civil, silent, unobtrusive” bore—“as cold as a statue”—(195) that we get to know as Madame Fosco, the Count’s wife. None of the alternative stories that are implied by such hints is ever made explicit, and there is no point in developing them in great detail here. The point is precisely that they are not developed in great detail. They are realised as possibilities, as possible stories that might have been (more extensively) narrated and, for that matter, as possible stories whose meaning is yet to be explored by responding to the novel’s secret dimension, to what it does not say. The point, in short, is that these alternative stories are realised as possible ways of reading, interpreting and re-writing Collins’s text.<sup>11</sup>

In a historical perspective, namely in terms of evolutionary theory—which was one of the most influential theoretical paradigms during the latter half of the nineteenth century—we may also say that these alternative stories are realised as apparently minor interpretative variations, yet encouraging ever fresh selections of what the text can potentially come to mean as it is adapted to different hermeneutic horizons or contextual fields.<sup>12</sup> “Nature has so much to do in this

world," Hartright's text says at an early point in the narrative, "and is engaged in generating such a vast variety of co-existent productions that she must surely be now and then too flurried and confused to distinguish between the different processes that she is carrying on at the same time" (38). If *The Woman in White* represents "Nature" in any respect, then it is in this. It represents "Nature" as an emergent structure of possible plots, "a vast variety of co-existent productions," simultaneously vying for precedence. This, however, suggests an even more wide-ranging conclusion, that I can only refer to very briefly here. It suggests that the nature of evolution may be regarded as a model for Collins's text (and for later nineteenth century narrative fiction in general) precisely because this nature potentially includes what the law of its gradual development actually seems to exclude, namely the alternative ways of this development. In Darwin's *Origin*, these alternative trajectories, the roads not taken by the evolution of life, figure prominently, if negatively, in the shape of the traces of extinction that mark our geological record, silently gesturing at the numerous "less improved and intermediate forms" that might have stayed alive but did not (Darwin 128). Yet, while the law of organic life, according to Darwin's theory, characteristically consist in rejecting these "less-favoured" variants (Darwin 320) for the benefit and survival of the better adapted kinds, one law of literary fiction is to revive them, to have them re-enter the natural world in the shape of possible alternatives, appealing, as E. S. Dallas puts it, "to what I may call the absent mind, as distinct from the present mind, on which falls the great glare of consciousness, and to which alone science appeals" (1: 316).

In a more contemporary perspective, namely as a specific function of all fictional texts, these disregarded details, nascent possibilities and negative narratives, may also be seen in terms of what William R. Paulson and others have called the "noise" of communication. For, according to Paulson, literary fictions, in contrast to other cultural forms of communication, do characteristically not attempt to eliminate or "reduce noise to a minimum," but rather to integrate it into their

syntactical arrangement, assuming it as “a constitutive factor” of their successive self-constitution (83) that proportionally enhances the scope and intensifies the effect of their possible meanings as long as they continue to be read, interpreted and discussed. Of course, this is a general theorem that may be applied to all works of literary fiction. But in *The Woman in White*, such perpetual propensity towards structural instability complicating the regular or ‘lawful’ communication of a single message is even represented on the level of the story. This is evident in the lake episode that I have dealt with. But it also becomes apparent in the delicate condition of Mr. Fairlie’s notorious “nerves” whose “wretched state” makes them exceptionally sensitive to the intrusion of noise or “loud sound of any kind” (33), threatening to disturb the “deep silence” (32) of his thickly carpeted room in the recess of Limmeridge House. It is significant that the seclusion and stillness of Mr. Fairlie’s residence—a “large, lofty room with a magnificent carved ceiling”—is highly reminiscent of a museum of art and antiquities, a showroom of valuables, densely “occupied” with old and luxurious objects, such as “a long book-case of some rare inlaid wood,” “statuettes in marble,” “two antique cabinets” (31), “a picture of the Virgin and Child” and several costly and ornate stands, “loaded with figures in Dresden china, with rare vases, ivory ornaments, and toys and curiosities that sparkled at all points with gold, silver, and precious stones” (31-32). It is significant that the room is thus “adorned” (31) because in this way it suggests itself to be read as a metaphor of art and fiction, displaying a remarkable “structure of double meaning” (Iser, “Fictionalizing” 965) that exists in two worlds at the same time (cf. Lotman 96).<sup>13</sup> On the one hand, the ‘room’ of fiction represents a constructed space of “profound seclusion” (32), a non-natural reality that is just as separate from the real world as the softly lit chamber of Mr. Fairlie—an effeminate ‘fairy’ man by name and appearance—where “the windows were concealed and the sunlight was tempered by large blinds” (32). On the other hand, the exposed peculiarity and distinction of fictional literature, its obvious lack of necessity as well as the ‘nervous’ shakiness of its truth claims,

the unreliability of its laws and the secrecy of its full meaning make it particularly susceptible to impulses from the real world that simultaneously tend to enrich and destabilise its semantic identity, just as the sound of the “horrid children,” that Mr. Fairlie supposes to enter his room from the garden “below,” immediately turns his touchy nerves into a jumble of “helpless alarm” (35), unsettling the room’s affectionate “halo of repose” (32). In relation to the careful order of Fairlie’s room, then, “such brats” as “the children from the village” (36) represent a natural world of mere tumult and row that makes him advocate nothing less than “a reform in the construction of children. Nature’s only idea seems to be to make them machines for the production of incessant noise” (36). Appropriately, therefore, Fairlie expressly prefers the mechanical artifice of celestial harmony, as encapsulated in “the conventional cherubs of Italian Art” (36) in one of his Raffaello paintings that lacks the very possibility of assuming and transforming noise:

“Quite a model family!” said Mr. Fairlie, leering at the cherubs. “Such nice round faces, and such nice soft wings, and—nothing else. No dirty little legs to run about on, and no noisy little lungs to scream with. How immeasurably superior to the existing construction!” (36)

Paradoxically, what, from the point of view of Fairlie’s selfish aestheticism, makes this artistic model of a family “immeasurably superior” to its real life analogue is also what, from the point of view of a real life reader, makes it inferior to an actual family. What, according to Fairlie’s art world, defines the children’s perfection is exactly what, according to our human world, defines their imperfection (“No [...] legs”; “no [...] lungs”). What provides them with their formal quality is exactly what deprives them of their human capacities. What, in Fairlie’s eyes, renders them “nice” and “round” and “soft” is what, in our eyes, threatens to render them lifeless. The important point to note, then, is that Fairlie’s reading of the painting strips it of its ability to transcend its actual surface design and represent a possibly real world. As he reduces the cherubs to the artificial construct of an ideal

family “and—nothing else,” he ironically precludes their ability to become a “model” of human reality. Limiting the image’s sole virtue to the properties it does not have, he simultaneously curtails the potential of meaning that may be generated by this very want. In this way, Fairlie arrests the picture’s negative mimesis. He frames it as a nature not made, complaining that its actual “construction” does not exist, instead of imagining it as one that might exist. He conserves the impossibility of the painting’s world reference, praising what is actually not real about it, instead of adapting it to a set of possibly real contexts which it could evoke. Consequently, his reading turns the art work into a mere object that lacks the energy-transforming and noise-converting organs which would help it develop a meaningful life of its own. Read in Fairlie’s way, art works are destined sooner or later to fall into a state of oblivion and neglect because when their meaning is too rigidly fastened into a single framework, it is likely to be kept away from the various environmental stimuli that may potentially modify and enliven it.

This allows for a final conclusion. What ultimately keeps works of fiction and art alive is not their conservation in a single state that closes them off from all external impulses, as the ones in Fairlie’s room; rather, it is their exposure to the possibility of being accommodated to contextual readings and requirements of various kinds. It is fitting, in this respect, that the “duty” Hartright is officially expected to “perform” at Limmeridge House is not only to “superintend the instruction of two young ladies in the art of painting in water-colours,” but also, more significantly, “to devote his leisure time, afterwards, to the business of repairing and mounting a valuable collection of drawings, which had been suffered to fall into a condition of total neglect” (10). The way Walter is meant to engage with Fairlie’s art works, then, is a kind of allegory of the way *The Woman in White*, as I have tried to demonstrate, suggests itself to be read. It suggests itself to be read in an active way that does not just preserve what the novel’s discourse seems to say, but that generates possible interpretations of what it does not say. It suggests itself to be read in a



way that complicates the reliability of the official story the text purports to convey. Just as Fairlie's pictures require "careful straining and mounting" (35), so Collins's novel, I have argued, should not just be consumed for its gripping story and then be let to fall into "a condition of total neglect." Instead, it also deserves to be explored for the roads apparently not taken by Walter's editing, for the alternative readings and the possible secrets not covered by his narrative law.

In the end, fictional narratives that are read merely for the detection of a particular plot often leave their readers in a state of lingering dissatisfaction that is then typically, if only temporarily, cured by the consumption of similar stories.<sup>14</sup> One reason for this dissatisfaction, I suspect, is that the establishment of a plot presupposes a constructive activity that is necessarily somewhat destructive at the same time. Indeed, in order to arrive at a final explanation for all the details that we encounter in the course of reading a fictional text, we have to pass over a great amount of missing elements, adding causal links and motives that the text does not explicitly provide, while, conversely, we tend to overlook a great amount of information that the text explicitly provides but that is not needed for the construction of a plot. In this way, steadily grouping, selecting and combining, we may well be able to set up a conclusive series of actions and events, "nice and round" like the faces of Fairlie's cherubs, but, as with these, the conclusiveness of this series of actions and events is premised upon the silencing of that which does not seem to be included in the frame of the plot. No fictional world can ever be as comprehensive and conclusive as the actual one; hence, whenever we endeavour to resolve its possibilities into a single conclusion, we curb the text's capacity to serve as a model of the actual or real and eliminate its elements of messiness and noise. Certainly, with *The Woman in White* such readings bereave the text of its ability to signify liveliness and zest, reducing it to a mechanical pattern, bereft of "lungs" and "legs" like Fairlie's disabled angels, instead of having it become invigorated by what it does not overtly say but might covertly still hold in store. "The remaining hours of the morning passed away pleasantly enough," Walter writes

after his interview with Mr. Fairlie, “in looking over the drawings, arranging them in sets, trimming their ragged edges,” and yet all of this is just part of “the necessary preparations” to be accomplished “in anticipation of the business of mounting them” (37). The critical work of engaging with a work or text, the “business of mounting,” we may gather from this, begins only when we have already become familiar with the basic outline of its contents. It starts where the main plot stops.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>This essay is a substantially revised and extended version of a paper given at the 10th *Connotations* Symposium on “Roads Not Taken,” Tübingen and Freudensstadt, August 2-6, 2009. I thank the participants of the conference, the organisers Matthias Bauer and Angelika Zirker, and, especially, an anonymous reviewer for their suggestions and criticism.

<sup>2</sup>All text references to *The Woman in White* are to this edition.

<sup>3</sup>On the positivity of law see Luhmann (159-226). I should add, however, that this essay is emphatically not meant as an attempt to apply Luhmann’s theory of law as a social system to literature.

<sup>4</sup>On the relationship between fictionality and narrativity see Erchinger, *Kontingenzformen* (41-58).

<sup>5</sup>This quotation comes from the text announcing the conference that eventually gave rise to the present essay.

<sup>6</sup>For further treatment of this issue see also Kermode’s *The Genesis of Secrecy* in which he draws on a wide range of narratives, especially biblical ones, to make his point.

<sup>7</sup>*The Woman in White* was immensely popular, when it was first published, as John Sutherland notes in the introduction to his Oxford edition. “Never before, it seems, had a work of fiction so caught the public’s fancy,” inspiring nothing less than “what would nowadays be called a sales mania and a franchise boom” (vii). Much of the book’s appeal has remained unmitigated today. The quotations at the beginning of this paragraph are taken from a passage in Marian Halcombe’s part which may be quoted as an example for the general atmosphere of nervous tension that characterises the whole novel: “I felt the ominous future, coming close; chilling me with an unutterable awe; forcing on me the conviction of an

unseen Design in the long series of complications which had now fastened round us" (257).

<sup>8</sup>"The genre [of the sensation novel]," D. A. Miller writes, "offers us one of the first instances of modern literature to address itself primarily to the nervous system" (146). Because sensation seems to be something that is primarily *received*, though, Miller points out, it has often been refused to be *read*, which is why the sensation novel has been "relegated to the margins of the canon" (147). Contesting this refusal to read sensation, Miller argues that it is important to take into account "the novel's implicit reading of its own (still quite 'effective') performative dimension" (149). Although his interpretation of *The Woman in White* focuses specifically on the relationship between sensation and gender, it may certainly complement mine. For an introduction to the historical dimension of the genre see Nemesvari and Pykett.

<sup>9</sup>For an overview of this theme see the essays in Budick/Iser.

<sup>10</sup>On this point, see also Hutter "Fosco Lives!" This essay collects a large amount of textual evidence to demonstrate "the gradual breakdown of Walter's clarity of purpose, even his clarity of mind, as the novel moves toward his encounter with Count Fosco" (212). Ultimately, Hutter argues that Fosco does not die at the end of the novel, as Walter tells us. Even this, it seems, is a legitimate possibility.

<sup>11</sup>One of the most fascinating contemporary re-writings of Collins's novel is Sarah Waters's Neo-Victorian novel *Fingersmith*, first published in 2002, which explicitly develops many of the themes and elements that are implicit in *The Woman in White*. For example, Waters's novel dwells wittily on how exactly the doctors, who had to supervise and confirm Laura's referral to the asylum, are made to believe that she is mentally ill, a detail that Collins's text quickly circumvents by referring to Laura's complete, but rather unjustified, loss of memory (443).

<sup>12</sup>Extensive and well-argued treatment of the impact of evolutionary theory on nineteenth century literature is offered by Gillian Beer's *Darwin's Plots* and George Levine's *Darwin and the Novelists*, two books which have by now, and rightly so, become classics in Victorian studies. For an example of the interaction between evolutionary psychology and literary fiction see Erchinger, "Nascent Consciousnesses, Unaccountable Conjunctions: Emergent Agency in Herbert Spencer's Principles of Psychology and George Eliot's Daniel Deronda."

<sup>13</sup>A more extensive treatment of some of the theoretical issues related to this claim can also, for example, be found in Iser's *Das Fiktive und das Imaginäre* and in Lobsien (31-49; 172-74).

<sup>14</sup>I owe this point to Maurice Charney.

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## Henry James's Double-Bind: Chasing Possibilities in "The Jolly Corner"\*

ELENA ANASTASAKI

*Look in my face; my name is Might-have-been;  
I'm also called No-more, Too-late, Farewell;  
Dante Gabriel Rossetti, "The House of Life"*

"If I were to live my life over again, I would be an American"<sup>1</sup>; Henry James's powerful statement is more than just a witty phrase. The subject of alternative lives fascinated him throughout his long career and he tackled it repeatedly in his work to various degrees. But it becomes the central theme in "The Jolly Corner" (1908), a strange tale about a man who decides to go after a rather unusual type of *doppelgänger*: the self he would have been if he had stayed in his American hometown. As we shall see, this narration of a 'road not taken' aspires to materialize the 'might-have-been.' Just like the text, which becomes a means to actually 'take' the road not taken, the story it is presenting and promoting is the life not lived.

The American expatriate Spencer Brydon comes back to his native land after an absence of thirty-three years, to take care of his inherited property which consists of two houses. The story takes its name from the family house which is the scene where the pursuit and the final encounter with his *alter ego* will take place. Significantly positioned at a corner—a place where roads meet—a strange relic of the past amidst modern constructions, it is a place where three generations are overlapping, a spot where time is a-continuous, and therefore parallel lives

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\*Reference: For a related article see Edward Lobb, "The Family Reunion: Eliot, James, and the Buried Life," *Connotations* 18.1-3 (2008/2009): 104-22.

For debates inspired by this article, please check the *Connotations* website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debanastasaki01813.htm>>.



can exist. The house, seen also as a representation of the mind, "becomes the space where time unfolds simultaneously in differing yet mutually inclusive timeframes" (Waters 181). This *limbo*, both external and internal, is necessary; for the narration of a 'road not taken' is not going to rely on hypothetical *what ifs*, half-truths, or dreams.

The family house plays a significant role in James's conception of identity as a part of one's self. When, in visiting New York, he became painfully aware of the loss of his own birthhouse, he described this effect as "of having been amputated of half my history."<sup>2</sup> William James, Henry's brother and eminent psychologist, viewed one's Self as "*the sum total of all that he CAN call his*,"<sup>3</sup> including his house. Henry echoes these views in *The Portrait of a Lady* where the difference of the European and the American way of perceiving one's identity is exposed through the dialogue of Madame Merle and Isabel Archer, with the fine European perception including the "shell," that is "the whole envelope of circumstances" and "everything that belongs to us," and the American viewing all possessions as "a limit, a barrier, and a perfectly arbitrary one" (*The Portrait of a Lady* 187)

Coming back to the place "in which he had first seen the light,"<sup>4</sup> Brydon's European personality appropriates the house and everything it represents as part of his own identity and wishes to take possession of what he has "given up" of himself by leaving. Back to 'square one' of his life, so to speak, represented by his birthhouse, and having witnessed the incredible changes that have taken place in his native land, he becomes obsessed with "what he personally might have been, how he might have led his life and 'turned out,' if he had not so, at the outset, given it up" (406).

The thought of course has occurred to him before, but what strikes him and triggers a whole new stream of thought is the realization of the "incalculability" (397) of his hypotheses, for even though "he *had* supposed himself, from decade to decade, to be allowing, and in the most liberal and intelligent manner, for brilliancy of change. He actually saw that he had allowed for nothing; he missed what he would have been sure of finding, he found what he would never have imag-

ined" (397). Such conditions, he muses, would necessarily have "made something out of me as well. Only I can't make out what"<sup>5</sup> (406). His search of the "fantastic, yet perfectly possible, development of [his] own nature" (407) takes in his mind the figure of an *alter ego* haunting the ancestral house.

Thus starts Brydon's extraordinary adventure of consciousness which will end with the final appalling confrontation of the figure to which he has given substance. Once he has set his mind to this tracking of his other self, his social, 'real' life seems like a shadow as he projects himself in thought into "the other, the real, the waiting life" (411). James's vision of reality is very close to the theories of his brother William, "founded upon the primacy of sensations and mental entities over material realities" (Adams 60). According to William "[t]hought and actuality are made of one and the same stuff, the stuff of experience in general."<sup>6</sup> Likewise, Henry James took consciousness as his subject matter viewed as an all encompassing faculty which "contained the world, and could handle and criticise it, could play with it and deride it" ("Life After Death" 123). Reality being a matter of "selection" from experience, and consciousness being the selective agent, Brydon's "hunt" becomes much more real to him than his ordinary life, while at the same time it is reshaping his consciousness. In his preface of *The American* for the New York edition of his collected works, James defines the real as "the things we cannot possibly not know, sooner or later, in one way or another" (*Critical Prefaces* 31),<sup>7</sup> and the figure Brydon encounters at the end of the tale, however appalling, is real at least in that sense, because it is what he has made of himself through his experience and the creative faculty of his consciousness.

His first notice of a "dormant" quality "in a compartment of his mind never yet penetrated" (399) which might have developed had he stayed in America is "a capacity for business and a sense for construction" (399). The *alter ego* is 'built' firstly on the basis of a series of differences of national identity. However, what is more important to note is this "sense for construction" since it is with this faculty, trans-

posed in the vicinity of consciousness, that Brydon is indeed constructing his *alter ego*. What Brydon *has* then become, is the figurative version—what Lee Clark Mitchell calls “the scare quotes of a life”<sup>8</sup>—of the self he would have become in plain, uncomplicated America, a feature of his native land that James held in contempt.<sup>9</sup> Deborah Esch has beautifully shown “the character’s literalizing compulsion” throughout his narrative in his attempt for the “meaning to become one—and only one” (Esch 597). Indeed, that is the only way to make the might-have-been ‘real,’ since the slightest ambiguity gives rise to doubts and banishes the construct of Brydon’s *alter ego* to the realm of the imagination. The character’s obsession for a single meaning, as we shall see, comes in contrast with the narrative’s openness to alternative possibilities, giving it the balance necessary for the story’s coherence to hold.

Brydon’s *alter ego* has—as is to be expected—been given many interpretations varying in accordance to the angle the story has been viewed. As Shalyn Claggett has pointed out, “however many ‘Brydons’ there are in the story, criticism has made them legion” (Claggett 199n4). The interpretation that had prevailed for a long time was the one that saw the apparition as the “monstrous American” that Brydon would have become if his long stay in Europe had not saved him. This view has been supported by a number of James’s critics such as Peter Brooks, F. O. Matthiessen, Edmund Wilson, Leon Edel, F. W. Dupee, and Marius Bewley, with this last critic qualifying the story as “anti-American with a vengeance.”<sup>10</sup> With Floyd Stovall the national identity gives way to a more personal introspection as he sees the story as being about the hero confronting himself “as he actually is,” finally seeing himself “as he has lived during his European years,” and he contends that “[t]here is nothing in this situation to justify the conclusion that Brydon either rejected America or was reconciled to a formerly rejected America” (Stovall 77, 80, and 83). The story has since been discussed under a variety of prisms focusing on self-knowledge and Brydon’s double has been interpreted as “the male collective shadow of American capitalism, Brydon’s economic self, an embodi-

ment of analogy, Brydon's worst self, and Brydon as a closeted homosexual"<sup>11</sup>; it has also been seen as "much more identifiable, much more real than Brydon."<sup>12</sup> A particularly interesting approach is Deborah Esch's aforementioned view that Brydon creates the apparition through *prosopopoeia*, which "designates the figure that makes present to the senses something abstract" and gives a face to it (594). Along a similar line Lee Clark Mitchell locates the

true crisis of the story [in] Brydon's failure to recognize his own figurative status, even as his self-conscious generating of figurative from literal has spurred on the ghost he cannot face. (230)

Capitalism comes again under a new light in Nicola Nixon's interpretation based on the idea that "money behaves culturally the way metaphor behaves linguistically" (Nixon 813-14); Nixon sees the alter ego as

connotatively a casualty of capitalism, his engagement with ferocious money-making literally inscribed on his face the way that both William James and Norris's Presley longed for it to be on the faces of Rockefeller and Shelgrim. (819)

Shalyn Claggett's original approach posits the Narcissus myth as a key to interpreting the story with the myth functioning "as an allegory of the conditions of self-knowledge," noting that the story might have implications for fictionality itself (197).<sup>13</sup> Finally, Linda Zwinger has read the story through Kristeva's notion of abjection experienced when an Other has "settled in place and stead of what will be 'me,'"<sup>14</sup> stating that

Brydon can deny that "that face" is his face, can refuse the figure to which he has given face (his *prosopopoeia* materializes this presence), but he cannot himself face the possibility that this figure in fact conjures *him*; the face that is *not me* is what makes my acknowledged face mine. (9)

However, if we see Brydon's *alter ego* as a construct of his consciousness, the interest shifts from the apparition's interpretation to

the process of that construction and to the puzzlement of the unexpected outcome that seems to be so radically alien as to appall him.

For William James, personality is based on selection:

The mind, in short, works on the data it receives very much as a sculptor works on his block of stone [...] by slowly cumulative strokes of choice, [...] by simply rejecting certain portions of the given stuff.<sup>15</sup>

By considering all the possibilities without being able to set his mind on one, Brydon refuses to select. Speculation does indeed allow for multiple realities and Brydon's case strongly resembles Schrödinger's cat, the thought experiment about the cat in a box considered both dead and alive according to quantum law, in a superposition of states, until we, the observer, look inside, thus affecting the outcome and cutting the ties that bind alternative realities together.<sup>16</sup>

For his consciousness, the path once thought of is by the same means also taken, since its life is pure thought fed by experience and, according to James, "[t]he power to guess the unseen [...], to trace the implication of things, to judge the whole piece by the pattern, [...] may almost be said to constitute experience."<sup>17</sup> This "monstrous" self is then the product of a consciousness that refuses to be fixed, to be pinned down, by refuting its very principle and basic function, that of selection. However, this overwhelming inclusion can lead to annihilation, and that is why Brydon flees before the prospect of the encounter and loses consciousness at the sight of his *alter ego*. The apparition, "unknown, inconceivable, awful, disconnected from any possibility" (427), appalls him in the measure it baffles him; it reduces the range of his mental faculties and uncovers the limitations of his mind to follow the untaken path. Admitting that "[s]uch an identity fitted his at *no point*" (427), he is accepting that at no point had he anticipated that outcome and confirms that the divergence has become so great as to annihilate his personality. Having trodden the untaken path(s) and not been able to decide upon the outcome—"What would it have made of me? What would it have made of me? I keep for ever wondering, all idiotically; as if I could possibly know!" (406)—he hoped

that the apparition would give him a fixed point from which he could go even further; instead the journey ends abruptly with the realization of his having reached a dead end as he gazes in the face of his *alter ego* at "his own void [...] in front of the total absence of centre, of reference, of values" (Montandon 38),<sup>18</sup> feeling the "aggression as of infinite numbers of modes of being" ("Life After Death" 124). James refers with the same violence of vocabulary to the "assault of the boundlessly multiplied personal relation (my own), which carries me beyond even the 'profoundest' observation of this world whatever, and any mortal adventure, and refers me to realizations I am condemned as yet but to dream of" ("Life After Death" 124). The construct of this monstrous self thus corresponds to the "awful architectural hare" his genius would have discovered, according to Alice, if he had stayed.

In his construction of his *alter ego*, Brydon is confronted with the same problems that are faced by the author in his construction of the story. Consciousness, which was always James's subject, was in itself an inexhaustible source in need of constant checking. The mapping of a consciousness which aspired to expand itself in its endless possibilities of being could be overwhelming. James, realizing the vastness of the subject after having abandoned *The Sense of the Past*, a novel dealing with a similar idea, when it proved "in execution so damnable difficult and so complex,"<sup>19</sup> chose the form of the short story to keep it manageable. Brydon's house was to be not only the field of his character's consciousness, but also James's "house of fiction,"<sup>20</sup> meant to contain the infinite and the formless in a limited and well-shaped form. The imagery of the house for the description of the structure of fiction is recurrent in James. Apart from the well known quote on the "house of fiction" in his preface to *The Portrait of a Lady*, James uses it also in his talk, "The Lesson of Balzac," to describe the rich and infinite intricacies of the French author's work that he so much admired: "Balzac's luxury, as I call it, was in the extraordinary number and length of his radiating and ramifying corridors—the labyrinth in which he finally lost himself" (*The Question of Our Speech* 85). In a



preface he wrote the same year "The Jolly Corner" was published, James is also linking the subject of that tale with the writer's adventure as he speaks about

the obscure law under which certain of a novelist's characters, more or less honourably buried, revive for him by a force or a whim of their own and 'walk' round his house of art like haunting ghosts, feeling for the old doors they knew, fumbling at stiff latches and pressing their pale faces, in the outer dark, to lighted windows. (*Critical Prefaces* 73)

The imagery of the hunt which is largely employed in "The Jolly Corner"<sup>21</sup> also allows us to read Brydon's adventure as an analogy to James's working process. Once James had "captured" his theme he had to confront "the law [of] consciousness [which] gives us immensities and imaginabilities wherever we direct it" ("Life After Death" 123). In his preface to *The Ambassadors*, he asserts "the felicity, or at least the equilibrium, of the artist's state dwells less, surely, in the further delightful complications he can smuggle in than in those he succeeds in keeping out" (*Critical Prefaces* 312). The job is then to "ki[ck] out of the path" the "wayside traps" (*Critical Prefaces* 320) that are lurking. For James it is a double edged knife:

The advantage, the luxury, as well as the torment and responsibility of the novelist, is that there is no limit to what he may attempt as an executant—no limit to his possible experiments, efforts, discoveries, successes. (*The Art of Fiction*)

It is art that serves to give order, coherence and meaning to the muddle of life. For James, the contribution of art to life is thus a matter of interpretation and of evaluation.<sup>22</sup>

According to Umberto Eco, the *fabula* is structured as a process of choosing among alternative courses or possibilities of actualization,<sup>23</sup> and James asserts that "[a]rt is essentially selection, but it is a selection whose main care is to be typical, to be inclusive" (*The Art of Fiction*). Millicent Bell has shown how Henry James "deliberately promotes impressionism in the *reader*, encourages the *reader's* passive acceptance of the immediate, the temporary, and the suspension of the *reader's*

drive toward a conclusion" with plots which "as they proceed [...] tend to preserve the sense of alternative possibilities" (Bell 8 and 22). Of course, any fictional world, being analogous to the actual one, "contains 'an actual world' and a set of possibilities, alternatives, predictions and forecasts non-actualized in the fictional world" (Ronen 29). The challenge for James, however, in this story was how to tackle such an elusive and virtually infinite subject of actualizing the non-actualized at the expense of the fictional 'actual' world without ignoring the artist's first duty of being "as complete as possible" (*The Art of Fiction*); at the same time excluding all the "waste" and have nothing "wasted"—James insists on the term repeatedly. During his childhood, his father instilled in him the notion that nothing in experience need be wasted.<sup>24</sup> He acknowledges to life the production of "nothing but splendid waste" (*Critical Prefaces* 120) remedied by "the sublime economy of art" (*Critical Prefaces* 120), and his one advice to a young writer is: "'Try to be one of the people on whom nothing is lost!'" (*The Art of Fiction*).

Indeed, any kind of limits, of foreshortening, is either undermining the theme or is subverted by it, dangerously inclining towards looseness, and "[l]ooseness of any description, whether of conception or of execution, [James] hated contemptuously."<sup>25</sup> However, in this instance, the subject itself was so elusive that the only thing left to cling to was to take as his tale's solid material the consistency with which Brydon excludes nothing. Brydon is exactly that sort of person on whom nothing is lost and the only limitation James allows himself in telling his story is his character's 'all inclusive' consciousness.<sup>26</sup> It is this consciousness that Brydon is willingly expanding through patient cultivation; the idea of his American *alter ego*, we are told, he "had felt it as above all open to cultivation" (414). This notion comes again and again in James's writings when he talks about consciousness; it is, according to James, the characteristic of the true artist and his inexhaustible source. In a letter to Henry Adams he notes:

I still find my consciousness interesting—under *cultivation* of the interest [...] *Why* mine yields an interest I don't know that I can tell you ... It's, I suppose,

because I am that queer monster, the artist, an obstinate finality, an inexhaustible sensibility.<sup>27</sup>

Brydon has that artistic quality of a hyperactive consciousness and the interest to cultivate it; viewed in this light, the monstrous *alter ego* he conjures and James's "queer monster" that is the artist are one and the same, similarly monstrous due to an unusual overgrowth. For both character and author,

It is not really a question of belief [...] but of desire so confirmed, so thoroughly established and nourished, as to leave belief as a comparatively irrelevant affair.<sup>28</sup>

Consciousness is then an ever-growing entity which "the more one turn[s] it, as an easy reflector, here and there and everywhere over the immensity of things, the more it appear[s] to take" (123).

There are also other hints linking Brydon's "hunt" to the writer's creative process. There is of course the constant play between literal and figurative meaning that runs throughout the story, posing, as Deborah Esch notes, the "ordeal of consciousness" as a "function of the process of figuration that it thematizes—of the ordeal, that is, of reading and writing" (588). There is also that strange nightmare, the "most appalling yet the most admirable nightmare of my life,"<sup>29</sup> as James called it, where, in encountering a frightening apparition of a man in the Galerie d'Appolon in the Louvre,<sup>30</sup> he manages to "turn the tables on him" and make him flee. The same expression of "turning the tables on a 'ghost'" is also used in both the tale<sup>31</sup> and James's account of it in his *Notebooks*.<sup>32</sup> This sudden aggressive movement of turning that Brydon executes "as if he might so catch in his face at least the stirred air of some other quick revolution" (415), is an attempt similarly futile as to try to be quicker than one's shadow, and we also find it, in a figurative way, in William James when he is trying to express the effort of the mind to catch a glimpse of its spiritual element: "*Whenever my introspective glance succeeds in turning round quickly enough to catch one of these manifestations of spontaneity in the act, all it can ever feel is some bodily process, for the most part taking place*

*within the head*" (300). William goes on to assert that "it may be truly said that [...] *the 'Self of selves,' when carefully examined, is found to consist mainly of the collection of these peculiar motions in the head or between the head and throat*" (301); so this turning about face turns out to be all about trying to get a glimpse of the "Self of selves."

Although at first this "turning the tables" in the tale seems to be, as James notes, a sign of Brydon's "winning a sort of a victory" over the ghost who is "more overwhelmingly affected by him than he by *it*,"<sup>33</sup> it actually strengthens the ghost's presence by refocusing the point of view of the story, albeit momentarily, from Brydon's consciousness to the ghost's, endowing the ghostly apparition with a consciousness possessing the attributes of a logical being. If the ghost has a consciousness, the ghost has a narrative; and this turning of the tables mirrors the promotion of the non-actualized to the central place of the tale.

James admits to having been all his life "trying to take the measure of my consciousness" ("Life after Death" 122) and as a consequence have "live[d] in it more" ("Life after Death" 123). As he cultivates it, he feels it expand, and this "accumulation of the very treasure [...] of consciousness" is measured in the "enormous multiplication of our possible relations with [the universe]" ("Life after Death" 123). These relations cannot, of course, all actualize, but through art they can offer that kind of expansion to the consciousness. Even as a reader James emphasized that he chose works "most different from my own [...] precisely *for* the extension of life, which is the novel's best gift."<sup>34</sup> It is this expansion of consciousness, these infinite possible relations, that Brydon seeks in his hunt for his might-have-been self in an attempt to complete his image of himself.

In William James's words, "*a man has as many social selves as there are individuals who recognize him and carry an image of him in their mind*" (294). At the end of "The Jolly Corner" it is made clear that this alter ego that Brydon confronts is, in many respects, Alice's image of who he might have been:

my mind, my imagination, has worked so over what you might, what you mightn't have been—to show you, you see, how I've thought of you. In the midst of that you came to me—that my wonder might be answered. (432)

The image of the apparition is unrecognizable not only because it is so much different from himself as he is, but also because it entails this vision of Alice.<sup>35</sup> The antagonistic and aggressive relation that Brydon develops with his *alter ego* is then also an attempt to assert his ground: he is to assimilate it as a possibility, not to merge with it; he clearly intends to safeguard his identity as he perceives it.

The apparition is, above all, "too hideous as *his*" (427).

The face, *that* face, Spencer Brydon's?—he searched it still, but looking away from it in dismay and denial, falling straight from his height of sublimity. It was unknown, inconceivable, awful, disconnected from any possibility—! He had been 'sold,' he inwardly moaned, stalking such a game as this [.]  
(427)

This reaction could be viewed as an exaggerated version of Henry James's aversion to images of himself, especially of photographs. What disturbed James, who declared himself "terribly unphotographable,"<sup>36</sup> was the "apparent evacuation of consciousness"<sup>37</sup> in them. In the same way, Brydon, seeing himself—or a part of himself—from the 'outside,' as a stranger, reduced to a mere image, rebels against this image of the self and refuses to be pinned down and fixed to that alternative. The materialization of the *alter ego* so longingly pursued proves itself treacherous, just like the "mechanical document"<sup>38</sup> that is photography, and Brydon feels 'sold.' For, as long as there was no fixed image, Brydon's *alter ego* could enjoy the richness of all the possibilities laid upon it by Brydon's consciousness. This enriched and ever evolving consciousness is what the tale strives to give shape to, not without some frustration caused by the near impossibility of the attempt. Indeed this same sense of betrayal was felt by the author when he abandoned *The Sense of the Past*, finding himself engaged in "a subject that one can't possibly treat, or hope, or begin, to treat, in the space, and that can only betray one, as regards that, after one is expensively launched" (*Complete Notebooks* 189).

As a writer, James was gratefully aware of “an immense increase—a kind of revelation—of freedom” (*The Art of Fiction*) due to art’s ability to be all comprehensive. Once he had grasped a single character, James’s difficulty was to decide the former’s fate, “*which*, among the possibilities being precisely the question” (*Critical Prefaces* 47). In one of his prefaces he mentions

the author’s incorrigible taste for gradations and superpositions of effect; [...] that contributes to a view of *all* the dimensions. Addicted to seeing ‘through’—one thing through another, accordingly, and still other things through *that*—he takes, too greedily perhaps, on any errand, as many things as possible by the way. (153-54)

This is precisely how Brydon goes about in pursuit of his *alter ego* in a tale where the challenge for James lies in enclosing into a confined space and shape this process of infinite branching of the paths not taken which constantly tempt author and character alike. The choice of a single path not taken would indeed not be a solution since, in a work of fiction, it would be just as arbitrary as the one taken. James was of course aware of the inherent danger of this attempt. In his talk on Balzac he mentions how the relations in his work are at moments “multiplied almost to madness” (“The Lesson of Balzac” 85); in his prefaces he talks of “the method at the heart of madness” wondering “where do we place the beginnings of the wrong or the right deviation?” (*Critical Prefaces* 120) and confessing his “mortal horror of two stories, two pictures, in one” which would cheat his subject of “its indispensable centre” (*Critical Prefaces* 83-84).

The story’s center is indisputably the character’s consciousness, and the third-person narrator giving the account of Brydon’s “adventure” as he experiences it. Most of the time, quite discretely, the author merges his own voice with the consciousness of his central character (Vaid 238). However, quite aptly, the authorial “I” distances itself in the scene where Brydon experiences a “duplication of consciousness” (416), rejoicing proudly in the fear his *alter ego* can provoke in him:

there came to him, as I say—but determined by an influence beyond my notation!—the acuteness of this certainty; [...] a thrill that represented sudden



dismay, no doubt, but also represented, and with the selfsame throb, the strangest, the most joyous, possibly the next minute almost the proudest, duplication of consciousness. (415-16)

In his fear Brydon is left alone to feel the fluid limits of his identity respond to those of his other self. The ground is so novel, and at the same time so slippery, that the narrator admits defeat in not giving a satisfactory account of this experience; and yet, somehow, it is this avowal of impossibility that makes it possible for the reader to grasp such an incongruity.

As Brydon's strategy within the house of the Jolly corner is "to keep vistas clear" (419), both literally and figuratively, in order to enable the construction of his might-have-been self, so James's narrative structure puts into play what Umberto Eco describes as "the totality of knowledge a narrative text activates" (Ronen 173). The empty house, "the great gaunt shell" where "absolute vacancy reign[s]" (402), is the "house of fiction" where nothing is decided yet, since the story is lingering on the threshold, not taking any paths, or rather taking them all simultaneously by keeping them on par with each other. The narrative is thus not presenting Brydon's life in Europe as a more privileged state of being than the one he would have had by dismissing it in a few vague phrases<sup>39</sup> and concentrating on the non-actualized possibilities of his character. These possibilities preoccupy him to such an extent that they materialize first in narrative and then in the figure of the *alter ego*, which the narrator tellingly calls "the Form."

The closed door that Brydon is confronted with on his last visit to the house signifies the end of these opening vistas in the house of fiction; the alternative possibilities have been condensed into one alternative Form that will confront Brydon's actuality with "a rage of personality before which his own collapsed" (427-28), so that his triumph is also his fall, just as the triumph of the story—materializing the might-have-been—is at the same time its narrative collapse. Indeed this "open vistas" policy could not be sustained for long before the work would become shapeless and meaningless. The choice of a different ending was a well known practice and often a demand of

either publisher or public—James himself had often been asked for a “happy ending” during his painful trials to establish himself as a playwright. However, alternative paths taken within the narrative instead of the one the frame supported was a difficult challenge to meet while maintaining the tight structure of a short story. The main body of the narrative necessarily concerns a time of suspension of the numerous possibilities that linger for a while in this a-chronic space and are therefore, for the sake of structure, eventually dramatized in a single Form. Indeed, once we look into the box, coming back to Schrödinger’s thought experiment, the cat is no longer *both* dead and alive. James was well aware of this double-bind: in order to achieve his goal he had to undermine the very thing he was trying to achieve. He hints at this in his preface to the volume of the New York edition containing “The Jolly Corner,” mentioning that the elusive presence which ‘stalked’ through the New York house by “the poor gentleman” is a matter carrying in itself a critical challenge that “may take a hundred forms—and a hundred felt or possibly proved infirmities is too great a number” (*Critical Prefaces* 257).

Brydon, at the beginning of the tale, expresses his obsession with his self as he might have been with a powerful image of “opening a door [...] into a room shuttered and void” and finding a presence.<sup>40</sup> The door has been part of the germ of the story since the very beginning. In 1879, James wrote “Imagine a door—either walled-up, or that has been long locked—at which there is an occasional knocking,”<sup>41</sup> and again twenty years later:

Note the idea of the knock at the door [...] (... He opens; there *is* some one—natural and ordinary. It is my *entrée en matière*). The denouement is all. What *does* come—at last? What *is* there? This is to be ciphered out.<sup>42</sup>

The confrontation with the apparition, or at least its interpretation, was in the end to become in itself the “denouement” of the story. For Brydon, looking for completeness and unity, wants to see his alternative in a single materialized form, while James is determined to make him see—what he himself has gained out of this perilous adventure—

namely that there is no unity in the might-have-been; it cannot be fixed, not even in fiction. Its beauty and its most exasperating feature is its "incalculability," its incommunicability. The best he can do is to make him stare at a monstrous formless synthesis which is not, however, the sum of its parts, since they cannot coexist in any single form. Once you look, the cat is no longer both dead and alive, the magic of the tale is lost, but if you don't look there is no tale.

Regaining consciousness after the encounter, Brydon has returned "from further away than any man but himself had ever travelled" (428). He has momentarily ventured outside the "tin mould" of life where, in Strether's words in *The Ambassadors*, "a helpless jelly, one's consciousness is poured" (218). What James's "poor gentleman [has] attempted and suffered in the New York house" (*Critical Prefaces* 258) is what James has suffered and attempted—an attempt doomed to failure but all the more alluring for it—in his house of fiction; and he has, like his character, come back from further away than any man has travelled. But neither of them has come back empty handed. Brydon's knowledge is likened to a "great inheritance" which he can "lie and watch [...] grow" (429), and James himself has managed to contain in a concise and structured form, if not all the possible roads not taken, at least his idea of all the roads not taken, and to show us a singular truth:

there are many roads leading to Self-representation and many vehicles available for transportation, each one capable of getting us there; just don't expect them all to take us to the same place. (Battersby 43)

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Hamlin Garland recounts in *Roadside Meetings* James's words: "I would steep myself in America, I would know no other land. I would study its beautiful side. The mixture of Europe and America which you see in me has proved disastrous"

(461); allegedly made when he was visiting him at Rye in 1906 or 1907, quoted by Donadio 66.

<sup>2</sup>Henry James, *The American Scene*, quoted by Waters 183.

<sup>3</sup>"In its widest possible sense, however, a man's Self is the sum total of all that he CAN call his, not only his body and his psychic powers, but his clothes and his house, his wife and children, his ancestors and friends, his reputation and works, his lands and horses, and yacht and bank account. All these things give him the same emotions. [...] There are few men who would not feel personally annihilated if a life-long construction of their hands or brain—say an entomological collection or an extensive work in manuscript—were suddenly swept away" (William James 291 and 293).

<sup>4</sup>Henry James, "The Jolly Corner," *Ghostly Tales of Henry James*, ed. and intr. Leon Edel (New York: The University Library, Grosset and Dunlap, 1963) 398. All subsequent quotes from this work will be referring to this edition.

<sup>5</sup>"What would it have made of me? What would it have made of me? I keep for ever wondering, all idiotically; as if I could possibly know!" (406).

<sup>6</sup>William James, quoted by Adams (66).

<sup>7</sup>Henry James published almost the total of his work in this American edition, known as the New York edition, in 24 volumes with prefaces, between 1907 and 1909.

<sup>8</sup>"While the ghost hints at a harshly literal life, Brydon had framed an essentially figurative one—in short, the scare quotes of a life, as its fleeting unstable secondary meaning" (Mitchell 229).

<sup>9</sup>"I hate American simplicity. I glory in the piling up of complications of every sort. If I could pronounce the name of James in any different or more elaborate way I should be in favor of doing it." Henry James in his *Letters*; quoted by Posnock 54.

<sup>10</sup>This synthesis of older interpretations is provided by Stovall 75.

<sup>11</sup>This synopsis of the various interpretations of the story, roughly from the 1970s and the 1990s, given by Shalyn Claggett, refers to the works of Ernest Tuveson, Russell Reising, William Flesh, Daniel Marc Fogel and Eric Savoy respectively; cf. Claggett 190.

<sup>12</sup>Byers 95. This idea is also sanctioned by Lee Clark Mitchell, who stresses the point that "in the play back and forth between literal and figurative meanings, it becomes clear that priority attaches to neither one," and perceives "the lurking sense that the ghost has been hunted by Brydon and all he now consummately represents" (229).

<sup>13</sup>Claggett also notes that "[t]he survival of the text's continuing signification is contingent on not believing it has one determinate meaning. Just as there is no one Brydon, there can be no single interpretation for the story" (198).

<sup>14</sup>Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Léon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia UP, 1982), quoted by Zwinger 9.

<sup>15</sup>William James, quoted by Kress 269-70.

<sup>16</sup>Erwin Schrödinger's thought experiment (1935) "sought to illustrate, curiously, not something only about physics but something about consciousness. The idea of the experiment was that the imaginary cat in an imaginary sealed box is subject to the completely unpredictable emission of a particle—which, if emitted, would release gas which killed the cat. But since the box is sealed, and the particle's emission is completely unpredictable, not only do we not know whether the cat is alive or dead but the 'actual' imagined cat is 'in reality' neither alive nor dead, until the box is opened and the cat examined" (Steinberg 97). Rachel Salmon records the same sort of multiple truths in *The Picture in the Carpet*: "Once it is clear that a choice cannot be made between the hypotheses, they may be experienced, no longer in sequence, but simultaneously. Such an experience transcends the temporal rules of both language and visual perception and is a potentiality rather than a property of the text. Only in the reader can textual ambiguity be transformed into paradox—the simultaneity of contradictory poles—an experience of the timeless in time" (Salmon 800).

<sup>17</sup>James concludes that "[i]f experience consists of impressions, it may be said that impressions are experience"; Henry James, *The Art of Fiction*, <<http://www.wsu.edu/~campbell/d/amlit/artfiction.html>> (14 Apr. 2010); html-version of the edition published in *Longman's Magazine* 4 (Sept. 1884), and reprinted in *Partial Portraits* (Macmillan, 1888); paragraphing and capitalization follow the Library of America edition.

<sup>18</sup>The translation is mine; the entire passage goes thus: "Le double n'est donc pas immédiatement la simple projection ou la personnification d'une pulsion inconsciente et coupable. Il est d'abord vertige du moi devant son propre vide, il est le fantôme du Moi, qui penché sur son propre néant est pris de vertige devant l'absence totale de centre, de référence, de valeurs."

<sup>19</sup>Henry James, notebook entry of August 9, 1900 (*The Complete Notebooks of Henry James* 189).

<sup>20</sup>"The house of fiction has in short not one window, but a million—a number of possible windows not to be reckoned, rather; every one of which has been pierced, or is still pierceable, in its vast front, by the need of the individual vision and by the pressure of the individual will. These apertures, of dissimilar shape and size, hang so, all together, over the human scene that we might have expected of them a greater sameness of report than we find. They are but windows at the best, mere holes in a dead wall, disconnected, perched aloft; they are not hinged doors opening straight upon life. But they have this mark of their own that at each of them stands a figure with a pair of eyes, or at least with a field-glass, which forms, again and again, for observation, a unique instrument, insuring to the person making use of it an impression distinct from every other. He and his neighbours are watching the same show, but one seeing more where the other sees less, one seeing black where the other sees white, one seeing big where the other sees small, one seeing coarse where the other sees fine. And so on, and so on; there is fortunately no saying on what, for the particular pair of eyes, the



window may *not* open; ‘fortunately’ by reason, precisely, of this incalculability of range. The spreading field, the human scene, is the ‘choice of subject’; the pierced aperture, either broad or balconied or slit-like and low-browed, is the ‘literary form’; but they are, singly or together, as nothing without the posted presence of the watcher—without, in other words, the consciousness of the artist. Tell me what the artist is, and I will tell you of what he has *been* conscious” (*Critical Prefaces* 46).

<sup>21</sup>James talks of “narrating my ‘hunt’ for Lambert Strether, of describing the capture of the shadow projected by my friend’s anecdote” (*Critical Prefaces* 313), and Brydon “had tasted of no pleasure so fine as his actual tension, had been introduced to no sport that demanded at once the patience and the nerve of this stalking of a creature more subtle, yet at bay perhaps more formidable, than any beast of the forest. The terms, the comparisons, the very practices of chase positively came again into play” (“The Jolly Corner” 412).

<sup>22</sup>In James’s own words, “Life being all inclusion and confusion, and art being all discrimination and selection, the latter, in search of the hard latent *value* with which alone it is concerned, sniffs round the mass as instinctively and unerringly as a dog suspicious of some buried bone” (*Critical Prefaces* 120).

<sup>23</sup>Cf. Ronen 168.

<sup>24</sup>According to Daniel J. Schneider, “James seizes on the idea with such avidity, he so richly floods his work with the vocabulary of hoarding and collecting and ‘saving,’ that some of his deepest fears and desires would seem to be brought into play by the idea” (449).

<sup>25</sup>R. P. Blackmur in his introduction to *Critical Prefaces by Henry James* xvi.

<sup>26</sup>Critical theorists have identified several narrative strategies of placing the virtual of the might have been within the framework of a literary work. Among them, Gerald Prince talks about the *disnarrated* being “all the events that *do not* happen though they could have and are nonetheless referred to (in a negative or hypothetical mode) by the narrative text,” and David Herman describes “hypothetical focalization” which assigns “the construction of virtuals—possible or counterfactual alternatives to fictional facts—to a hypothetical, fictionally nonexistent observer (witness)” (Doležel 151). However, James is not really using either of these strategies. Those things that could have happened but didn’t are taken as active elements of the narrative which lead to the materialization of Brydon’s *alter ego* and the “hypothetical focalization” coincides with the main character’s point of view.

<sup>27</sup>Quoted by Tintner 258-59.

<sup>28</sup>It is an “action of the mind” which James describes as “encourag[ing] my consciousness to acquire that interest, to live in that elasticity and that affluence, which affect me as symptomatic and auspicious” (“Life After Death” 127).

<sup>29</sup>Henry James, *A Small Boy*, quoted by Tintner 255.

<sup>30</sup>“[T]he sudden pursuit, through an open door, along a huge high saloon, of a just dimly-described figure that retreated I terror before my rush and dash ... out



of the room I had a moment before been desperately, and all more abjectly, defending by the push of my shoulder against hard pressure on the lock and bar from the other side. The lucidity, not to say the sublimity, of the crisis had consisted of the great thought that I, in my appalled state, was probably still more appalling than the awful agent, creature, or presence, whatever he was. ... The triumph of my impulse, perceived in a flash as I acted on it by myself at a bound, forcing the door outward, was the grand thing, but the great point of the whole was the wonder of my final recognition. Routed, dismayed, the tables turned on him by my so surpassing him for straight aggression and dire intention, my visitant was already but a diminished spot in the long perspective, the tremendous, glorious hall, as I say, over the fat-gleaming floor of which ... he sped for *his* life"; Henry James, *A Small Boy and Others*, quoted by Esch 590-91. Even though, according to Leon Edel, the dream is placed about two years after the publication of the tale, Adeline R. Tintner interprets the dream to mean that "in the Galerie d'Appolon James recognized his vocation and routed the alter ego that would stand in the way of his artistic commitment" (Tintner 255-56).

<sup>31</sup>"People enough, first and last, had been in terror of apparitions, but who had ever before so turned the tables and become himself, in the apparitional world, an incalculable terror?" (413).

<sup>32</sup>"[...] I put my finger on what originally struck me as the very centre of my subject, and the element in it that I spoke hereabove of my having a bit discounted in the stuff of the *Jolly Corner*. The most intimate idea of *that* is that my hero's adventure there takes the form so to speak of his turning the tables, as I think I called it, on a 'ghost' or whatever, a visiting or haunting apparition otherwise qualified to appal *him*; and thereby winning a sort of victory by the appearance, and the evidence, that this personage or presence was more overwhelmingly affected by him than he by it" (*The Complete Notebooks of Henry James* 507).

<sup>33</sup>For the entire quote see note 32.

<sup>34</sup>Henry James, quoted by McCarthy 275.

<sup>35</sup>In a notebook entry in 1895 James had mentioned the idea of a character "*recovering* a little of [...] the Dead Self, in his intercourse with [...] some woman [...] in whom it still lives a little," insisting that "*She is his Dead Self: he is alive in her and dead in himself*"; *The Complete Notebooks of Henry James*, entry of February 5, 1895, (112-13). This concept could also be linked to the fact that James was quite shocked to find out, after his sister's Alice death, her view of him as it transpired in her diaries.

<sup>36</sup>Henry James, quoted by Saltz 258.

<sup>37</sup>Henry James, quoted by Saltz 258.

<sup>38</sup>Henry James, quoted by Saltz 256.

<sup>39</sup>We learn only that "He could live in 'Europe,' as he had been in the habit of living, on the product of these flourishing New York leases" (398), and that he had "the experience of a man and the freedom of a wanderer, overlaid by pleasure, by infidelity [...] just by 'Europe' in short" (400); and Brydon himself alludes

to his previous life with the same vagueness refusing it its concreteness: "I've followed strange paths and worshipped strange gods; it must have come to you again and again—in fact you've admitted to me as much—that I was leading, at any time these thirty years, a selfish frivolous scandalous life" (408).

<sup>40</sup>"The quaint analogy quite hauntingly remained with him, when he didn't indeed rather improve it by a still intenser form: that of his opening a door behind which he would have made sure of finding nothing, a door into a room shuttered and void, and yet so coming, with a great suppressed start, on some quite erect confronting presence, something planted in the middle of the place and facing him through the dusk" (401).

<sup>41</sup>January 22, 1879, *The Complete Notebooks of Henry James* 10.

<sup>42</sup>May 16, 1899, *The Complete Notebooks of Henry James* 183.

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*The Family Reunion:*  
Eliot, James, and the Buried Life \*

EDWARD LOBB

T. S. Eliot's play *The Family Reunion* (1939) has not become part of the standard repertoire and is not likely to do so. Eliot himself came to consider it a failure, but it remains stubbornly alive; some of the scenes and individual speeches have indisputable power, and every decade or so there is a major production of the play in England or the United States.<sup>1</sup> For Eliot specialists, of course, the play is crucial in various ways. Eliot was always, from his first monologues, a dramatic poet, and his experiments in form are always of interest; the language and versification of the play also echo earlier and anticipate his later work and provide a vital link between "Burnt Norton" (1935) and the later *Quartets* and plays. As David Moody says, "*The Family Reunion* is far and away the most interesting of Eliot's plays" (172); it is also his most successful extended analysis of the human resistance to reality and of the ability of some individuals to grow and change. More importantly, for my purposes, the play illustrates Eliot's preoccupation with "the road not taken." In returning to his childhood home, Harry Monchensey is forced to confront the reality of his childhood and the genuine self he has evaded for decades. In conveying Harry's situation, Eliot makes intriguing although tangential use of Henry James's story "The Jolly Corner" in ways that have not been fully analyzed before.

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\*Reference: For a related article see Elena Anastasaki, "Henry James's Double-Bind: Chasing Possibilities in 'The Jolly Corner,'" *Connotations* 18.1-3 (2008/2009): 82-103.

For debates inspired by this article, please check the *Connotations* website at <<http://www.connotations.de/deblobb01813.htm>>.

Even in his earliest poems, Eliot's interest in unrealized possibilities is apparent. Much of "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" is an uneasy justification of inaction haunted by the ghost of what might have been: "And would it have been worth it, after all ... ?" (*Complete Poems and Plays* 15, 16). In "Gerontion," the speaker admits

I was neither at the hot gates  
Nor fought in the warm rain  
Nor knee deep in the salt marsh, heaving a cutlass,  
Bitten by flies, fought. (CPP 37)

The inhabitants of *The Waste Land* have also retreated from action, choice, and risk, "the awful daring of a moment's surrender/ Which an age of prudence can never retract" (CPP 74), and as a result they live a half-life between "memory and desire" (CPP 61). In "Burnt Norton" and the succeeding *Quartets*, the concern with "the door we never opened" and "what might have been and what has been" is still strong (CPP 171).

The unhappiness with one's actual life and the sense of having failed to live in a meaningful way are aspects of what Matthew Arnold famously called "the buried life."<sup>2</sup> The speakers in Eliot's poetry tell us little about the context of their lives—the matrix of family and relationships that shapes all of us—and that little is mostly hints and suggestions. In attempting a fuller portrayal of character and consciousness, Eliot was drawn not to fiction but to verse drama, a form which had never entirely died out and which he thought capable of successful renewal on the commercial stage. His earlier dramatic experiments had enjoyed some success, but none had been written for commercial performance.<sup>3</sup>

Eliot's attempt to use the form of the West End play in *The Family Reunion* was both ambitious and subversive:

The curtain was to open on the most conventional of dramatic worlds, the English drawing room, but every device at the dramatist's disposal was to be used as the play progressed to shake the audience's confidence in the



validity of that world of surface reality as a total representation of existence.  
(C. Smith 116)

Beneath this surface reality, or through it, Eliot would show, without overt reference to Christianity, the universal desire for meaning, purgation, and renewal, using the Orestes myth and the primitive religious ritual that underlay it. He had, of course, used this same mixture of “unreal” surface reality, myth, and ritual with great success in *The Waste Land*, but here he was constrained by the conventional form he had chosen, and his deviations from that form, necessary to show its artificiality, created more dissonance than theatre-goers were able to accept. Early audiences in particular were baffled by the chorus, the chanting of runes, and the appearance (and silence) of the Eumenides; they were also frustrated by an excess of exposition and a dearth of action. The “deepest flaw” in the play, Eliot thought, “was a failure of adjustment between the Greek story and the modern situation,” and one symptom of this was our being “left in a divided frame of mind, not knowing whether to consider the play the tragedy of the mother or the salvation of the son.” A decade after the first production, the author’s own sympathies, against his intentions, came to be “all with the mother,” and he found Harry “an insufferable prig” (“Poetry and Drama” 84). Early reviewers considered *The Family Reunion* an interesting failure, and later critics have generally agreed with Eliot’s strictures and added others of their own.<sup>4</sup>

From his first entrance, Harry draws attention, in near-Expressionist style, to his being on another plane of consciousness:

You are all people  
To whom nothing has happened, at most a continual impact  
Of external events. You have gone through life in sleep,  
Never woken to the nightmare. I tell you, life would be unendurable  
If you were wide awake. You do not know  
The noxious smell untraceable in the drains,  
Inaccessible to the plumbers, that has its hour of the night; you do not know  
The unspoken voice of sorrow in the ancient bedroom  
At three o’clock in the morning. (CPP 293-94)



This claim of superior consciousness certainly sounds, as Eliot would say, priggish. The cause of Harry's awakening is his murder of his wife, but we doubt almost immediately that this really occurred, and Harry himself eventually admits that he may just have dreamed it (*CPP* 333). The guilt symbolized by the imagined murder persists, however, and the Eumenides appear again shortly after Harry acknowledges that the murder may not have happened. His guilt stems, then, from something other than personal action, and the dialogue suggests various possibilities. He learns from his aunt Agatha that his father contemplated murdering Amy, his mother, and this parallel is one of several suggestions that the Monchensey family is under a curse analogous to that of the House of Atreus, in which multiple murders actually do take place. The Monchensey curse appears to be the result of Amy's failure to love and of her attachment to the house rather than the people in it. Managerial and manipulative, Amy maintained the façade of the family:

What of the humiliation,  
Of the chilly pretences in the silent bedroom,  
Forcing sons upon an unwilling father?  
Dare you think what that does to one? Try to think of it.  
I *would* have sons, if I could not have a husband:  
Then I let him go. I abased myself.  
Did I show any weakness, any self-pity?  
I forced myself to the purposes of Wishwood. (*CPP* 340)

Growing up with an aggrieved and demanding mother, Harry and his brothers "all felt like failures, before we had begun" (*CPP* 318). The guilt-ridden child in a loveless household becomes the adult in a loveless marriage like his mother's; he is afflicted with a sense of personal inadequacy and "filthiness" (*CPP* 327) that lead, perhaps, to his self-indictment for murder. But just as the reality of Harry's "crime" evaporates as we begin to understand his upbringing, the neat psychological explanation begins to dissolve or to seem inadequate in itself—at best an explanation of the immediate mechanics of guilt rather than its origins. In the same speech in which he confesses to murder, Harry refers to "the slow stain" which "sinks deeper

through the skin/ Tainting the flesh and discolouring the bone" (*CPP* 294), and later he elaborates on the point in a crucial passage:

[...]. What you call the normal  
 Is merely the unreal and the unimportant.  
 I was like that in a way, so long as I could think  
 Even of my own life as an isolated ruin,  
 A casual bit of waste in an orderly universe.  
 But it begins to seem just part of some huge disaster,  
 Some monstrous mistake and aberration  
 Of all men, of the world, which I cannot put in order. (*CPP* 326)

This clearly refers to the Fall; Coghill connects it plausibly with a famous passage in *Apologia pro Vita Sua* where Newman describes the human race as "implicated in some terrible aboriginal calamity" (46). The legacy of this remains with each of us as original sin, a predisposition to evil. Harry's acceptance of this general guilt, of which the family curse of lovelessness is a local example, leads to his acceptance of the Eumenides, whom he sees first as avenging Furies and finally as the benevolent guides they are. But in order to understand the meaning of this, it is necessary, I believe, to digress briefly and consider the Henry James story alluded to in the play.

Early in the first scene of the play, Agatha, one of Harry's aunts, comments on his impending return:

The man who returns will have to meet  
 The boy who left. Round by the stables,  
 In the coach-house, in the orchard,  
 In the plantation, down the corridor  
 That led to the nursery, round the corner  
 Of the new wing, he will have to face him—  
 And it will not be a very *jolly* corner. (*CPP* 288)

As early as 1947, F. O. Matthiessen (175-76) noted the allusion to Henry James's story "The Jolly Corner."<sup>5</sup> The story is not about an encounter with a previous self, "the boy who left," but with the spectre of a self that never came into being—Spencer Brydon as he might have been under other circumstances.<sup>6</sup> The allusion therefore

seems puzzling, at least initially, and is usually either ignored by critics or dismissed as a “dry academic joke” characteristic of Agatha, who has taught for thirty years in a women’s college (Coghill 186). I wish to suggest instead that the allusion is one of the keys to the play.

“The Jolly Corner” (1908) is one of those stories in which James uses a ghost or ghosts to explore the dark side of the psyche. Spencer Brydon returns to New York at the age of fifty-six, after thirty-three years in Europe. He is appalled by the vulgarity and materialism he sees in the city, but intrigued by the vitality and prosperity of the place. As he deals with the demolition of an old house he owns, which is to be replaced by an apartment building, Brydon discovers in himself an unsuspected talent for business and wonders what his life would have been like had he remained in the United States. In another house, the one he grew up in, he becomes aware of a ghostly presence, that of his “*alter ego*” (707, 711) the self he might have become had he remained in New York and pursued a career in business. Tracking the spectre over several nights in the now-empty house, he finally confronts it one evening: it is “evil, odious, blatant, vulgar” (725), and it is also maimed, lacking two fingers on one hand. The figure at first recoils from Brydon, then advances “as for aggression” (725). Brydon falls unconscious and is found and revived the next morning by his friend Alice Staverton and the housekeeper. Alice, who has known about the spectre, seen him in dreams, and accepted him, comforts Brydon, and we infer that her acceptance allows him to come to terms with the dark side of his own psyche. Readers today are likely to see the story in the context of two other *alter ego* stories of the period, Stevenson’s *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1885) and Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890). James’s story deals not only with the shadow self in each of us, but also with James’s sense of the corrosive effects of American Gilded Age capitalism and with sexual issues; as with *Dorian Gray*, critics have explored the implications of a gay writer’s depiction of the hidden and denied self.<sup>7</sup> Since I am primarily interested here in Eliot’s use of James’s story, I shall focus on elements common to the two works.

The most obvious parallel between them is the two protagonists' return to their childhood home. Spencer Brydon is too intelligent to think of himself as without flaw, but he clearly considers the house of his childhood on "the jolly corner" a kind of Eden—a common enough idealization. In his youth "he had too promptly waked up to a sense of the ugly" (698) and fled to Europe; "it had been the theory of many superficially-judging persons, he knew, that he was wasting [his] life in a surrender to sensations" (711). This seems a clear reference both to Walter Pater's *Marius the Epicurean: His Sensations and Ideas* (1873) and to the famous last pages of *The Renaissance*, summarized in its last sentence: "For art comes to you, proposing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for those moments' sake" (223). Brydon has lived a life of high-minded hedonism, of Paterian aesthetic "ecstasy" (221), but he is still anxious that Alice, in particular, should think well of him:

"Do you believe then—too dreadfully!—that I *am* as good as I might ever have been?"

"Oh no! Far from it!" With which she got up from her chair and was nearer to him. "But I don't care," she smiled.

"You mean I'm good enough?"

She considered a little. "Will you believe it if I say so? I mean will you let that settle your question for you?" And then as if making out in his face that he drew back from this, that he had some idea which, however absurd, he couldn't yet bargain away: "Oh you don't care either—but very differently: you don't care for anything but yourself." (708)

Alice's bluntness is mitigated by her great affection for Brydon: she has already asked him twice "How should I not have liked you?" As a mature person, she accepts him with all his faults, but Brydon is not yet ready to acknowledge the seriousness of these faults. He insists that his dark side was merely potential and that his move to Europe prevented its development: "'It comes over me that I had then a strange *alter ego* deep down somewhere within me, as the full-blown flower is in the small tight bud, and that I just took the course, I just transferred him to the climate, that blighted him for once and for ever'" (707). Speaking of the yet-unseen spectre, he insists that "'He

isn't myself. He's the just so totally other person. But I do want to see him,' he added. 'And I can. And I shall'" (708).

Brydon's insistence that the ghost is another, unrelated to his present self, is paralleled in *The Family Reunion* when Harry first sees the Eumenides. He denies almost hysterically that he is the man they are seeking:

Why do you show yourselves now for the first time?  
When I knew her, I was not the same person.  
I was not any person. Nothing that I did  
Has to do with me. The accident of a dreaming moment,  
Of a dreaming age, when I was someone else  
Thinking of something else, puts me among you.  
I tell you, it is not me you are looking at,  
Not me you are grinning at, not me your confidential looks  
Incriminate, but that other person, if person  
You thought I was: let your necrophily  
Feed upon that carcase. They will not go. (CPP 311)

Spencer Brydon and Harry both divide themselves in two, and associate the denied and rejected self with the imaginary and the unreal—the ghost of a prophylactically aborted self or the self of “a dreaming moment.” Each man is dwelling in illusion, unable to face the radical flaw in himself and attempting to deny its reality because the evil of which he is capable has never been fully expressed.<sup>8</sup> Both are reminiscent of the denizens of the bar in Auden's “September 1, 1939,” where illusion is facilitated with alcohol and distractions:

Faces along the bar  
Cling to their average day:  
The lights must never go out,  
The music must always play,  
All the conventions conspire  
To make this fort assume  
The furniture of home;  
Lest we should see where we are,  
Lost in a haunted wood,  
Children afraid of the night  
Who have never been happy or good. (246)

Eliot's Harry and James's Spencer Brydon both return to their childhood homes, and both attempt to isolate the evil self from their present self. The third major parallel between them is that each must now recognize that this division is an illusion—that his capacity for evil is innate and that he has “never been happy or good.” Brydon's two houses—one associated with commerce through its pending destruction and replacement by an apartment building, the other associated with home and childhood—are connected with his two selves, one “evil, odious,” and unrealized, the other essentially uncorrupted. The artificiality of this binary is shown by the *alter ego's* invasion of the “good” house on the jolly corner, but even after seeing him, Brydon initially insists that the spectre is not himself: “‘There's somebody—an awful beast; whom I brought, too horribly, to bay. But it's not me.’” Maintaining his belief that the “bud” of the dark side was “blighted” forever by his move to Europe, he says, “‘He's none of *me*, even as I *might* have been’” (730). In the last pages of the story, Alice Staverton performs a therapeutic, even a religious role; she accepts that the ghost is not the present Brydon (“‘No—it's not you’” [729]), but tries to bring him to a recognition that it represents a real part of his present psyche. She saw the ghost in a dream at the same time that Brydon saw him in the house, but uses a telling second-person pronoun:

“So this morning [...] you appeared to me.”

“Like *him*?”

“A black stranger!”

“Then how did you know it was I?”

“Because, as I told you weeks ago, my mind, my imagination, had worked so over what you might, what you mightn't have been—to show you, you see, how I've thought of you. In the midst of that you came to me [...].” (730)

In keeping with the affection she has already demonstrated, Alice repeats a question she earlier directed to Brydon twice: “‘So why ... shouldn't I like him?’”

“You ‘like’ that horror—?”

“I *could* have liked him. And to me,” she said, “he was no horror. I had accepted him.”



“‘Accepted’—?” Brydon oddly sounded.

“Before, for the interest of his difference—yes. And as *I* didn’t disown him, as *I* knew him—which you at last, confronted with him in his difference, so cruelly didn’t, my dear—well, he must have been, you see, less dreadful to me. And it must have pleased him that I pitied him.” (730)

Her “*could* have liked” suggests what Spencer Brydon could have been, a potentiality which—as his newfound business skills imply—is still with him. Moved by her acceptance of the ghost and therefore of his mixed nature, Brydon is himself able to accept these things, and the story ends on a note of almost conventional romance “as he [draws] her to his breast” (731).

When we first encounter Harry Monchensey, he has already awakened “to the nightmare,” and is now convinced of his sinful nature and the “huge disaster” of which it forms part. In this he is a step ahead of Spencer Brydon, but he must come to terms with the reality of his childhood. Harry has come back not in search of happiness, but of simplicity; as he says to his cousin Mary,

I thought [Wishwood] was a place  
Where life was substantial and simplified—  
But the simplification took place in my memory,  
I think. (CPP 306)

Like Brydon’s idealization of “the jolly corner,” Harry’s search for simplicity—in the sense of ease, clarity, or ordinariness—is an illusion; the hollow tree which represents his “only memory of freedom” (CPP 307) was cut down when he was still a child. The root meaning of simplicity, however, is oneness, and Harry has, ironically, found this: “I thought I might escape from one life to another,/ And it may be all one life, with no escape” (CPP 306). All of his life is one thing because there never *was* a pre-lapsarian life; in a world organized by his mother, his sole memory of freedom, the hollow tree where he and his brothers and Mary played Cowboys and Indians, is short-lived and recognized as false. The immediate answer to Harry’s poignant question “Why were we not happy?” (CPP 306) is that Amy organized and

controlled everything; the deeper answer is that Harry must undergo a process of purgation and rebirth, as Mary suggests:

I believe the season of birth  
 Is the season of sacrifice  
 For the tree and the beast, and the fish  
 Thrashing itself upstream:  
 And what of the terrified spirit  
 Compelled to be reborn<sup>9</sup>  
 To rise toward the violent sun  
 Wet wings into the rain cloud  
 Harefoot over the moon? (CPP 310)

By this point, we can see that the apparent incongruity of Agatha's reference to "The Jolly Corner"—that Harry's impending encounter with a previous self, "the boy who left" is not the same as Spencer Brydon's meeting the spectre of a self that never came into being—is the result of the very binaries that James's story and Eliot's play seek to undermine. Because there was no world before the Fall for the individual, the boy who left is continuous with the man who returns; the *alter ego* is not an evil twin left behind at some fork in the road and "blighted [...] for ever" but a present potential that must be faced and accepted.

There remains a fourth parallel between story and play that merits attention, and it is one which involves a significant divergence between them on the subject of human love. Spencer Brydon's coming to terms with his own sinfulness is clearly facilitated, as I have suggested, by Alice Staverton, whose acceptance of the ghost represents a mature notion of love which embraces the beloved with all of his faults. In *The Family Reunion*, Harry is likewise helped by people who love him—primarily by Mary, the cousin his mother wished him to marry, and by Agatha, his youngest aunt and the only one he addresses by her first name alone. Harry is attracted to Mary:

[...]. You bring me news  
 Of a door that opens at the end of a corridor,

Sunlight and singing; when I had felt sure  
That every corridor only led to another,  
Or to a blank wall [...]. (CPP 310)

Shortly after this, however, the Eumenides appear for the first time, and Harry renounces the possibility of ordinary human love. At the psychological level, audience or readers could accept that Harry rejects Mary's love because of Amy's attempt to engineer their marriage, and because of his own loveless marriage. At the thematic level, they could understand that Harry cannot return to the level of consciousness he had before. At the mythic level, they could perhaps recognize that Harry must undergo a process of purgation and renewal. But readers, and many critics, could not understand what this process might involve in practice.

It can be argued, of course, that this is deliberate, that Eliot's dismantling of the superficiality of the premises of realistic theatre is by this point complete and that any inquiry into what Harry intends to do simply puts the questioner on the level of the chorus of aunts and uncles who "insist that the world is what we have always taken it to be" (CPP 302). Eliot himself was bemused when Michael Redgrave, playing Harry in the first production, asked what his character actually did at the end of the play,<sup>10</sup> and David Moody asserts that the play "mocks any curiosity about where Harry is going or what he will do" (179). In terms of Eliot's intention, this is probably true, but the issue remains one of those instances Eliot noted of "failure of adjustment between the Greek story and the modern situation," the more so because Harry's behaviour is often repellent. We see him for only a couple of hours, and in the throes of a spiritual crisis, but as Coghill argues, "if he could [suggest] some touch of contrition in the matter of his unhappy wife, or of generous feeling towards his mother, one might be ready to believe him capable of the programme he outlines for his future" (55). To know that Amy represents the "domination of the senses and of the human will" or "a corrupt spiritual principle which must die in order to renew itself" is not enough to make Harry's treatment of her sympathetic<sup>11</sup>; the fact that his leaving effec-

tively kills her may be an echo of the *Oresteia*, but it still makes Harry a monster in normal human terms.

I mention this problem not to point out flaws in the play that are generally acknowledged, but to suggest how "The Jolly Corner" functions in the play's treatment of love. Spencer Brydon is offered redemption in the form of acceptance and love by Alive Staverton, and embraces it; Harry rejects a similar redemption by Mary and goes off, as himself, Orestes, Buddha, or Christ, in search of purgation.<sup>12</sup> The contrast between earthly and other-worldly salvation, whether intended by Eliot as a contrast to the James story or not, draws attention to the severity of Eliot's vision. The idea of divesting oneself of the love of created beings has honourable antecedents in Christian and non-Christian traditions,<sup>13</sup> but to the ordinary reader Harry's brutality is distasteful, and it is hard to disagree with the critics Evans mentions who conclude that "Eliot denigrates human life in favour of a divine calling" (23). Eliot's later comments on the play and his sympathy for Amy suggest that the author himself perceived a problem in Harry's apparent brutality as well as his priggishness. It is easier for most of us to sympathize with Spencer Brydon, who is able to come to terms with his own faults and continue to live, with heightened consciousness, in the world we all share.

If we look more closely at the play, however, we can see that Eliot's portrayal of human love is more complex than it first appears. Although Agatha apparently approves of Harry's rejection of Mary and his mother ("Love compels cruelty/ To those who do not understand love" [*CPP* 337]), she represents, as Harry's favourite aunt and spiritual guide, a "merging of human and divine love" (C. Smith 119). Mary, too, has helped Harry to understand his childhood, and both women take their places in the line of intercessory female figures in Eliot's poetry. These figures, who function on various levels depending on the poem, are part Beatrice, part Madonna, and part muse, and have been analyzed by many critics.<sup>14</sup> Although Harry eventually leaves his family and the house behind, Mary and Agatha function

very much as Alice Staverton does in the James story, lovingly but firmly leading the protagonist to recognize the truth.

It is when we look at the characters' interaction, however, that James's influence on Eliot is most apparent. Critics who see *The Family Reunion* as Harry's story routinely consider most of the other characters (except for Agatha and, to a lesser extent, Mary) as dullards—foils to Harry and his higher consciousness—and assume that the author's sympathies are entirely with his protagonist; Grover Smith, for example, speaks of "the uncritical tolerance the play accords this character in whom there is much to criticize" (197). In the only book-length analysis of the play, however, Giles Evans makes a compelling case for seeing *The Family Reunion* as another kind of "poetic" drama in the tradition of Ibsen and Chekhov, both of whom Eliot acknowledged as influences.<sup>15</sup> This approach takes account of Eliot's desire to move beyond the theatre of superficial realism while demonstrating that he was concerned not only with spiritual issues but with ordinary human life: "The experience at the centre of the play ceases to be Harry's inner illumination (so difficult in fact to dramatise) and is rather the human consequences on those who are not Harry. There is a tragedy for those who go on living" (23). Evans shows that each of the characters has a more complex inner life than is usually recognized; he also draws attention to the ways in which the dramatic situation undermines our acceptance of any one character's point of view as correct. This orchestration of conflicting centres of consciousness, like the overlapping circles of a Venn diagram, is one of the staples of good drama; it is also, as Eliot realized, a technique which Henry James had perfected in fiction.

This becomes clearer if we look at one of the crucial speeches in the play—Mary's analysis of Harry's state of mind:

Even if, as you say, Wishwood is a cheat,  
Your family a delusion—then it's *all* a delusion,  
Everything you feel—I don't mean what you think,  
But what you feel. You attach yourself to loathing  
As others do to loving: an infatuation

That's wrong, a good that's misdirected. You deceive yourself  
 Like the man convinced that he is paralysed  
 Or like the man who believes that he is blind  
 While he still sees the sunlight. I know that this is true. (CPP 309)

Looking at the play as a whole, we understand Mary's own experience of cheat and delusion, her sense of having been used by Amy, her awareness of the "ordinary hopelessness" of her life (CPP 307). We do not take her characterization of Harry entirely at face value, but neither do we dismiss it: there remains the real possibility—and not only from an obtusely secular point of view—that his self-loathing is pathological in its extremity.<sup>16</sup> Unless we believe that he actually murdered his wife (and this possibility is effectively dismissed), Harry has not, after all, done anything very terrible; his reaction to discovering his sinful nature seems excessive, a form of self-importance or pride based on the idea that he is unique. He imagines, for example, that only he can see the Eumenides, but we learn that Mary, Agatha, and Downing have all seen them; guilt and the desire for expiation are not Harry's alone.<sup>17</sup>

Eliot had analyzed a focus on self similar to Harry's in "Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca" (1927). Discussing Othello's famous last speech ("Soft you: a word or two before you go"), Eliot writes:

He is endeavouring to escape reality, he has ceased to think about Desdemona, and is thinking about himself. Humility is the most difficult of all virtues to achieve; nothing dies harder than the desire to think well of oneself. Othello turns himself into a pathetic figure by adopting an *aesthetic* rather than a moral attitude, dramatizing himself against his environment. He takes in the spectator, but the human motive is primarily to take in himself. (130)

Othello's narcissism deflects attention from his murder of Desdemona to himself; Harry, who claims to have murdered his wife, dramatizes himself in a similar way.<sup>18</sup> His response to Mary's account of him suggests that he has learned something about himself: "Perhaps you are right, though I do not know / How you should know it" (CPP 309).



When Eliot began to write West End plays, his interest in perception had expanded from the depiction of the isolated consciousness to the interplay and conflict of multiple consciousnesses, and in this growth the example of James was crucial. In addition to being obsessed with what was and what might have been, Eliot's early personae (Prufrock, Gerontion, the inhabitants of *The Waste Land*) are all more or less self-absorbed, and their failure to acknowledge other people's points of view amounts in many cases to a form of solipsism. James, too, created a whole gallery of characters whose consciousness is limited by naïveté, egoism, or circumstance, and who may or may not develop a more comprehensive vision as the story progresses.<sup>19</sup> As *The Family Reunion* shows, Eliot had learned not only from the great dramatists but also from Henry James how to present various perspectives on a single issue. When, early in his career, Eliot praised James for a "mind so fine that no idea could violate it" ("In Memory" 2), he meant what he said: everything in James comes to us mediated by a dramatized character's consciousness and qualified by our awareness of other characters' points of view, and a real encounter with another point of view or centre of consciousness is crucial in both *The Family Reunion* and "The Jolly Corner." If Spencer Brydon is able to accept human love fully and Harry Monchensey is not, the point is not to decide which of them is right, but to understand the full complexities of their situations. The story and James's work as a whole allow us to look at Eliot's play not only in terms of his often unrealized intentions but of his actual accomplishment. The "buried life" is not only the life that was not lived, the road not taken<sup>20</sup>; it is also the self-knowledge we avoid by clinging to our own limited points of view. As Eliot's later comments on *The Family Reunion* demonstrate, he understood that part of his achievement in the play was the portrayal of Harry's self-absorption and its effects on his family.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>For Eliot's later view of the play, see "Poetry and Drama" 82-84. Since the play's premiere, there have been four major productions in London (1946, 1956, 1979, and 2008) and two in New York (1947 and 1958); a 1999 production moved from Stratford-upon-Avon to London and then to New York.

<sup>2</sup>Craig Raine was not the first to invoke Arnold's poem "The Buried Life" in relation to Eliot, but he makes it the persuasive focal point of his reading of Eliot as poet, dramatist, and critic.

<sup>3</sup>"Sweeney Agonistes" is a pair of fragments; both *The Rock* and *Murder in the Cathedral* were written originally for non-commercial production.

<sup>4</sup>See, e.g., Donoghue 94-103; Matthiessen 170-71; Williams 232-37; G. Smith 212. Goldman's essay is an interesting defence of Eliot's practice, but even Goldman does not argue that the plays are effective on stage.

<sup>5</sup>Matthiessen's is in fact the first mention in a *book* of the James allusion. At least one journal review noted the reference: see Horace Gregory, "The Unities and Eliot," *Life and Letters* 23 (Oct. 1939): 53-60, reprinted in Brooker 403-06. More recent critics have tended to dismiss the allusion in a few lines or ignore it altogether.

<sup>6</sup>Grover Smith points out in addition that *The Family Reunion* is really the reverse of "The Jolly Corner," with the present self acknowledging guilt (cf. 205). For reasons which will become clear, I think the two narratives work most often in parallel rather than by contrast.

<sup>7</sup>On gay issues in the story, see Savoy.

<sup>8</sup>Eliot intended the question of Harry's murder of his wife to remain unresolved, but most readers and viewers of the play conclude that he did not in fact kill her; the fact that he *thought* of doing so is enough to represent the evil inherent in him and all of us.

<sup>9</sup>The distinction between the Once-Born and the Twice-Born, as Coghill points out, is borrowed from William James, Henry's brother, who followed earlier writers on the subject. The Once-Born (or Healthy-Minded) are joyful, optimistic, and confident; the Twice-Born (or Sick Souls), "conscious of their own sinfulness and the sinfulness of the world around them," "tend to prefer punishment to forgiveness, the Day of Judgment to the Beatific Vision, justice to Mercy, righteousness to happiness, asceticism to pleasure, Protestantism to Catholicism, Puritanism to either" (Coghill 52).

<sup>10</sup>See Jones 101. According to the biography of Redgrave cited by Jones, Eliot replied that "[Harry] and the chauffeur go off and get jobs in the East End." When Redgrave mentioned that it would be useful to have some lines suggesting this, Eliot was surprised, but produced an additional twenty-five lines for rehearsal the next day. The play had already been published, however, and the lines have never appeared in any subsequent edition.

<sup>11</sup>Carol Smith 134. Most commentators on the play (Jones, Matthiessen, Moody, and Grover Smith, among others) also mention Harry's unpleasant qualities.

<sup>12</sup>As one "awakened" and seeking escape from the fire of the senses and earthly attachment, Harry is analogous to the Buddha; as a sacrificial or expiatory victim for the sins of the family, he is analogous to Christ and the various slain gods of mythology.

<sup>13</sup>Several critics draw attention to one of Eliot's epigraphs to "Sweeney Agonistes," a line from St. John of the Cross: "Hence the soul cannot be possessed of the divine union until it has divested itself of the love of created beings" (CPP 115).

<sup>14</sup>E.g.—in different ways—by Moody, Childs, and myself.

<sup>15</sup>See Evans 17-22 for the evidence and acknowledgment of earlier work by Kristian Smidt and Andrew Kennedy.

<sup>16</sup>My view of the play owes much to Giles Evans's analysis of it as a drama of "the tension between various sympathies" (23); my view of Harry is perhaps harsher than his.

<sup>17</sup>In Eliot's play and James's story, the fact that other characters see the apparitions suggests that they are, in literary terms, real—or, as Eliot might say, real enough.

<sup>18</sup>In discussing Harry's sometimes absurd phrasing ("a twilight/ Where the dead stone is seen to be batrachian,/ The aphyllous branch ophidian" [CPP 308]), Evans acutely cites Eliot's essay on "'Rhetoric' and Poetic Drama" (1919), which also draws attention to characters who see themselves "in a dramatic light" (Evans 50). The more extended discussion in "Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca" seems to me a better gloss on Harry's character and a stronger suggestion of Eliot's awareness of Harry's self-absorption.

<sup>19</sup>Many of James's tragic heroines—Catherine Sloper, Isabel Archer, Verena Tarrant, and Kate Croy, for example—learn and grow; the anonymous narrator of *The Aspern Papers* does not.

<sup>20</sup>While it is beyond the scope of this article, the speaker's encounter with the "compound ghost" in "Little Gidding" is clearly, on one level, another allusion to "The Jolly Corner." As Lyndall Gordon demonstrates in her biography, James's works are useful glosses on both Eliot's writings and his life.

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## “The Road Not Taken” in Hemingway’s “The Snows of Kilimanjaro”<sup>\*1</sup>

SILVIA AMMARY

Although the speaker of Robert Frost’s poem “The Road Not Taken” tells us that the road he takes is “less traveled,” in the second and third stanzas, he makes it clear that “the passing there” had worn these two paths “really about the same” and that “both that morning equally lay/ in leaves no step had trodden black” (835). The poem is told from the point of view of a speaker who imagines that he will contemplate his life later, “I shall be telling this [...],” and whether he will have made the right choice or not. In fact, the only marker for the present tense is the word “hence.” Ambiguity is felt in Frost’s most famous words: “I took the one less traveled by, and that has made all the difference.”<sup>2</sup> We are never told whether or not the difference made in the life of that person was good or bad; whether it enriched his life or made it miserable. Even the few clues that we have—the telling all this with a “sigh” and that both roads were equally fair—are vague. Is the “sigh” an expression of satisfaction and contentment that the speaker has taken a successful path? Or is it an expression of regret and remorse that he has not taken the other road and has left behind the possibilities it might have offered? If the roads are equally fair, then why does the speaker say “that has made all the difference”? What about the title of the poem? Which road is “the road not taken”? Is it the one the speaker takes, which according to his last description is “less traveled by,” i.e., had not been taken by others, or does the title refer to the supposedly better-traveled road that the speaker himself fails to take?

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<sup>\*</sup>For debates inspired by this article, please check the *Connotations* website at <http://www.connotations.de/debammmary01813.htm>.

Frost never answers these questions, leaving the readers to create their own interpretations. Even Frost himself, after a public reading of the poem, admonished the public “to be careful of that one; it’s a tricky poem—tricky” (Thompson 14). An initial reading of the poem reveals a searcher-speaker who sees a forked road and chooses the nonconformist, “the less-traveled” path, thus discovering meaning for the self; however, a close reading of the poem reveals that the speaker admits three times within six lines that the roads are the same and that they are indistinguishable: one is “just as fair” as the other, they are “worn really about the same,” and each “equally lay.” The reader of the poem would like to believe in a world of clear, forked-road choices, but there is really no other path in Robert Frost’s most famous and most ambiguous poem “The Road Not Taken.” There is only one path; the other path remains simply an illusion, an abstraction, and a missed and lamentable chance. One interpretation of the poem could be that Frost wants the individual to make a choice (unless one wants to stand forever in the wood in front of the forked path!), and even if that choice will always be determined by fate, chance or destiny, one should make the best of it. Only then can one understand the nature of the choice made and the nature of the self that has made it.

The theme of the lamentable chance permeates Hemingway’s fiction. In fact, his world is one filled with loss. On the surface, Hemingway’s short stories and novels seem to deal with violence, death, tension and threat, but those aspects constitute just the tip of the iceberg or the surface structure; the remaining hidden and larger part reveals a sense of loss matched with a sense of longing, confusion, remorse and nostalgia. What can be noticed is that Hemingway develops his fiction from a sense of nostalgia for something that was there and is not anymore in his earlier writing to a sense of remorse at a missed chance, i.e., at something that never was. The short stories about Nick Adams, *The Sun Also Rises*, *A Farewell to Arms*, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, and, finally, *The Old Man and the Sea* all deal with the first kind of loss; the emotional and spiritual aftermath of losing something one had before. This takes the form of longing and nostalgia. Nick



Adams is involved in loss most of the times: be it the loss of a girl, older values, his country, his family and his friends, etc.; Jake Barnes yearns for a sense of order and love in a world which is losing all purpose and meaning; Frederic Henry narrates his story to come to terms with the loss of his love Catherine; Robert Jordan also fears the loss of love and life, even more than he fears death; and finally Santiago loses the biggest fish ever and the biggest challenge of his life (Adair 12).<sup>3</sup>

In Hemingway's later fiction, especially in *Death in the Afternoon*, *The Garden of Eden* and "The Snows of Kilimanjaro," the sense of nostalgia changes into a sense of remorse for the lost chance. In *Death in the Afternoon*, Hemingway catalogues all the things that he had loved about Spain but was not able to get into the book. In *The Garden of Eden*, Hemingway said that the theme of the book is "the happiness of the garden that a man must lose" (Baker 460). Harry, the protagonist of "The Snows of Kilimanjaro," ruminates on the path not taken and the lost chance of becoming a writer. The reminiscences he had always intended to write about, italicized in the text, remain unrecorded and just part of his imagination. They remain snapshots and imagistic scenes. They remain in his memory and flashbacks. He dies without reaching the summit and without seeing the white peak of Kilimanjaro, since what happens in reality is that Harry dies on the filthy plain next to the hyenas. The mocking of the nostalgic notion that one could have lived one's life differently in Frost's "The Road Not Taken" is paralleled by Harry's regret on his deathbed that he had not written all those stories and novels, and his belief that he could have if only he had not "sold" himself to rich women, but had become a professional writer instead (i.e. somebody who writes for money, instead of marrying for money).

A brief summary of the story is helpful at this point. The epigraph at the beginning of the story tells the reader that the snow-covered western summit of Mount Kilimanjaro in Africa is called "House of God" by the natives and that the dried and frozen carcass of a leopard was strangely once found there. We are then introduced to the main char-

acter, a man named Harry, and his wife, Helen, who are on a safari in Africa. The safari is Harry's self-prescribed treatment to recover his artistic health:

Africa was where he had been happiest in the good time of his life, so he had come out here to start again. They had made this safari with the minimum of comfort. There was no hardship; but there was no luxury and he had thought that he could get back into the training that way. That in some way, he could work the fat off his soul [...]. (44)<sup>4</sup>

But the disease has spread too far and too deep for such a regeneration or an African purge and catharsis. The story opens on the African savannah where the husband and wife are talking to each other about his leg, which is rotting away from gangrene. Harry's failure to care for a thorn scratch on his knee, which resulted in gangrene two weeks before, fits into the pattern of his neglect of his artistic talent. While Harry continues satirizing her, Helen is trying to make him more comfortable and make him believe that he will survive, but he seems to be enjoying the black humor of the vultures that are waiting for him to die. Harry's sense of failure and regret permeate the story from the beginning.

In a series of flashbacks, Harry's past unfolds. In the first flashback, Harry remembers being in World War I, then thinks about different scenes in numerous winters. We learn that Helen is the last woman in his life, and that though she loved him, he had never really loved her. In the second flashback, Harry thinks about his time in Paris and Constantinople, but all of his memories are colored by memories of the war. In the third flashback, he is in the forest, living in a cabin, and then he remembers Paris and the time spent there near the Place Counterscarp. He briefly returns to the present to ask for another whiskey and soda before flashing back again. Eventually, his flashbacks start to blend into the real world as he asks Helen to explain why he never wrote the stories he wanted to write. He thinks about why he feels such contempt for the wealthy. In the final flashback, he becomes delirious, and he dreams that the plane has

come for him; that the pilot lifts him in, then they fly through clouds and rain where Harry sees, looming ahead of them, the snow-covered peak of Kilimanjaro shining whitely in the sun, "and then he knew that there was where he was going"(56). At this point, the hyena "makes a strangely human, almost crying sound," waking Helen up, who discovers that Harry has died. Hemingway has so contrived the ending that the reader is unaware—until Helen makes her discovery—that the plane trip never took place except in the mind of the dying man: the details of it are rendered with utmost realism. In fact, Hemingway's major trick is that he does not italicize the illusion, as he did with the other flashbacks, and so the readers expect realism, when in fact, the ending is an ironic vision which mocks Harry's profound sense of self-deception.

One of the modes of narrative representation of the un-lived life is the duality of Harry's character. Harry remains an ambiguous character until the end of the story, and the reader retains contradictory images of him; he is mean and selfish, yet was once a man of action and valor. He is a cheat and a liar, yet at times self-searching and sincere. Through his recollections, we see him as a different Harry: adventurous, vital, self-reliant, active, a sportsman, courageous in facing the war, and an avid traveler. However, it is never clearly stated in the text whether this is indeed a portrait of him as a young man, or if it is also part of his yearning for what he really wanted to be, but never actually was. At the end of the story, he arrives at a vision of transcendence flying toward the snow-capped peak of Mount Kilimanjaro, but this vision seems incongruous with his degraded character throughout the story. Therefore, the vision of the mountain is not one of transcendence and salvation for the artist, but the last manifestation of Harry's profound ability to deceive himself. The snow-capped Mount Kilimanjaro remains Harry's spiritual destination that he never reaches. In reality, the rescue plane never arrives in time, and Harry's corpse is discovered in the tent by his wife. The rescue and the flight to Kilimanjaro are only what *might have been*. The story narrates his failure to work at his writing and his regrets. The

imagined flight simply reveals Harry's final illusions. There is no *anagnorisis* (so much valued by Aristotle as the redeeming end of the tragic plot) to set in here since the protagonist is already dead, which is so unlike the other typical heroes in Hemingway, who manage to survive thanks to the defensive parapet that they have built for themselves and which enables them to discard illusions if they want to learn how to live life anew, as Henry Frederic of *A Farewell to Arms* and Jake Barnes in *The Sun Also Rises*. For Harry, all this does not happen since there is no epiphany for a dead man. Harry did not follow the ideals of honor, courage and endurance that are necessary to live in Hemingway's painful and chaotic world, and so he fails even to become the typical "Hemingway code hero."<sup>5</sup>

Hemingway extensively uses a language of negation and hypothetical assumptions to highlight the theme of the missed opportunity. The story is filled with conditional phrases such as "if," "in case," "as though"; negatives (never, not, no, at all, etc.); and modal verbal phrases indicating regret about unfulfilled desires, like "would," "could," "might," which all indicate hypothetical situations but never real happenings. Notice the following phrases quoted from the story (the italics are mine):

"*In case* I ever wanted to use them in a story." (39)

"He *would never write* the things that he had saved to write until he knew enough to write them well. Well, he *would not have* to fail at trying to write them either. Maybe you *could never write* them, and that was why you put them and delayed the starting. Well, he *would never know, now*." (41)

"But in yourself, you said you *would write* about these people; about the very rich [...] but he *would never do* it, because each day of not writing, of comfort, of being that which he despised, dulled his ability and softened his will to work so that, he *did no work at all*." (44)

"What was his talent anyway? It was a talent all right but *instead of* using it, he had trodded on it. It was *never* what he had done, but always what *he could do*." (45)

"He *had never written* any of that because, at first, he *never wanted* to hurt anyone and then it seemed *as though* there was enough to write without it. But he had always thought that he *would write* it finally. There was so much to write." (49)

"There *wasn't* time, of course, although *it seemed as though* it telescoped so that you *might put* it all into one paragraph *if you could* get it right." (50)

"No, *he had never written* about Paris. Not the Paris that he cared about. But what about the rest that *he had never written*?" (52)

"He knew at least twenty good stories from out there and he *had never written* one. Why?" (53)

"But *if he lived* he *would never write* about her, he knew that now. *Nor* about any of them." (53)

The above quoted sentences have a clear meaning: Harry has not taken that path and has never done the things that he wished for. Thus, his accomplishments remain in the realm of missed opportunities. The perfection he wanted to achieve through writing remains an ideal that will never be realized, even if the ideal continually bombards Harry's mind. He never attempted to write the many stories that he intended to write, which might have gained a permanent place in literature for him; they remain locked in his memory. Therefore, all his bitter regrets and remarks in his dying moments concerning his betrayal of craft and self do not atone for a wasted artistic life. The scenes of reminiscences remain in his imagination, unfulfilled. "They remain in the limbo of his delirium" (Bluefarb 6). Harry regretfully tells himself that he "could or should have written" about them, but he deserted his talent for the corrupting appeal of becoming a rich woman's kept man. As Marion Montgomery puts it "throughout the story the emphasis has been on the ideal of attempt, not on accomplishment" (282). Those scenes remain outside Harry's work, within the limits of illusory possibility, never to be fulfilled or consumed. Harry can only think back on these moments without any compensation in the present. Repetition, which is an important stylistic device in the modernist aesthetic that Hemingway uses in his fiction extensively, is particularly suitable here as it shows the sense of unfulfilled desires that keep bombarding the protagonist throughout the story (Lodge 157).

Four elements in the story are worth analyzing in order to support such an interpretation of the other road as an illusion: Hemingway's innovative and unusual narrative style, typography, the symbols

(especially of the leopard, the snow and the hyena), and the characterization of Harry's wife, Helen. Although Harry is not a first-person narrator, the narrative reveals his thoughts explicitly. This narrative mode is rather unusual compared to other stories by Hemingway, where the (theoretically omniscient) third-person narrators bury their feelings about their pasts and the pasts of the characters. Their minds become icebergs, and readers must carefully piece together what is bothering the protagonists precisely. By contrast, "The Snows of Kilimanjaro" is filled with lengthy passages of introspection through flashbacks. We are not used to Hemingway entering the minds of his narrators as Faulkner does, for example, as he always describes his characters from the outside, and yet in this story, Hemingway breaks his rule of objectivity. The epigraph, the bulky italicized thoughts, and the hallucinations in "The Snows of Kilimanjaro" are elements that oppose the typical Hemingway style. We do not have to go deeper into the text to understand or decipher Harry's thoughts.

Harry is also an unreliable narrator. He believes that his wife and the rich life he led are to be blamed for his lack of artistic output. Harry's excuse for not writing is based on the sudden wealth he has acquired without effort or work. Easy money and the women that go along with it brought him a life of comfort and luxury, an artificial world unfavorable to literary creation. Harry became powerless and was drawn to life in the form of hunting, sex and adventure. It is true that procrastination suited him well, allowing him to live a comfortable and carefree life, but one can argue that Harry never really had any talent as a writer, and that he had already been on the road of sloth and self-betrayal even before he met Helen: "it was not her fault that when he went to her he was already over" (44). As an unreliable narrator, Harry is simply projecting his frustrations and regrets on his wife. In fact, this defense mechanism, whereby one projects one's own undesirable thoughts, motivations, desires, and feelings onto someone else, becomes an integral part of the story and highlights the theme of the unlived life. The wife is much more likeable than Harry since she



cannot be held responsible for his corruption. Harry is the only one to be blamed for what happened:

He had destroyed his talent by not using it, by betrayals of himself and what he believed in, by drinking so much that he blunted the edge of his perceptions, by laziness, by sloth, and by snobbery, by pride and by prejudice, by hook and by crook. (45)

Hemingway’s typography is worth analyzing since it is also atypical in this story. The oscillation in typography between the roman type sections and the italicized sections is to represent the contrast between reality and illusion, the present life and the unlived life. In the first style, the narration is typical of Hemingway in so far as it is mostly dialogue-driven, adjective-free, made up mostly of short-declarative sentences, and marked by a style of omission and understatement. This style represents Harry’s present at the moment of death. It is the miserable reality that Harry is living now. The italicized sections, on the other hand, convey a different style: the sentences grow longer and become almost stream of consciousness-like, with one clause tacked on another, recording the protagonist’s impressionistic, and memory-laden narration. The second section conveys bits and pieces of the unlived life, of the things that were not written, and the tone also seems to change from the one in the roman type section. The scenes of the unlived life, although at times haunted by images of war and combat, generally reveal positive energies, movement, and excitement; within the realm of his imagination, Harry felt alive: sweating, pedalling, crying, sympathizing, winning, losing, playing sports, spending vacations in beautiful resorts, and living an exciting life. The following passage captures the vitality of the life that Harry should have written about. Hemingway uses all kinds of sensuous images (olfactory, visual, gustatory, kinaesthetic, and auditory) to dramatize the life that “might have been”:

*[...] when they had walked into Bludenz, that time to buy presents, and the cherry-pit taste of good kirsch, the fast-slipping rush of running powder-snow on crust,*

singing "Hi! Ho! said Rolly!" as you ran down the last stretch to the steep drop, taking it straight, then running the orchard in three turns and out across the ditch and onto the icy road behind the inn. (43)

Hemingway blends the two narrative styles into one final image of the story: Kilimanjaro. This image combines both worlds: the imagined and the real, the plain and the mountain, the cold and the heat, the past and the present, and, most importantly, Harry's reality and his dreams. Hemingway's mode of representing the rise of the wounded hero to symbolic self-fulfillment is an ironic manifestation of Harry's failures and ridicules the nostalgic notion that he could have lived his life differently. Harry, in fact, is discovered dead on his cot by his wife.

The story has three important symbols significant for interpretation. To start with, there is the leopard. There has been much debate about what it might represent. In his essay "The Snows of Kilimanjaro: A Reevaluation," Oliver Evans spends a whole paragraph reviewing different interpretations given to the leopard: a "symbol of worldly pleasure and lechery," "religious blasphemy," a representative "of Harry's moral nature," etc. (604). I am not going to add a new interpretation, but I will simply focus on the leopard's physical perfection, agility, and boldness: it has the power to climb and reach the mountain peaks. However, it is unusual for leopards to be this high: "no one has explained what the leopard was seeking at that altitude" (39). Then, the leopard dies, but he does not disappear without leaving a trace. Likewise, Harry could have left a trace had he fulfilled his aspirations and become a successful writer. It is tempting to see the leopard as a metaphor symbolizing the writer, who died before reaching what would have been the summit of his career. Harry does not even come close to the peak, but dies rotting away in the heat of the lowlands.

The snow is another symbol in the story, which here becomes a dangerous trap from which no escape is possible; it blinds and isolates with its whiteness. It is hostile to animals and humans and presents an obstacle to growth and movement, so all that remains to Harry is

solitude, silence, emptiness and death. White is the absence of color,<sup>6</sup> and therefore is most suited to the unfulfilled desires, empty illusions and to the "might have been." The snow in Hemingway's story also exemplifies the pure, the unspoiled celestial presence, a source of light and power on the peaks of the mountains, a presence that Harry will never feel or sense. In this sense, the snow-peaked mountain symbolizes the eternal heights of art that Harry never achieves, and so he remains in the humid rotting savanna.

The third symbol is the hyena, a scavenger and the most despised of all African animals because of its filth and aggressive efforts to destroy and steal other animals that are wounded or suffering on the plains. In its hunger for destruction, it represents Harry's physical death, but also his spiritual death, the life of sloth and carelessness he lived, and the scavenger-like qualities in Harry which prevented him from achieving his goals. Harry had a romantic weakness for the glittering world of wealth and was lured by the dreams of "high life," so he became too dependent on the artificial world of luxury and lost the freedom necessary for the artist while trading his artistic talents for money and comfort. This exchange was not worth it, and at the end of the story, Harry is found dead by his wife after she was woken by the cry of a hungry hyena. The story ends with the hyena's voice: "Outside the tent, the hyena made the same strange noise that had awakened her. But she did not hear him for the beating of her heart" (56).

As for Helen, she becomes a character foil to Harry. Her character received rather harsh criticism: she was labeled as the "bitch-woman" and the destroyer and corruptor of the writer's talent.<sup>7</sup> Despite the fact that Hemingway has often been (wrongly) accused of siding with his male characters,<sup>8</sup> I would rather see him taking Helen's side in this story. Helen seems to be Harry's victim and the butt of his sarcasm and criticism. From the perspective of her husband, Helen is seen negatively; he calls her "silly" and "a bloody fool," (40) always implying how little she knows and understands. Harry thinks that her money has kept him from leading the life of a writer. She and her rich

friends wreck people and things alike in order for them to flourish: "he thought they were a special glamorous race and when he found they weren't it wrecked him just as much as any other thing that wrecked him" (53). However, another image of her emerges in the story. Helen shows to be a positive illustration of life and acts positively to Harry: she proposes to read to him, worries about his rest and gives him the right nourishment. Helen keeps to her usual pattern: she bathes, joins Harry for a drink before dinner, sits and eats with him and reassures him of her love. While Harry dreams of a past of unfulfillment, Helen does not dream of the past, nor does she fear the future, but she accepts things as they come and has a realistic view on life, unlike Harry, who is sorry for the missed chances. The deep contrast between the couple underscores their basic inability to communicate with each other.

The modernist Hemingway does not end his stories and novels with an achievement or a fulfilled ambition, but instead he withdraws into domains of 'vision,' of controlling but imaginary order, distanced and aloof from an actual world. In fact, writers of the modernist period often lament missed opportunities, as well as exceptional but wasted chances for picturesque heroic actions, for brave and splendid performances in the world's eyes. Hemingway in "The Snows of Kilimanjaro," like Proust in *Remembrance of Things Past*, creates these unaccomplished visions through memory; not rational or forced but spontaneous and involuntary memory. Hemingway shows the hero's moment of death when time is running out, and when the experiences and the sensations of life from the time before continually bombard the consciousness. The present moment is eternalized when special instances are remembered that incorporate all the experiences of a lifetime. The past, present and future (imminent and certain death) exist in the protagonist's mind at the same time: the memory of the past and the fear of the future determine the protagonist's perception of the present. At one point in *Remembrance of Things Past*, Proust exhibits the theme of the road not taken just like it can be found in "The Snows of Kilimanjaro":

And I begin again to ask myself what it could have been, this unremembered state which brought with it no logical proof of its existence, but only the sense that it was a happy, that it was a real state in whose presence other states of consciousness melted and vanished. I decide to attempt to make it reappear. I retrace my thoughts to the moment at which I drank the first spoonful of tea. I find again the same state, illumined by no fresh light. I compel my mind to make one further effort, to follow and recapture once again the fleeting sensation [...]. (2712)

The unlived life is an illusion; just like the other path in Frost’s poem. Eventually, it becomes a sort of “unremembered state” that has “no logical proof of its existence,” a road that is forever lost, no matter how hard one “attempts to make it reappear.” Harry, in fact, never succeeds in getting down on paper those reminiscences he has always intended to write. The snapshots have a Proustian free-associational quality similar to those of a patient under the influence of a hypnotic drug. They appear, reappear, and disappear in the form of flashbacks, but can never be pinned/penned down. The writer has a sacred duty to capture these fleeing moments in time before they disappear forever, preserving these precious times, and rendering them unchangeable and immortal and thus to ensure their survival. For Harry, *that* is too late.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>I would like to thank the participants of the 10th International *Connotations* Symposium about “Roads Not Taken” for their encouraging and useful suggestions; special thanks to Burkhard Niederhoff, whose critical comments on my paper and throughout the symposium provided a paradigm by which to apply the unlived life to modernist texts.

<sup>2</sup>Here it is worth mentioning William Empson’s *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, published in 1930 and one of the most enjoyable and influential offshoots from I. A. Richards’s experiments with practical criticism. I usually use Empson’s definition as the theoretical principle in teaching Robert Frost’s poetry in general, especially in dealing with the way Frost uses metaphors, the multiple meanings that remain

suspended till the end of the poems, as for example in "Stopping by Wood on a Snowy Evening" which remains suspended between "miles I go" and "before I sleep" (839). The tension is not resolved: it is the tension between the pursuit of pure beauty and the demands of the ordinary rituals of life, between a world offering perfect quietness and solitude and a world of people and social obligations. Similarly, in "Mending Walls," the poem remains suspended between "something there is that doesn't love a wall" and "good fences make good friends" (834). The same dynamic applies to "The Road Not Taken."

<sup>3</sup>William Adair discusses the dynamics of loss in Hemingway's fiction in two parts. Part one deals with how the protagonists of Hemingway feel the sense of loss and pain and the aftermath of spiritual and emotional "hunger," while part two deals with some of the structural and stylistic consequences of these motifs of loss and longing.

<sup>4</sup>All references of the story are taken from Ernest Hemingway, *The Complete Short Stories: The Finca Vigia Edition*.

<sup>5</sup>The phrase "Hemingway code hero" has its origin in Philip Young's book *Ernest Hemingway: A Reconsideration* (1966). Young uses it to describe a Hemingway character who "offers up and exemplifies certain principles of honor, courage, and endurance which in a life of tension and pain make a man a man" (56). It is important to note here the difference between the "Hemingway hero" and the "Hemingway code hero." Some people (myself included) have fallen into the habit of using these terms interchangeably. The "Hemingway hero" is a living, breathing character essential to the story's narrative. Nick Adams is an example of a "Hemingway hero." The "Hemingway code hero" is often a living, breathing character as well, but he doesn't always have to take a human form. Sometimes the "Hemingway code hero" simply represents an ideal that the "Hemingway hero" tries to live up to, a code he tries to follow. An example of the "Hemingway code hero" (in human form) would be Santiago in *The Old Man and the Sea*, or Catherine in *A Farewell to Arms*. To simplify the theory to some extent, Earl Rovit developed a unique naming system. He refers to the "Hemingway hero" as the *tyro* and the "Hemingway code hero" as the *tutor*.

<sup>6</sup>Melville's description of "The Whiteness of the Whale" in *Moby-Dick* consists of a series of associations and reflections conjured up in the mind of Ishmael as he thinks about what white symbolizes. After cataloguing the numerous ideas associated with the color white, Ishmael wonders if its essential emptiness—the absence of color—is what makes it frightening: "Is it that by its indefiniteness it shadows forth the heartless voids and immensities of the universe, and thus stabs us from behind with the thought of annihilation, when beholding the white depths of the Milky Way? Or is it, that as in essence whiteness is not so much a colour as the visible absence of colour; and at the same time the concrete of all colours; is it for these reasons that there is such a dumb blankness, full of meaning, in a wide landscape of snows—a colourless, all-colour of atheism from which we shrink?" (*Moby Dick* 175). As opposed to Ahab, Ishmael copes by observing, interpreting what he observes and then reconciles himself to whatever



he encounters and does not feel, like Ahab, the compulsion to derive a single answer to explain the white whale.

<sup>7</sup>Edmund Wilson (231) and Robert W. Lewis Jr. (103) give very negative views on Helen. The reason for this conformity of criticism about Helen could be that "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber" and "The Snows of Kilimanjaro" were written close to each other and are both set in Africa, so several of the assumptions made about "Macomber" are assumed automatically to apply as well to "Snows."

<sup>8</sup>Most of the early criticism of Hemingway, and especially since the rise of the women's movements in the 1960s, Hemingway has been accused of perpetuating sexist stereotypes in his writing, thus embellishing a masculine public image of himself and siding mostly with his male characters. Among these critics are Judith Fetterley and Katherine M. Rogers.

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## Joe Orton's Laodicean Tragedy: *The Good and Faithful Servant*\*

MAURICE CHARNEY

In Robert Frost's poem "The Road Not Taken," there are two roads that diverge in a yellow wood. The poet takes one and wonders what would have happened had he taken the other. But there is another way of interpreting the topos of the road not taken. This is the theme of the Henry James story "The Beast in the Jungle." The protagonist is unable to take any road at all. He is stuck in a comfortable stasis, a psychological paralysis that prevents him from acting on his own behalf. As he comes to realize this, that is his tragedy. His passivity in relation to choice is like that of the Laodiceans in the New Testament book of Revelation, where 3:15-16 reads: "I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would thou wert cold or hot. So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth."

These ideas apply very aptly to Joe Orton's television play of 1967, *The Good and Faithful Servant*. The title comes from Matthew 25:21, "Well done, thou good and faithful servant," and it is meant ironically. This short play, written in 1964, is one of Orton's least appreciated and least performed works, but Francesca Coppa calls it "brilliant (and underrated)."<sup>1</sup> Even though it follows *Entertaining Mr Sloane* and precedes *Loot*, Orton makes none of his characteristic attempts to make the play farcical, and it lacks his usual violence and sexual energy. The humor, what there is of it, is bitter and accusatory, especially of the corporation as a symbol of the soullessness and de-personalization of capitalism. It is Orton's most Marxist work. Some

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\*For debates inspired by this article, please check the *Connotations* website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debcharney01813.htm>>.

of the bitterness comes from the fact that the main character, Buchanan, a doorman at a huge factory, is closely modeled on Orton's father, a very silent and ineffectual man, who worked as a gardener for the city of Leicester and lost three fingers in the service.

In the first scene of the play, Buchanan is described as "an old man, wearing a commissionaire's uniform" (153).<sup>2</sup> A commissionaire is what we would call a doorkeeper or doorman. He has worked for the corporation for fifty years and is about to retire. Along the corridor to the Personnel Director's office he meets an old woman, Edith, who is scrubbing the floor. It turns out that she is his former lover, Edith Anderson, by whom he had twins, both of whom died when, during the war, a "peasant's son offered them water from a poisoned well—he meant no harm—it was an accident" (155). This is the first of a whole series of baleful accidents, for which no one is responsible.

The world immediately presented by the play is a cruel and capricious place. In a typical exchange, Buchanan wonders what has happened to Edith's beauty:

EDITH. I remained desirable until I was thirty.

BUCHANAN. You lasted so long?

EDITH. Then I had my first illness. (155)

Their grandson, Ray, is still alive. Edith looks after him, but announces: "When he's settled I shall die" (156). Buchanan asks "What of?" and Edith answers "Does it matter?" This is Orton in his jokey and nonsensical phase, but there is a bitterness in this scene that makes the jokes fall flat. The scene scrupulously avoids any of the expected joyousness of a long-lost couple meeting again after fifty years. All emotional gestures are kept to an absolute minimum.

Buchanan is on his way to the office of the Personnel Director, Mrs. Vealfoy, whose name ties in with the second epigraph of the play: "*Faith*, n. Reliance, trust, *in*; belief founded on authority" (151). This is quoted from the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*, and it includes Orton's favorite authority words: *faith*, *reliance*, *trust*. It is interesting that in the 1967 television production of *The Good and Faithful Servant* on Rediffu-

sion, Mrs. Vealfoy was played by Patricia Routledge, the much-loved, imperious star of the long-running television series *Keeping Up Appearances*. Mrs. Vealfoy is the exemplar of a blank and unexpressive cheeriness in the play. She is a perfect personnel director because she is totally impersonal. For example, she asks Buchanan, "May we be completely informal and call you 'George'?" Buchanan, of course, agrees, and she answers affably: "Good, good. (*Laughs.*) My name is Mrs. Vealfoy. I expect you know that, don't you?" (156-57). Mrs. Vealfoy reviews all the anticipated responsibilities of the firm as Buchanan is about to retire: "You lost a limb in the service of the firm? (*She consults a file on her desk.*) You conceal your disabilities well" (157). She flatters Buchanan as she tightens the legal screws:

And the pension paid to you by the firm for the loss of your arm plus the cash was legally binding. We are in no way responsible for your other limbs. If they deteriorate in any way the firm cannot be held responsible. You understand this? (158)

The climax of this scene comes when Buchanan casually mentions his grandson, whose existence he has just discovered in the first scene. Mrs. Vealfoy, who has put on her hat and is about to leave, is suddenly taken aback:

*She stares at BUCHANAN sharply.* Pay attention to me! What grandson? You've no descendants living. I have the information from our records. (158)

Buchanan's protests about his newly-discovered wife Edith are ineffectual. Mrs. Vealfoy rejects Buchanan's pleas with angry annoyance: "Your wife is dead! Have you been feeding false information into our computers?" (159). There is no way that the innocent Buchanan can convince Mrs. Vealfoy that the sacred records are wrong. He says pitifully: "It's a personal matter. My private life is involved," but he cannot reach the supremely impersonal Mrs. Vealfoy: "Should your private life be involved, we shall be the first to inform you of the fact" (159). In the corporation, there is no such thing as a "private life." According to the always smiling Personnel Director, the personal is

swallowed up in the corporate. The individual has no separate, intrinsic existence.

At the retirement party in Scene Three, Mrs. Vealfoy presents Buchanan with an electric toaster—a “very lovely electric toaster”—and an electric clock. She refers to “his cheery laugh” (160), but there is not the slightest evidence for any cheery laugh in the play. Buchanan’s acceptance speech is full of nonsensical and unfathomable platitudes:

Over the years I’ve witnessed changes both inside and outside the firm. The most remarkable is the complete overhaul of equipment which has taken place during the last year. I am truly sorry to leave without seeing much of it in operation. But—there it is—what will be, will be. (160)

This fatalistic *qué será será* formula is the closest Buchanan ever comes to a philosophical observation. At the end of the scene he “*joins the lunch queue. No one speaks to him, or is aware of his presence*” (161).

Buchanan’s retirement presents, the toaster and the clock, keep reappearing in the action as symbols of the ‘benevolent’ corporation. In Scene Six, Edith opens the first parcel, the clock, and exclaims: “They gave you the wire as well. Shows how much they think of you” (165). It is odd to consider the gift of an electric clock without the wire. She opens the second parcel, the toaster, and is equally enthusiastic: “It’s a good make too. We must have toast for tea to try it out” (165). These casual remarks follow a very surprising and seemingly disconnected interchange with Buchanan. We learn from the stage direction that Edith “*stares*” at her husband “*in amazement*” (164). Her first words are “Oh! [...] Your arms! Where has the extra one come from?” Edith is grateful for Buchanan’s reply: “It’s false”—“Thank God for that. I like to know where I stand in relation to the number of limbs a man has” (165).

Buchanan is the mechanical man, like the heroine of the song “After the Ball Was Over,” and Scene Nine opens in his bedroom in the morning: “*On a table, an artificial arm, a pair of glasses, a hearing aid*” (171). This is a comic idea growing out of the theories of Henri Bergson, in which the mechanization of the human is a vital source of



comedy. As Edith says, "That hand of yours is almost human. The things you contrive to do with it are miraculous." Ray, the grandson, a pleasure-loving youth, calls the clock and the toaster a "load of old rubbish," as is Buchanan himself, thrown on the scrapheap by the corporation. Edith's closing comment in Scene Six is unconsciously ironic: "It was presented to Mr Buchanan by his firm. As a reward for fifty years' service" (168).

Of course, the clock and the toaster don't work.<sup>3</sup> Even Edith agrees that the clock "[t]ells whatever time it fancies" (177)—like the clock in Ionesco's *Bald Soprano*—and when Buchanan drops it, it gives him a nasty shock. Even the ever-optimistic Edith is forced to conclude: "They seem more like murder weapons than gifts from a grateful employer." In Scene Seventeen, right before Buchanan dies, he "*stands beside the table. On the table the clock and the toaster. He lifts a hammer and smashes them to pieces*" (190).<sup>4</sup> This is a powerful nonverbal scene. It is surprising that Orton makes Buchanan so inarticulate, unlike most of his other glib and voluble characters. In Scene Eighteen, Buchanan dies without a single word. He "*lies back, stares at the ceiling,*" while Edith tries to comfort him: "Why, you're crying. (*She kisses him.*) Tears running down your cheeks. (*She hugs him*)" (191). This is the only personal, emotional note in the entire play. But Edith is preoccupied with the company's annual get-together at the Bell Hotel: "I'm buying a new dress for the occasion. And I shall smile a lot, more than usual, because we have so much to be thankful for." Edith has picked up the cheery style of Mrs. Vealfoy. Meanwhile, "*BUCHANAN closes his eyes and dies*" (191).

There is another death set casually in the entertainment context of the Bright Hours club, designed specifically for persons of either sex who are "old, lonely and ex-members of the firm" (178). Scene Sixteen is set in the firm's recreation center: "*A number of old ex-employees are grouped around an upright piano singing: 'We'll All Go Riding on a Rainbow to a New Land Far Away.' Weary, apathetic voices*" (183). This is a savage scene, unmitigated by Orton's farcical high jinks. Besides Buchanan and the old man who at first appears to be his friend—but it

is a case of mistaken identity—we have a Goyaesque collection of decrepit old men and women: “Two of them are in wheelchairs, one is blind, a couple are simple-minded. They stare at BUCHANAN without interest. [...] Two or three VERY OLD WOMEN are knitting” (184). While Buchanan and his supposed friend are exchanging the platitudes of a seeming recognition, “[a] WOMAN at the end of the room falls over. A flutter of excitement” (184). Mrs. Vealfoy insists on maintaining the tone of forced merriment as she shoos people away from the fallen woman, but the woman is dead. This grotesque scene, with the piano playing and Mrs. Vealfoy insisting on running through all the songs with the word “happy” in them, including “Happy Days Are Here Again,” foreshadows the silent death of Buchanan in Scene Eighteen.

In her final speech in the play, Mrs. Vealfoy announces the sad death of George Buchanan in the midst of the firm’s annual festivities at the Bell Hotel:

His wife wishes me to express thanks to all in the firm who sent beautiful floral tributes in her sad bereavement. And now, on with the dance and let us pray for good weather during the holiday season. *The band plays ‘On the Sunny Side of the Street.’ Dancers fill the floor.* (192)

This may be ironic, but the irony is grim and unlike anything else in the works of Joe Orton.

Mrs. Vealfoy prepares us for the figure of Erpingham in *The Erpingham Camp*, written a year after *The Good and Faithful Servant* and produced on television by Rediffusion in 1966. *The Erpingham Camp* is a manic play full of the excitement and violence that is distinctly missing from *The Good and Faithful Servant*. Like Mrs. Vealfoy, Erpingham is an authentic “figure of authority” (*The Erpingham Camp* 303). He has a grandiose vision of “Rows of Entertainment Centres down lovely, unspoiled bits of the coast, across deserted moorland and barren mountainside. The Earthly Paradise” (*The Erpingham Camp* 281). Like *The Good and Faithful Servant*, the play uses music very effectively. Both Erpingham and Mrs. Vealfoy are mindless optimists and defenders of Establishment values, especially law and order and empty

ceremony. There is a distinctly Tory assumption that what is good for business is also good for the state. Simon Shepherd calls Mrs. Vealfoy "a horrific prophecy of Margaret Thatcher."<sup>5</sup> She and Erpingham are both totally autocratic. The corporation in *The Good and Faithful Servant* directs people's lives; like the Roman Empire, it offers bread and circuses and non-stop public entertainment to numb the workers' sensitivities. So, at a crucial moment in *The Erpingham Camp*, Erpingham denies any inherent rights to the rebellious camper Kenny: "You have no rights. You have certain privileges which can be withdrawn. I am withdrawing them" (307). Kenny's anarchic reply to Erpingham: "You'll pay for this, you ignorant fucker!"—and the campers' rebellion occurring to the tune of "La Marseillaise"—has no parallel in *The Good and Faithful Servant*. Nothing can oppose Mrs. Vealfoy, the Director of Personnel, not even death.

Some of the most effective scenes in *The Good and Faithful Servant* are wordless, which is, again, unusual for the jokey and epigrammatic Orton, who thought of himself as a successor to the Restoration comedy of manners and to Oscar Wilde, especially *The Importance of Being Earnest*.<sup>6</sup> Scene Five, for example, has no dialogue. It shows us Buchanan turning in his uniform. We see "a tailor's dummy dressed in the trousers, shirt, tie, shoes and hat belonging to BUCHANAN's uniform." We then see Buchanan entering from behind the curtain in his own clothes. The stage direction is significant: "He appears smaller, shrunken and insignificant." At the end of the scene, he "shuffles from the store" (164). There are a number of scenes of investiture and divestiture in *The Erpingham Camp*. Orton seems to have learned a lot from Brecht, especially in *Galileo*.

It is the triviality of Buchanan that brings the play close to tragedy, but not tragedy according to Aristotle's *Poetics*, where the protagonist has to have some stature.<sup>7</sup> In Scene Sixteen, Buchanan's desultory conversation with the nameless old man who he thinks is his former mate is pitiful in the pointless details that represent the high points of their careers. Buchanan boasts that his photo once appeared in the company magazine: "I was a long-service employee. A credit to can-

teen food they said I was" (184). Buchanan explains that he looked forward to his retirement "so's I could play skittles full time. I used to be a fan. I was in line for the cup. I just missed it. The mysterious thing was that I never came in line for it again" (185). Nothing further is said about skittles in the play. The old man counters with: "I was almost mentioned in a well-known sporting periodical once," which he regards as "the high-spot of my life" (185). What sporting periodical?

At this, Buchanan insists that the high-spot of his career came "when my photo appeared in the magazine. I didn't ask them to put it in" (185). Buchanan is basking in boastful reminiscence: "I was in charge of the Main Entrance. I saw the Chairman of the Board several times. I've even opened the door to him once" (186). The old man cannot match this glorious exploit. At the end of the scene, the old man realizes that his mate was not Buchanan but Georgie Hyams. Buchanan is shocked. He catches hold of the old man's sleeve:

BUCHANAN. You don't know me then?

OLD MAN. No.

BUCHANAN. But I worked here. I was on the main entrance. Are you sure you don't remember me?

OLD MAN. I'm sorry.

*He shrugs* BUCHANAN *off and moves to the group around* MRS. VEALFOY.

BUCHANAN. Nobody knows me. They've never seen me before. (189)

Buchanan, deflated in his boasting, becomes the Invisible Man.

If Buchanan is modeled on Orton's father, and Edith, to a lesser extent, on Orton's mother, then the grandson Ray is clearly an autobiographical projection like Sloane in *Entertaining Mr Sloane* and Hal and Dennis in *Loot*. They are all hedonistic, carefree, anarchic youths with criminal tendencies. Ray is co-opted into the corporation by Mrs. Vealfoy because he gets Debbie Fieldman, whom he barely knows, pregnant—just like his grandfather did with Edith Anderson. But until that time he expresses free-spirited views that one can find frequently in Orton's diaries.<sup>8</sup> In *The Good and Faithful Servant*, Ray tends to give jokey answers to all questions, as if he were an observer rather

than a character in a play full of moral cant and sanctimoniousness. When he confesses in Scene Six that he does not work, Buchanan is outraged:

BUCHANAN. Not work!?! (He stares, open-mouthed.) What do you do then?

RAY. I enjoy myself.

BUCHANAN. That's a terrible thing to do. I'm bowled over by this, I can tell you. It's my turn to be shocked now. You ought to have a steady job. (167)

Buchanan is the unwitting spokesman for the official values of the state and the corporation, a bit like McLeavy in *Loot*. The irony is heavy. When Buchanan asserts that "Something's missing from your life. Do you know what it is?" Ray frowns, there is a pause, and he asks slyly, "Is it God?" (172). This makes Buchanan pause and he is suspicious: "Who told you about Him?" to which Ray gives a characteristically vaudevillian answer: "I read a bit in the paper once" (172). These are snappy, contemptuous replies, like Ray's explanation of why you shouldn't have sex before marriage: "Because you should save it up, shouldn't you? Make it go further. Thrift, thrift" (173). Orton is having fun with the audience by quoting from Hamlet's bitter denunciation of his mother's quick marriage to Claudius: "Thrift, thrift, Horatio. The funeral baked meats/ Did coldly furnish forth the marriage tables" (1.2.179-80).<sup>9</sup>

*The Good and Faithful Servant* is hardly a tragedy according to the conventional criteria of Aristotle's *Poetics*. By calling it a "Laodicean" tragedy, I want to invoke a different set of ideas more relevant to black comedy. None of the persons in *The Good and Faithful Servant* has much stature nor is there any sense of hubris, or the insolence of challenging the gods or the powers that be. Buchanan is quietly swallowed up by the corporation, but he has introjected the values of the corporation, and his prosaic proselytizing of the rebellious Ray is not very different from what Mrs. Vealfoy, the Personnel Director, would say. Buchanan is a willing victim of corporate culture in the sense that he is rendered passive and without any free will to protest his fate. He suffers from a kind of paralysis that blocks him from taking any action



at all. In this sense, he is, like the Laodiceans, “neither cold nor hot.” Once he resigns—and he has no choice in this matter—he has separated himself from the warm, living body of the corporation, and he begins to die right from the beginning of the play. His doom is sealed. *The Good and Faithful Servant* is a Laodicean tragedy, or black comedy tragedy, not in the sense that no road has been taken, but rather with the idea that there is no road that could have been taken. The characters are paralyzed, frozen, rendered incapable of any action on their own behalf by the soulless corporation.

It is interesting that Orton developed some of the ideas for *The Good and Faithful Servant* in an earlier play called *Fred and Madge*, written in 1959.<sup>10</sup> Fred and Madge both have meaningless jobs, one rolling stones up the hill and the other catching water in a sieve, but they speak seriously and at length about the importance of the work they do and the nameless corporation they serve. Orton thought of himself as a realistic writer, and that is one of the ways that he separated himself from Pinter. Orton was dissatisfied with the staging of most of his plays, which he thought of as too stylized. When his mother died, the only memento that he took from her effects was her false teeth. He took them back to London and he played them like castanets for the cast of *Loot*, who were horrified by this intrusion of reality into what they understood as a stylized farce. Admittedly, *The Good and Faithful Servant* is an anomalous play that does not fit well with the other plays of Orton. It is jokey and ironic, but much too bitter to be farcical. Orton’s assumptions about the world around him must have remained pretty much the same throughout his brief career, but one can see in plays like *Entertaining Mr Sloane*, *Loot*, and especially *What the Butler Saw*, that the playwright sought vigorously to disguise his bitterness in one-liners, epigrams, polymorphous perversity, and knockabout farce.

That is why, even though all of Orton’s plays can be classified as black comedy, *The Good and Faithful Servant* is the blackest of his black comedies. Its sense of despair is unmitigated. Because it is so uncharacteristic of Orton, it is no surprise that it is his least produced and



least discussed play. I have been arguing in this paper for its excellence just because it is so anomalous, so uncompromising, so absolute. *The Good and Faithful Servant* is a remarkably quiet and unviolent play. None of its characters is very expressive and, with the possible exception of the hedonistic Ray, not very witty either. This is not what we have come to expect from Orton. The image of the world we live in—the image of the soulless and mindless corporation—hits us very hard. It is repellent and rebarbative. Those are the very qualities that make the play so strong and so compelling.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Francesca Coppa, ed., *The Visitors and Fred and Madge* (New York: Grove P, 1998) xviii.

<sup>2</sup>Orton is quoted from the edition of *The Complete Plays*, ed. John Lahr (New York: Grove P, 1976).

<sup>3</sup>On an ironic personal note, when I was honored for twenty-five years' service to my university, I received a clock (which didn't work) and an umbrella with the university logo which broke on its first use.

<sup>4</sup>Orton's roommate, Kenneth Halliwell, may have gotten the idea of smashing Orton's head in with a hammer from this scene.

<sup>5</sup>Simon Shepherd, *Because We're Queers: The Life and Crimes of Kenneth Halliwell and Joe Orton* (London: The Gay Men's P, 1989) 120. This is the best analytic study of Orton, especially from a gay perspective. Shepherd challenges the homophobia of John Lahr's biography, *Prick Up Your Ears: The Biography of Joe Orton* (London: Lane, 1978). See also my book on Orton in the Macmillan Modern Dramatists series: *Joe Orton* (London: Macmillan, 1984).

<sup>6</sup>In his article "The Orton Offensive," Ronald Bryden called Orton the "Oscar Wilde of Welfare State gentility" (*Observer* [2 Oct 1966]: 4).

<sup>7</sup>It's a moot point about the relation of *The Good and Faithful Servant* to tragedy. Obviously, Orton's play is black comedy, which is antithetical to tragedy as it is defined by Aristotle. But in productions of Orton, there is no way that pity and fear do not enter in to our reactions. In the original production of *The Good and Faithful Servant* by Rediffusion on 6 April 1967, the cast included Donald Pleasance as Buchanan, Hermione Baddely as Edith, and Patricia Routledge as Mrs.

Vealfoy. There is no way that this stellar cast could have failed to conjure up some pity and fear.

<sup>8</sup>Edited by John Lahr as *The Orton Diaries* (New York: Harper and Row, 1986).

<sup>9</sup>William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. Ann Thomson and Neil Taylor (London: Thomson Learning, 2006).

<sup>10</sup>Recently edited by Francesca Coppa, cited above.

## Pynchon Takes the Fork in the Road<sup>\*1</sup>

ROBERT E. KOHN

*"Even if you forget everything else," Rinpungpa instructs the Yogi, "remember one thing—when you come to a fork in the road, take it." Easy for him to say, of course, being two people at once.*

(Pynchon, *Against the Day* 766)

The enigmatic seal, inscribed in Tibetan, on the dust jacket and final front-fly-page of Thomas Pynchon's *Against the Day* can, with a stretch of the imagination, be interpreted as a caricature of the Tibetan yogi coming to the fork in the road to mythical Shambhala and then looking both ways. The actual quotation is that of the legendary baseball player and Mets manager, Yogi Berra, giving directions to his New Jersey home which was equally accessible along either of the two roads branching out from the fabled fork. This passage in the novel is not just a comic replay of Berra's most famous remark, for "being two people at once" is a recurring theme in *Against the Day*. Pynchon traces the phenomenon back to "the mysterious shamanic power known as bilocation, which enables those with the gift literally to be in two or more places, often widely separated, at the same time" (*Against* 143). The Tibetan scholar W. Y. Evans-Wentz (152, 177, 178) records legends of Padmasambhava's shamanic bilocal power to transform "himself into a pair of hawks," into "Three Chief Teachers" or even into "Five Dhyani Buddhas" (see also Kohn, *Ambivalence* 110). The "memory we carry of having once moved at the speed and density of light," Pynchon explains, makes us "once more able to pass

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\*For debates inspired by this article, please check the *Connotations* website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debkohn01813.htm>>.

where we will, through lantern-horn, through window-glass, eventually, though we risk being divided in two, through Iceland spar" (*Against* 688). The shadowed print on the dust jacket of *Against the Day*, a visual metaphor for the doubly-refractive property of Iceland spar, can be easily replicated with a crystal of this unique but plentiful mineral. When Pynchon fancies bilocated persons—such as Renfrew and Werfner, who were "one and the same person, had been all along," but "somehow had the paranormal power to be in at least two places at the same time, maintaining day-to-day lives at two different universities"—he is perhaps intimating that there are two Pynchons authoring the novel along dissimilar narrative roads (*Against* 685).<sup>2</sup>

I interpret the two roads simultaneously taken in *Against the Day* as the two antithetical approaches to writing identified by Peter J. Rabinowitz. In the first of these, an author of fiction connects with his or her anticipated audience on the basis of mutually established rules; this is what Rabinowitz means when he argues that authors "usually write for readers who are capable of taking *pleasure* in certain aspects of their texts," and it is those readers whom the author takes to be his or her "authorial audience" (7). Along the second authorial road there are *no* rules, and connections between author and readers are problematic because "you can't perform the task unless you know beforehand what [the] directions [for reading] *are*" (Rabinowitz 51). This "Quixotic [...] or idiosyncratic" approach to writing, which Rabinowitz (58) disparages, likewise troubles William Logan, who complains that "[i]t isn't clear whether Pynchon plots by the seat of his pants or has his own secret and impenetrable designs" (233). As befits Rabinowitz's negative appraisal of idiosyncratic writing, some reviewers of *Against the Day* deemed it a failure. "[D]espite its partial achievements," concludes Tom LeClair, this "novel as a whole resembles the zeppelin that appears in its first pages, a giant bag of imaginative hot air." Louis Menand calls it "a very imperfect book. Imperfect not in the sense of 'Ambitious but flawed.' Imperfect in the sense of 'What was he thinking?'" (170). Alternatively, Liesl Schillinger's (10) praise for Pynchon's "idiosyncratic genius" may

signal that some critics are starting to think, as Rabinowitz allowed they might, in terms of some new generic placement within which idiosyncrasy “makes sense” (63).

The authority on idiosyncrasy in postmodern art is Donald Kuspit, and what he says of the idiosyncratic artist helps us to understand the road taken by the second Pynchon: “In this situation, in which every kind of art has been assimilated into the mainstream and seems ‘relevant,’ only the idiosyncratic artist appears to make sense—indeed, the only kind of sense that can be made: personal sense” (3). With some of the same words that Kuspit uses, Rabinowitz hedges his disavowal of idiosyncratic writing by explicitly recognizing the “need to distinguish *interest in the personal* from encouragement of the idiosyncratic” (52; italics added). Though Kuspit suggests that the idiosyncratic artist seems to create “an aurá of intimacy with the viewer in which unconscious communication occurs” (6 *sic*), the communication in *Against the Day* may be subtle but it is hardly unconscious. And there is no question in the case of Pynchon’s novel, that “the idiosyncratic work seems to encourage, even induce it” (Kuspit 6). In this essay I discern special connections between author and readers along the second road, in which individual readers’ “own secret idiosyncrasy can safely, if unexpectedly appear” (Kuspit 7). This second road in *Against the Day* is for an audience attuned or attunable to the idiosyncratic. LeClair cynically suggested that “[t]he only readers (besides responsible reviewers) I can imagine finishing *Against the Day* are the Pynchonists, the fetishizing collectors of P-trivia.” However, there are many such readers, and they are part of a much larger interpretative community that, if Kuspit is correct, takes aesthetic pleasure in the idiosyncratic. Stanley Fish anticipated such an interpretive community in which the only proof of membership is “the nod of recognition from someone in the same community, someone who says to you what neither of us could ever prove to a third party: we know” (173). Crystal L. Downing clarifies Fish’s concept when she notes that “‘interpretive communities’ establish the

meaning of a text, reading it according to the assumptions, values and goals of their particular subculture" (90).

The contrasting roads in *Against the Day* correspond to Ihab Hassan's contention that "modernism [...] is largely formalistic/hierarchical" and "postmodernism, [...] antiformalistic/anarchic" (xiii). This suggests that the first Pynchon in our model, being formalistic, is modernist and the second, being idiosyncratic, is postmodernist. Logan invokes the modernist/postmodernist dichotomy when he speaks of the "bittersweet sadness" of *Against the Day* in "a *fin de siècle* world [1893 to 1913] that had only begun to adore science and invention, a world that had not yet learned to distrust them" (246). The American years, *circa* 1893 to 1960, of naïve enthusiasm for scientific and technological progress, are now called modernist. Although World War I was a "heroic disaster," Logan sees the period that followed it as one in which "the common man might have thought things were looking up. Pynchon's task has been to remind us that the worse was to come" (246). Logan foreshadows postmodernism's backlash against the utopian expectations of modernity (see Kohn, "Unwitting Witness"). Pynchon's transition from *The Crying of Lot 49* to *Against the Day* traces his own path from ethos-based postmodernism to late-postmodern stylistics (see Kohn, "Pynchon's Transition").

The postmodern ethos is aptly described by Andreas Huyssen, as a cultural reaction "to a one-way history of modernism which interprets it as a logical unfolding toward some imaginary goal" (49). "Postmodernism is far from making modernism obsolete," insists Huyssen; what

has become obsolete, however, are those codifications of modernism in critical discourse which, however subliminally, are based on a teleological view of progress and modernization. Ironically, these normative and often reductive codifications have actually prepared the ground for that repudiation of modernism which goes by the name of the postmodern. (49)

Huyssen reiterates that "such rejection affects only that trend within modernism which has been codified into a narrow dogma, not mod-



ernism as such" (49). That "narrow dogma," which is often distinguished as 'modernity,' was the one-sided celebration of science, technology and progress, which in turn privileged elitist intellectualism and pompous rationalism. In Pynchon's words, written almost midway between *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Against the Day*, what doomed modernity and triggered postmodernism was that "cheerful army of technocrats who were supposed to have the 'future in their bones'" ("Luddite" 41). These utopian modernists naively believed that they would cure cancer, prevent nuclear extinction, end starvation, eliminate pollution and "realize all the wistful pipe dreams of our days" ("Luddite" 41). Their expectations for science, technology, progress, and rationalism were carried to such excess that Jean-François Lyotard was moved to "define *postmodern* as incredulity toward metanarratives," which was his word for sweeping, utopian conceptual schemes (xxiv). One of those modernist metanarratives was that science had obviated religion. Crystal L. Downing bitterly blames nineteenth-century scientists for having "demolished the Christian edifice for the English speaking world" (63). In turn, she is grateful to postmodernists for "undermin[ing the] assumptions of secular humanism," which they did by crediting sources other than science alone for knowledge and discernment (26). It is compatible with these views of Hassan, Huyssen, Lyotard and Downing that Brian McHale sees modernism as "dominated by epistemological issues" and postmodernism as "dominated by ontological issues" (xii).

The first section of this essay, following the introduction, focuses on the rules-oriented road taken by the first Pynchon, particularly as it applies to history. The second section examines the idiosyncratic road that the second Pynchon travels, giving special attention to his surreptitious communications with individual readers. The third section builds on implications in *Against the Day* that modernity wasn't as naïve as the rules-oriented Pynchon and other scholars once took it to be. The fourth section follows the idiosyncratic road as far as it goes. In the concluding section, the two roads and the two Pynchons come together to mark the dead end of the postmodern ethos. *Against*

*the Day* starts at the onset of what Franco Berardi calls “the beginning of the century that believed in the future” (39), the century that subsequently included Pynchon’s “cheerful army of technocrats” who had “the future in their bones” (“Luddite” 41). It was in that century that Alvin Toffler foresaw “a roaring current of technological and sociological change, which would usher in “shattering stress and disorientation” (3, 4). We are now, Berardi says, at “the beginning of the century with no future” (39). In this new age of aggravated change, uncertainty, and complexity, the old modernism has evolved into a dystopian modernism that cannot be repudiated as the old one could. What Robert L. McLaughlin calls “for lack of a better term, post-postmodernism” (55), Paul Virilio aptly calls “hypermodernism” (18, 98).<sup>3</sup> This name for the new modernism hauntingly resonates in the repetitious reference to a “hyper-hyperboloid” on the final page of *Against the Day* (see also Goldford, Irvine and Kohn).

### The Rules-Based Road

The road taken by the first Pynchon corresponds to the approach to writing in which author and reader participate in a “rule-governed activity” (Rabinowitz 48). The over-arching rule in *Against the Day*, as perceived by Logan, is that “Pynchon writes neither counterfactual history nor historical fiction” (227). According to that double standard, all the historical background events of the novel are necessarily factual, but in no way do the characters that experience those events recreate any of “the small details” that make up the genuine “archeological” reality of that past (Logan 227). This is not as easy a rule for the authorial audience to pick up as Rabinowitz might have thought, because the first road is frequently obstructed by ‘red herrings’ which falsely suggest that individual historical events are fictional. There is the alleged attendance at the 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago of the ill-fated Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand, that seems counterfactual because it appears in a paragraph that suspiciously ends

with the archduke perceiving his visit as “a warm invitation to rewrite history” (*Against* 45). There is a hurricane in Galveston that kills six thousand people, the description of which is enigmatically followed by a reference to “that frightful bomb,” and finally, the “rising dust-cloud” that the Campanile in Venice “collapsed into” in 1902 is witnessed along with “two skyecraft slid[ing] away at angles” (*Against* 188, 256). Pynchon’s almost-subliminal red herrings suggest that these particular happenings are fake surrogates for the tumultuous assassination that started World War I, the atomic bombing of Hiroshima, and the devastating collapse of the World Trade Center Towers on 9/11. Because so many of the novel’s events, though they are staged in the early 1900s, portend crises that subsequently occurred in the reader’s era, he or she is likely to be surprised to learn, most likely through internet searches, that the Archduke *did* attend the Exposition in 1893, that a hurricane *did* kill thousands of Galvestonians in 1900, and that the Campanile *did* collapse in 1902, but from structural faults. Logan must also have been diverted by the same red herrings, because the three examples he uses to illustrate how “Pynchon bends his narratives around historical events” are “the Exposition, the collapse of the Campanile in Venice, [and] the Galveston hurricane” (227).

It is a *tour de force* on Pynchon’s part that he makes important events *seem* to be counterfactual even though they turn out to have been real. This misleadingly inclines the reader to believe that arcane but feasible details associated with the genuine events are likewise factual. With some surfing on the internet, one discovers Hubert Bancroft’s voluminous reportage of the Exposition which confirms that “Archduke Ferdinand, heir apparent to the throne of Austria, was among the [royal] pilgrims of the Fair” (971). This validation—presumably it was from Bancroft that Pynchon acquired this esoteric bit of information in the first place—sets up the reader to believe Pynchon’s intriguing account of Franz Ferdinand telling his Chicago hosts that back in Austria, “we have forests full of game and hundreds of beaters who drive the animals toward the hunters such as myself

who are waiting to shoot them,” then asking his hosts if they “think the Chicago Stockyards might possibly be rented out to me and my friends, for a weekend’s amusement? We would of course compensate the owners for any loss of revenue” (*Against* 46). What appears to be a juicy bit of historical fiction is not that at all, because it is totally inconsistent with supplementary information in Bancroft that, though the Archduke attended the fair, “few at the time were aware of it, for he came merely as a visitor and avoided all publicity” (971). That two skycraft slid away at angles over the Venice tower illustrates the kind of red herrings Pynchon uses to give the impression that historical events are counterfactual, which they never are, whereas the archduke’s hunting escapade in the Chicago stockyards illustrates the kind of red herrings that give the impression of being historical fiction, which they never are (Logan 226).<sup>4</sup>

There is an extravagant claim in the novel about a heat wave in Europe during World War I that sent me beyond the internet for validation. According to Pynchon,

That summer had been memorable for its high temperatures. All Europe sweltered. Wine grapes turned on the vine to raisins overnight. Piles of hay cut and gathered early as June burst spontaneously into flame. Wildfires travelled the Continent, crossing borders, leaping ridgelines and rivers with impunity. Naturist cults were overcome with a terrible fear that the luminary they worshipped had betrayed them and now consciously planned Earth’s destruction. (1018)

I contacted Ahira Sanchez-Lugo at the National Climactic Data Center, Asheville, North Carolina, who sent me a copy of an article entitled “Heat Wave Decreases Wine Production in Madeira,” published in the October 1919 issue of the *Monthly Weather Review* (Vol. 47.10), advising that in August of 1919 the island of Madeira “was almost ‘smothered’” by extreme warmth (750). During that period, the

temperature in the sun was as high as 135°. The grapes dried up rapidly, and although many of them were just about ready to be picked at that time, [...] this year’s wine production [...] represented] a depreciation of nearly 40% on the previous estimate. (750)

However, Madeira is off the coast of *Africa* and the event occurred *after* World War One ended. With regard to the alleged heat wave in Europe proper, Ms. Sanchez-Lugo directed me to Peer Hechler and Gerhard Müller-Westermeier of Deutscher Wetterdienst, Offenbach am Main, who in turn sent me the following graph produced by Deutscher Wetterdienst indicating that there could have been a relative heat wave in Germany in 1917. However, when I asked Enric Aguilar of the Geography Department at the University Rovira i Virgili de Tarragona if that 1917 heat wave, presumably in June according to Pynchon's novel, had been experienced in Spain, he found that "nothing really exceptional" in the way of monthly maximums or number of hot or very hot days had been reported for that June, either at stations near the shore or in the interior of Spain.

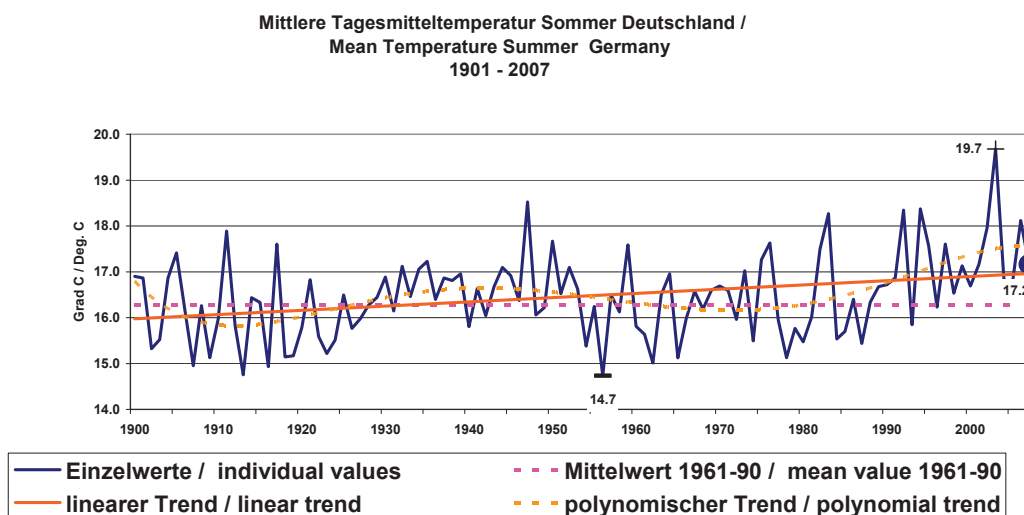


Figure 1. Mean Summer Temperature in Germany, 1901-2007

The biggest heat wave recorded on the Deutscher Wetterdienst graph took place in 2003, and it occurred throughout Europe as well as in Spain. It killed over 50,000 people, withered crops, dried up rivers and spread fires, making it one of the deadliest climate-related disasters in Western history. Just as the Galveston hurricane is conflated with Hiroshima, and the collapse of the Campanile with 9/11, so Pynchon may be conflating a relatively minor heat wave in 1917 with the catastrophic heat wave in August of 2003. The fact that rivers dried up in 2003 could have given him the idea to have wildfires leap across

“rivers with impunity” (*Against* 1018). In the case of the counterfactual heat wave, Pynchon appears to have honored his rule *against* historical fiction, because the paragraph immediately following the above includes some of the novel’s main characters. This particular red herring may have something to do with the unfortunate fact that *Against the Day* was published when George W. Bush’s administration was disputing the mainstream science on global warming.

Why has Pynchon written a novel that is “neither counterfactual history nor historical fiction” (Logan 227)? Surely this quixotic jumble of truth and falsehood is what Joseph Carroll calls “a source of confusion and disorientation.” According to the new field of literary Darwinism, “the arts evolved as a means for counterbalancing this [kind of] confusion” (Carroll, *Darwinism* 82). The psychological function of literature, in Carroll’s view, is to provide “order by depicting the peculiarities of time and place—of cultural context, individual circumstance, and personal character—and by integrating these particularities with the elemental structures of human concerns” (*Darwinism* 115-16). There is evidence in *Against the Day* that Pynchon was aware of the meteoric rise of evolutionary literary studies; its most ardent advocate could deservedly boast that “[m]ore than a hundred articles, three special journal issues, four edited collections, and about a dozen free-standing books have been devoted to the topic” (Carroll, “Evolutionary” 103). However Pynchon would surely have recognized that this new movement was the latest of the “grand narratives that claim to be based on, or compatible with, science and which offer comprehensive accounts of human existence” (Seamon 262). In Carroll’s words the most ambitious of the literary Darwinists “aim at fundamentally altering the paradigm within which literary study is now conducted” (“Evolutionary” 105). With respect to the discombobulating mixture of the factual and the counterfactual in *Against the Day*, Torben Grodal, one of many literary theorists who welcome evolutionary literary studies as an augmentation, not a replacement of existing critical methodologies, argues that confusions in artistic presentation can serve “as means of strengthening



mechanisms for imagining counterfactual situations" (193). Whereas Carroll's emphasis on literature that integrates "particularities with the elemental structures of human concerns" was probably more adaptive in the Victorian period (see Chapter 8 in Carroll's *Literary Darwinism*), counterfactual and disorderly presentations may be more adaptive in our hypermodern age.<sup>5</sup> To Carroll's credit, he "continue[s] to refine [his] understanding of the elements in the model" and is extending its purview to "dystopian literature" and "counterfactual reasoning" (Carroll, "Rejoinder" 315, "Evolutionary" 131; Swirski 298).

### The Idiosyncratic Road

Schillinger observes that one of this "novel's *idées fixes* is that mysterious agents are trying to send messages to individuals and to humanity at large" (10). The messages are typically incorporated in idiosyncratic pieces of text—Logan calls them "*culs de sac*"—that make "the reader wonder whether Pynchon's novels are planned in any conventional sense or [are] mere constructions of whim plus steroids" (Logan 233). I was especially intrigued by three such *culs de sac* that mention "wrathful deities." Nodding "at a scroll on the desk," Lew Basnight guesses that it represents "a series of wrathful deities from Tantric Buddhism" (*Against* 612). Next, Kit Traverse enigmatically comments that "Out here pilgrimage is a matter of kind and wrathful deities" (774). In the third example, the skyship comes close to the ground, and Lieutenant Prance, who is on the ground searching for Shambhalla, shouts up to the crew: "'Are you kind deities? Or wrathful deities?' 'We endeavor to be kind,'" one of the crew shouts back and another snarls "Me, I'm wrathful" (787). Kuspit's view that idiosyncrasy makes only "personal sense" suggests that the references to "wrathful deities," which have nothing substantive to do with any on-going narratives in *Against the Day*, may be meant as personal communications. I dared to think that Pynchon had read my 2003 essay on *The*

*Crying of Lot 49* in which I compared Dr. Hilarius's "Fu-Manchu" face, his "number 37," to "that of a Wrathful Deity in the *Bardo*" ("Seven Buddhist Themes" 81). Could my mention of the *Bardo* have likewise prompted Pynchon to idiosyncratically compare Kit's slipping from the hold of the Habsburg steamship to his being "reincarnated from some intermediate or *Bardo* state" (*Against* 521)?

Carried away by the novel's aura of intimacy and my own vanity, I began to imagine that Pynchon was signaling me his assent to the opening sentence of my 2003 essay in which I claim that "*The Crying of Lot 49* can be better understood (or at least some of its ambiguity resolved) in the context of Tibetan Buddhism" ("Seven Buddhist Themes" 73). I went so far as to imagine that the round red seal inscribed in Tibetan on the novel's dust-jacket was a communication meant for me, though it is much more likely—because I first learned about the 49-day limit of the *Bardo*, and hence the connection of *The Crying of Lot 49* to Tibetan Buddhism, from earlier works by Robert D. Newman (82), Pierre-Yves Petillon (137) and Judith Chambers (116)—that if Pynchon were communicating with anyone about Buddhism in *The Crying of Lot 49*, it would be with them. It made sense that he would do so, given that *Against the Day*, published 40 years after *The Crying of Lot 49*, may have been meant in part to communicate with the hundreds of literary critics who have written books and articles about this seminal postmodern novel. Surely a 40th anniversary, the author's 70th birthday, and a third of a century of presumably lonely reclusiveness from his authorial audience could explain why Pynchon might want to create the "aurá of intimacy" with particular readers that Kuspit associates with idiosyncrasy (6 *sic*). Actually, if Pynchon had read my article and did send a message to me, like the snarling "Me, I'm wrathful," it may have been sardonic. Alternatively, it is well known that Pynchon admired Jorge Luis Borges—he specifically mentions his name on page 264 of *Gravity's Rainbow*. Borges wrote two erudite non-fiction articles on Buddhism, which were fortuitously translated and published when Pynchon started work on *Against the Day* (*Borges: Selected Non-Fictions*). Indeed, the games that Borges plays

with history in *Ficciones* may have inspired the comparable games in *Against the Day*.

In much of the novel, Kit Traverse searches for “Shambhala,” (257, 435-36, 447, 550-51, 607, 609, 628, 631, 686, 735, 748-50, 766, 772, 790-91, 793, 975, 1081), an “ancient metropolis of the spiritual, some say inhabited by the living, others say empty, in ruins, buried someplace beneath the desert sands of Inner Asia. And of course there are always those who’ll tell you that the true Shambhala lies within” (*Against* 628). When Kit Traverse decides that “Tannu Tuva” is the hidden Shambhala (790), he strikes an idiosyncratic chord with a whole generation of readers who collected stamps in their childhood and remember the dramatic, brightly-colored triangular-shaped stamps imported at a pittance, un-cancelled and in mint-condition, from Tannu Tuva, which between 1926 and 1933 had produced them primarily for the western philatelic market, rather than for domestic postage. A small country on the border of Russia, Mongolia and Tibet, Tannu Tuva was absorbed into Russia before World War II. Not until the end of the novel does Pynchon explicitly refer to the “mint, never-hinged, superbly-centered Shambhala postage stamps” (1081). It is rare, and possibly nostalgic on his part, that the usually cryptic author would explain an enigmatic signifier that appeared earlier in the same novel.

An intimate scene in the novel involves Dally Rideout in New York “in her first time in a department store” (*Against* 346). At some distance, she sees a woman shopper with an “egret plume on her hat” whom she thinks is her mother, Erlys Zombini. The woman is

not looking at Dally in particular but somehow demanding her attention. Before the clarity of the apparition, Dally knew she had to get an immediate grip on herself, because if she didn’t, the next thing she knew, she’d be running over there screaming, to embrace some woman who would of course turn out to be a stranger, and all the embarrassment, maybe even legal action, that was sure to go with that. (347)

Surely, no novelist has ever simulated so accurately the intrusive thoughts symptomatic of OCD (obsessive-compulsive disorder). Their

typical pattern is all too familiar to those who suffer from it. First there is the idiosyncratic and seemingly unpreventable urge to precipitate some inappropriate act; next there is the imagined embarrassment of being confronted by the shocked and innocent victim; then the imagined shame and loss at facing severe but deserved legal punishment. Finally there are the compulsive rituals to reduce the mounting anxiety; in Dally's case, she has to go all the way down to the basement, making "sure on every floor to look for her, but the woman, tall, fair, perhaps not real to begin with, had vanished" (347). To heighten the idiosyncrasy of this strange insertion, the psychiatric syndrome is not mentioned by name in the text, but is sequestered in subsequent references to a "compulsive promenade" and to an "obsessive friend" (561, 1046).

In the same area of mental illness, there are a number of gratuitous references in *Against the Day* to "idiots," "madness," "lunatics," "insanity," and to going "mad" or "a little crazy" that are likewise idiosyncratic (825, 1074, 790, 828, 863, 864, 902, 908, 870, 880). Kit's confidence that Shambhala is located at Tannu Tuva, for example, is based on nothing more substantive than that he "left somebody there at the edge of madness who was making a good argument that's where it is" (*Against* 790). It is possible that Pynchon is signifying Brooks Adams's posthumous republication of his brother Henry's *Letter to American Teachers of History*, an arcane source for Pynchon's thoughts on entropy, in which Brooks inserted 46 new lines that do not appear in the original. This 46-line insertion, the only substantive alteration made by Brooks, concludes with the assertions that the human race is "progressing in a downward direction" and, based on numbers published by Dr. Forbes Winslow, "that in three hundred years one half the population should be insane or idiotic" (*Degradation* 254). The spurious lines, based on Brooks's flagrant misreading and mishandling of Winslow's data, would explain Pynchon's (102) charge in *The Crying of Lot 49* that "the 'Whitechapel' edition [of 'The Courier's Tragedy' ...] abounds in such corrupt and probably spurious lines" that it "is hardly to be trusted," as well as the allusion in the

context of Rinpungpa and the “fork in the road” in *Against the Day* (766) to “a variant currently for sale, which contains lines that do not appear in other versions” (see Kohn, “Corrupt”). One wonders whether Pynchon gave watery names to the two wayward Traverse siblings, “Lake” and “Reef,” to make a connection to “Brooks A[dams].” Alternatively, it may be that all of the references to madness, lunacy and even OCD in *Against the Day* are meant to signify what Toffler called “the cumulative impact of sensory, cognitive or decisional overstimulation” that is “increasingly mirrored in our culture” and has “become a staple in literature” (324).

The idiosyncratic writing of the second Pynchon peaks with the psychotic who, as a psychiatrist tells Kit, “has come to believe that he is a certain well-known pastry of Berlin—similar to your own American, as you would say, *jelly-doughnut*” (*Against* 626). To get him to “accept the literal truth of his delusion,” he is brought “to a certain Konditorei” in nearby Göttingen,

where he is all over powdered with *Puderzucker* and allowed to sit, or actually recline, up on a shelf ordinarily reserved for the pastries. When he starts in with his “*Ich bin ein Berliner*,” most customers try only to correct his diction, as if he is from Berlin and has meant to say “*Ich bin Berliner*”—though sometimes he is *actually purchased*—“Did you want a bag for that, madam?” “Oh, no, no thank you, I’ll eat it right here if I may.” (*Against* 626-27)

*That* should “bring him back to reality,” Kit says to the psychiatrist who is telling him this story; “*Ach*, but no,” the doctor replies, “he only remains inert, even when they attempt to ... *bite into*—” (627). Although this idiosyncratic foray verges on the bawdy—unless I am misreading that final dash through my own secret idiosyncrasy—it is at the same time sophisticated, given the allusion to the hullabaloo over correct German diction that John Kennedy set off a half-century later in Berlin.

## Modernism Becomes Complex along the Rules-Oriented Road

Modernism is said to have begun in America with the Chicago Columbian Exposition of 1893, which may explain why Pynchon began *Against the Day* in that venue. In his eponymous biography, Henry Adams recorded the enthusiasm for human progress through scientific and technological advancement that he felt in his visit to the Chicago World's Fair. Although he marveled at the exhibits on railroads, explosives, dynamos, electric batteries and telephones, Adams was most impressed by the fantastic displays of the Cunard Steamship Company before which, this "student hungry for results found himself obliged to waste a pencil and several sheets of paper trying to calculate exactly when, according to the given increase of power, tonnage, and speed, the growth of the ocean steamer would reach its limits" (341). His on-the-spot calculations resonate on the penultimate page of *Against the Day* in the description of an airship "grown as large as a small city" (1084).

Modernism is hailed by turn-of-the-nineteenth-century denizens of *Against the Day* for its "electric runabouts, flush toilets, 1,200-volt trolley dynamos and other wonders of the modern age" (65). In this fabulous *fin de siècle* world, there was plenty of bell-hanger work for Merle Rideout:

[A] sudden huge demand was spreading throughout the Midwest for electric bells, doorbells, hotel annunciators, elevator bells, fire and burglar alarms—you sold them and installed them on the spot, walked away down the front path counting out your commission while the customer stood there with her finger on the buzzer like she couldn't get enough of the sound. (*Against* 72-73)

This delightful passage echoes the beginning of capitalistic consumerism, abetted by the utopian promise of Nikola Tesla's "project of free universal power for everybody" (158). The mere mention of words like "laboratories" and "experiments" stirred excitement, as did the anticipation of scientific miracles like "wireless waves, [...] Roentgen rays, whatever rays are coming next. Seems every day somebody's



discovering another new piece of the spectrum, out there beyond visible light" (670).

But modernism had more to it than people's enthusiasm for scientific and technological progress. There was a utopian anarchism in the early twentieth century, with which Pynchon originally sympathized. This sympathy appears to have been foreshadowed in *The Crying of Lot 49* by the deaf-mute dancers in the ballroom of the Claremont Hotel in Oakland:

Each couple on the floor danced whatever was in the fellow's head: tango, two-step, bossa nova, slop. But how long, Oedipa thought, could it go on before collisions became a serious hindrance? There would have to be collisions. [...] But none came. (131)

That none came—"Jesús Arrabal would have called it an anarchist miracle"—could only have been explained by "some unthinkable order of music, many rhythms, all keys at once, a choreography in which each couple meshed easy, predestined. Something they all heard with an extra sense" (*Crying* 131, 132). The very idea of an "anarchist miracle" intimates that Pynchon himself had thought in modern utopian terms. Joseph Losos reveals that Henry Adams "claimed to have been a conservative anarchist," which might have pointed Pynchon in that direction—though Losos argues that "in truth he [Adams] was nothing of the sort" (411). Disturbed by the Vietnam War and by underhanded government crackdowns on drug use, Pynchon might have been theoretically open to an anarchy in which socially responsible citizens acted on their own, unconstrained by narrow-minded bureaucrats.

Forty years later, in *Against the Day*, on another dance floor, couples are "dancing at a number of different speeds, trying to arrive someplace recognizable at the end of each four bars, everybody crashing into furniture, walls, each other, staggering away from these collisions at unpredictable angles, giggling incessantly" (902). The rules-oriented Pynchon appears to have backed away from the utopian vision of anarchy in his earlier novel, though he remained sympathetic, arguing in their favor that anarchists in the American

west avoided bloodshed and intended to blow up only “company outbuildings” and “electric power junctions” (*Against* 217). Reef Traverse pointedly expressed the view that “as civilization comes creeping out from back east, authorities tend to [...] tell you, ‘Don’t take the law into your own hands’” (654). Pynchon may have turned away from anarchism because its position “that the centralized nation-state [...] has lost all credibility with the population” sounded too much like the now discredited Reaganesque view that government is the problem, not the solution (938). The novel describes a deadly suicide bombing in a crowded café in Nice, “just the kind of bourgeois target anarchists love to bomb” (850). Suddenly it happened,

this great blossoming of disintegration—a dense, prolonged shower of glass fragments, [...] human blood everywhere, blood arterial, venous and capillary, fragments of bone and cartilage and soft tissue, wood splinters of all sizes from the furniture, shrapnel of tin, zinc and brass, from torn ragged sheets down to the tiny nails in picture frames, nitrous fumes, fluid unfurlings of smoke too black to see through. (850)

That Pynchon occasionally expresses a utopian nostalgia for anarchy in *Against the Day*—he goes so far as to capitalize the word (as for example on pages 175, 181 and 372), which he never did in *The Crying of Lot 49*—may reflect his dismay that the foremost doomsayer for biodiversity, Edward O. Wilson, demeaned “philosophical postmodernists [as] a rebel crew milling beneath *the black flag of anarchy*, challeng[ing] the very foundations of science and traditional philosophy” (40; emphasis added). Pynchon would not be alone in such a reaction to the environmentalist’s latest book; Frank Kelleter deplors that “the neo-natural turn” that Joseph Carroll envisions for the humanities “quotes Wilson’s agenda of ‘consilience’ as if it was an uncontroversial, almost self-evident program” (222, 228).

Much of *Against the Day* takes place in Europe, where modernity’s fascination with science and technology was also taking place. It was in Venice around 1910 that Dally met another of the novel’s fictional characters, the painter Andrea Tancredi, who “sympathized with Marinetti and those around him who were beginning to describe

themselves as ‘Futurists’” (*Against* 584). This historic movement, an aggressive response to modernism, began in Milan in 1908 under the leadership of Filippo Marinetti. Its “first manifesto demanded the destruction of the libraries, the museums, the academies, and the cities of the past that were themselves mausoleums. It extolled the beauties of revolution, of war, of the speed and dynamism of modern technology” (Arnason 212). In what readers might at first take to be an example of the second Pynchon’s idiosyncrasy, Tancredi tells Dally, as he scowls at Venice:

“Look at it. Someday we’ll tear the place down, and use the rubble to fill in those canals. Take apart the churches, salvage the gold, sell off what’s left to collectors. The new religion will be public hygiene, whose temples will be waterworks and sewage-treatment plants. [...] All these islands will be linked by motorways. Electricity everywhere, anyone who still wants Venetian moonlight will have to visit a museum. Colossal gates out here, all around the Lagoon, for the wind, to keep out sirocco and bora alike.” (*Against* 585)

Though it does sound idiosyncratic, Tancredi’s vow to tear Venice down is compatible with the creed of Italian Futurism, and is therefore the kind of factual history that Logan expected from the rules-oriented Pynchon. Although Tancredi later confesses to Dally that, unlike “Marinetti and his circle, [...] I really love the old dump,” it would violate Logan’s rule against historical fiction that a character in *Against the Day* would correctly express the attitudes of his time. In this case, however, the historicity is violated by the implication that colossal sea-gates for Venice were conceived back in 1910, which they were not, and that they were intended to keep out sirocco and bora winds. The siroccos are a cause of flooding only because they stir up the ocean. The gates were planned much later, in 1995, to protect Venice from flood, not wind. That last sentence of Tancredi’s incredible monologue is the red herring that upholds the first Pynchon’s rule against historical fiction.

In contrast to modernity’s view of itself as utopian, the first Pynchon emphasizes its darker side. The Italian Futurists’ “comfortless faith in science and rationality” (*Against* 585) was evolving into an extreme

political activism, rooted in “the prevalent atmosphere of anarchism” and in hostility to “a lopsided aristocratic and bourgeois society” that “unfortunately became a pillar of Italian fascism” (Arnason 212). America too had its brush with fascism. Late in the winter of 1914, near the end of *Against the Day*, Estrella (Stray) and her son Jesse are among the sympathizers living in the “tent colony at Ludlow,” occupied mostly by striking coal miners and their families (1007). When the Colorado National Guard, which the governor called up to support the mine owners, finally closed in on the strikers, tents were set on fire, and

the troopers made sounds of animal triumph. Shots kept ripping across the perilous night. Sometimes they connected, and strikers, and children and their mothers, and even troopers and camp guards, took bullets or fought flames, and fell in battle. But it happened, each casualty, one by one, in light that history would be blind to. The only accounts would be the militia’s. (*Against* 1016)

In his review of a new book on the 1914 Ludlow strike, Caleb Crain confirms, although he does not use the word “fascism,” that “[o]nce the National Guard was deployed, its general claimed the powers of martial law, holding prisoners incommunicado, setting up a military commission to review detention, and threatening to jail a local district attorney if he interfered” (80). In testimony before Congress, John D. Rockefeller, Jr. claimed “that the miners were striking against their will, coerced by outside agitators, and that his company was fighting for the workers’ freedom” (Crain 80).

It would violate Logan’s rule against historical fiction that the characters, Stray and Jesse, shed light on a tragic, but short-lived triumph of fascism in America. The red herring here is Pynchon’s statement that the account of the miners’ deaths “would be that of the militia’s only.” It is well-known that the best records were kept, not by the mine company’s militia, but by the United Mine Workers, which purchased Ludlow after it became a ghost town and erected a monument on which are inscribed the names and ages of the 19 men, women, children and babies that were killed. It attests to the connection

of the Ludlow strike to modernism that the tent colony “was nicknamed White City, for the color of its tents and in homage to the white buildings at the 1893 Chicago World’s Fair” (Crain 78).

Just as modernism was less utopian than postmodernists believed, so it was more spiritual. Whereas critics like John A. McClure and Crystal L. Downing accentuate modernity’s secularism, the first Pynchon uncovers a host of arcane but flourishing spiritualities in that supposed heyday of secular humanism. The morphing of mathematics and physics into spirituality is exemplified at the University of Göttingen where Leopold Kronecker “believed ‘the positive integers were created by God’” and that “‘all else is the work of man’” (*Against* 593). So intense was the mixture of mathematics and faith in Göttingen that, when the brilliant “Yashmeen had to leave” the university, it was like her being “expelled from the garden” (663). For Pynchon, who writes of “invisibility [as] a sacred condition,” imagines “the invisible taking on substance” and senses “affirmation from the far invisible,” the very word “invisible” is a metaphor for transcendence (*Against* 43, 164, 165). The modernist contradiction between religion and rationality is resolved by buildings “solidly constructed on the principles of Invisibilism, a school of modern architecture which believed that the more ‘rationally’ a structure was designed, the *less visible* would it appear” (*Against* 625). Pynchon’s use of “invisibility” as a metaphor for spirituality appears to have been inspired by Thomas Luckmann’s book, *The Invisible Religion*. Although Luckmann admitted to statistical evidence of declining church populations, he argued that “church-oriented religion is merely one and perhaps not even the most important element [...] that characterizes religion in modern society” (28). The “[human] organism,” he explains, “transcends its biological nature by developing a Self” in a “fundamentally religious” process that is “mysterious” (50, 58). Because “individual religiosity” is not as visible as “church-oriented religiosity,” Luckmann calls it invisible religion (70, 76).

The intermixture of the sacred and the profane explains the brief appearance of “the noted Uyghur troublemaker Al Mar-Fuad” in his

“English tweeds,” his “deerstalker cap turned sidewise,” and “an ancient Greening shotgun whose brasswork carried holy inscriptions in Arabic” (*Against* 757). Because English speakers generally pronounce Uyghur as “Weegur” instead of the native “Oogur,” this Uyghur troublemaker announces “Gweetings, gentlemen, on this Glowious Twelfth! [...] I am here to deliver a message fwom my master, the Doowswa [. . .] Them I am going out after some gwouse,” sounding very much like Looney Tunes’ harmless Elmer J. Fudd (757). There’s a political message here because 17 Islamic Uyghurs had been prisoners at Guantanamo Bay since it opened, even though “the Bush administration had conceded that none of [them . . .] were enemy combatants” (Glaberson A6). Not until June 12, 2009 were the first of the Uyghurs released, prompting a specialist on detention issues at the Center for American Progress in Washington to exult: “This is ‘closing Guantanamo.’ This is what it looks like” (Glaberson A6).

#### Along the Idiosyncratic Road as Far as it Goes

Using hyperbole and ridicule, the second Pynchon mocks modernity’s enthusiasm for science. Immediately after his bilocated other zealously describes Merle Rideout’s commercial success selling electric doorbells, he comes up with a burlesque tale of Merle’s next, brief hitch—selling lightning protection. On “his first, and as it turned out only, ball-lightning job,” Merle tries to catch one upstairs in a Midwestern farmhouse, using an “insulated cage” that is “hooked to a sal ammoniac battery to try and trap the critter in” (*Against* 73). Eventually the ball lightning starts to trust his pursuer and approaches him. “Merle thought he could feel a little heat, and of course his hair was standing on end” (73). He addresses the ball lightning, who replies, “My name is Skip, what’s yours?” (73). He gets Merle to agree to never “send [him] to ground, it’s no fun there” and to “forget that cage,” and from “then on the ball lightning, or ‘Skip,’ was never far from Merle’s side” (73, 74).



The idiosyncratic Pynchon has a heyday with relativity theory. He describes an advanced weapons-sighting device, allegedly in use in 1900, with which “gunners were abolishing Time—what they saw ‘now’ in the sights was in fact what did not yet exist *but would only be* a few seconds from ‘now’” (*Against* 256). Even Luca Zombini, the professional magician in *Against the Day*, had “long been interested in modern science and the resources it made available to conjurors, among these the Nicol prism and the illusionary uses of double refraction” (*Against* 354). Luca explains to his daughters, including his step-daughter Dally, how he saws his assistants in half:

“You already know about this stuff here.” Bringing out a small, near-perfect crystal of Iceland spar. “Doubles the image, the two overlap, with the right sort of light, the right lenses, you can separate them in stages, a little further each time, step by step till in fact it becomes possible to saw somebody in half *optically*, and instead of two different pieces of one body, there are now two complete individuals walking around, who are identical in every way, *capisci?*” (355)

In the ensuing exchange with her father, Bria asks Luca if it’s “a happy ending. Do they go back to being one person again?” (355). A little defensive, Luca stares at his shoes and replies:

“No, and that’s been kind of a running problem here. Nobody can figure out—”

“Oh, Pop.”

“—how to reverse it. I’ve been everywhere, asked everybody, college professors, people in the business, even Harry Houdini himself, no dice. Meanwhile ...”

“[D]on’t tell me.”

“Yeah.”

“Well, how many?”

“Maybe ... two or three?”

“*Porca miseria*, so that’s four or six, right? You realize you could get sued for that?” (*Against* 355)

Coming only eight pages after Dally has the episode of OCD, it appears that her catastrophizing half-sister, Bria, has the same genetic disorder. We almost wonder whether Pynchon, having imagined

himself passing “through Iceland spar” and “being divided in two,” is starting to worry about himself (*Against* 688).

Kitsch, which is garish art or text generally considered to be in bad taste, has long been postmodernism’s in-your-face response to modernity’s intellectual elitism. The idiosyncratic Pynchon takes kitsch well over the top when Reef, thinking that there was something “flirtatious” going on between Mouffette and himself, gets an erection and invites her to jump on his lap:

“Oboy, oboy.” He stroked the diminutive spaniel for a while until, with no warning, she jumped off the couch and slowly went into the bedroom, looking back now and then over her shoulder. Reef followed, taking out his penis, breathing heavily through his mouth. “Here, Mouffie, nice *big dog bone* for you right here, lookit this, yeah, seen many of these lately? *come on*, smells good don’t it, mmm, yum!” and so forth, Mouffette [...], sniffing with curiosity. “That’s right, now, o-o-open up ... *good girl*, good Mouffette now let’s just put this—*yaahhgghh!*” Reader, she bit him. (*Against* 666)

The grammatically incorrect “smells good don’t it,” in which the “don’t” could be facetiously taken as a contraction of “donut,” is reminiscent of the human jelly-doughnut, similarly(?) bitten only 40-pages earlier in the novel. But we must be careful of what Pynchon masquerades as kitsch; Reef’s sexual interaction with Mouffie, especially with its implication of a bedroom invitation by the dog, invokes Virilio’s concerns about “*new relationships between species*” and “*the loaded terms of bestiality*” (61). Virilio not only adds his anxiety to those of Toffler and Birardi about the “general speeding-up of phenomena in our hypermodern world,” but is alarmed that “geneticists are now using cloning in the quest for the chimera, the hybridization of man and animal” (51). Virilio’s paranoia over “that *great transgenic art* in which every pharmacy, every laboratory will launch its own ‘lifestyles,’ its own transhuman fashions” (61) seems over the top, but it resonates ominously in Kelleter’s fear of “the adaptive capacities of high intelligence [...] turning evolution into history” (227). If eugenics doesn’t do it, consider Peter Swirsky’s prediction about a “thinking computer” that “will build itself by modifying its rulebook, erasing

some pre-loaded instructions, adding new ones, and turning itself effectively into an intentional black box. In other words, it will evolve" (296).

### Conclusion: The Dead End of the Postmodern Ethos

The two roads come together in the final hundred pages of *Against the Day*, and despite Bria Zombini's forebodings, so does the bilocated author. For the reader, the double standard of the first Pynchon has become more idiosyncratic, and the idiosyncrasy of the second Pynchon begins to make sense in terms of futuristic writings in contemporary cultural theory. The idea, for example, of gunners sighting "what did not yet exist *but would only be* a few seconds from 'now'" seems less idiosyncratic when Virilio tells us, not only of the need for "a car that actually sees other vehicles over the horizon, so that car speed and audiovisual speed are rendered compatible" but also that "European companies [... are] actually working on such an idea" (*Indirect* 69).

Given "Pynchon's giddy use of coincidence," what Logan calls "the mulligan stew of *Against the Day*" could more aptly be called a "Brownian stew" after the random zigzagging molecular motion in liquids that Einstein famously explained (232, 247). That Umeki, by marrying Yashmeen's adoptive father, beomes the grandmother of her former lover's niece (*Against* 974); that Stray, whom Reef had abandoned years ago in Colorado along with their infant son, finds Reef's mother, Mayva living with the parents of her new partner, Ewball Oust (976, 979); that Scarsdale Vibe's menacing bodyguard, Foley, who has protected him for 30 years, abruptly turns his gun on Vibe, and to settle his own score, proceeds "to empty all eight rounds into" his astonished employer (1006); that Lake, who magnanimously fell in love with and married Deuce Kindred, although he and Sloat Fresno had savagely beaten her father to death, would have rowdy sex with Basnight when he came to Hollywood looking for information on a

local murder case (1052); that Deuce, who had become a trusted sheriff after Lake presumably straightened him out, is now the “little runt of a studio cop” that Basnight intends to arrest “for a whole string of orgy-type homicides” (1059); that the two main characters, Dally and Kit, should not only meet but become involved in a sadly dysfunctional marriage (1067); that after Reef, Yashmeen and their daughter Ljubica emigrate to Colorado, Stray and Yashmeen, both parents of a child by Reef, become involved in a lesbian relationship (1075-76); it is as though Pynchon is anticipating the “breakdown[s] in rejection, separation, abandonment, violent struggle, abuse, and even murder” that a few years later Carroll would acknowledge are counter-adaptative (“Evolutionary” 113). Despite his utopianism, it is Carroll himself who reminds us that: “Civilizations, like species, have often come to bad ends” (“Rejoinder” 368).

The enormous complexity of *Against the Day*, as well as that of the characters that people it, is a metaphor for the complexity of human life in our disorienting hypermodern world. In the 40-plus years since Pynchon wrote *The Crying of Lot 49*, there has been “the roaring current of change,” that Alvin Toffler foresaw, “a current so powerful today that it overturns institutions, shifts our values and shrivels our roots” (3). In those years, the population of the earth has doubled, and the complexity of life for that doubled population has been geometrically intensified by globalization, new communication technologies, new weaponry, and so forth. We have come so far from the utopian modernism that peaked in the 1950s that the postmodern ethos is no longer relevant, but has become what John V. Knapp calls “a moment in critical history rather than something current” (qtd. in Kohn, “Unwitting” 314).

The penultimate page of *Against the Day* is symbolic of the new age of hypercomplexity:

The [air]ship by now has grown as large as a small city. There are neighborhoods, there are parks. There are slum conditions. It is so big that when people see it in the sky, they are struck with selective hysterical blindness and end up not seeing it at all. (*Against* 1084)

That there are “slum conditions” in the sky is a dramatic sign of the dead end of utopian modernity. The “selective hysterical blindness” speaks to the dulling “aesthesia” associated with “the transition from a realm of conjunction to one of connection” (Berardi 42, 43). To facilitate “this transition,” Berardi explains, “a mutation of the conscious organism is taking place,” in which “our cognitive system” is being

reformatted. This appears to generate a dulling of the faculties of conjunction that had hitherto characterized the human condition. [...] Central to this mutation is the insertion of the electronic into the organic, the proliferation of artificial devices in the organic universe [... We are] confronted with the effort of the conscious organism to adapt to a changed environment and a readjustment of the cognitive system to the techno-communicative environment. This generates pathologies of the psychic sphere [, ...] slows down processes of interpretation and renders them aleatory and ambiguous. (42, 43)

Symbolic of the hypermodern age, the boys’ airship, whose ordinary landing in Chicago began the novel, is now able to dock in “remote stations high in unmeasured outer space,” hurtle “at speeds that no one wishes to imagine,” and fall “for distances only astronomers are comfortable with” (*Against* 1084). Despite “invisible sources of gravity rolling through like storms,” the airship is inevitably “brought to safety, in the bright, flowerlike heart of a perfect hyper-hyperboloid that only Miles can see in its entirety” (1084-85). Remembering that this particular member of the crew “suffered at times from a confusion in his mental processes” (*Against* 4), the novel’s readers will not be surprised to discover that the “perfect hyper-hyperboloid,” which is a reference to Willem De Sitter’s solution to Einstein’s cosmological field equations, is a four-dimensional hyper-hyperboloid embedded in a (4+1)-dimensional Minkowski space-time. Miles could not possibly have been able to see it “in its entirety” because the space-time that it describes is matter-free, that is, completely empty, which, according to Michel Janssen, is why Albert Einstein, who believed that there could be no space-time without matter, rejected De Sitter’s solution.<sup>6</sup>

"In the expression of contemporary poetry, in cinema, video art and novels," Berardi insists, "the marks of an epidemic of psychopathology proliferate" (43).<sup>7</sup> Pynchon's emphasis on the "hyper-hyper" in the final page of *Against the Day* may signal the hypermodernism that is replacing the old modernism. Whereas the old modernism confidently lionized science and progress, the new hypermodernism, which is its opposite, is based on "resistance against science" (Armitage 37). This dramatic turnaround of attitude is for Virilio, "extraordinary, unheard of" (37). To Berardi's fear of "an epidemic of psychopathology" spawned by the new "techno-communicative environment" are added Virilio's confident forecasts of an "integral accident" which will knell "modernism's end," the ascension of "technological fundamentalism [, ... a] religion of those who believe in the absolute power of technology," and extreme miniaturization by which "the machine enters into the human [, ...] no longer a prosthesis, [...but] a new eugenicism" that can be "forced on people who don't need or want them" (Armitage 26, 44, 50).

The concluding paragraph of *Against the Day*, presumably the denouement in the iconic airship's future, if it has a future, is a kind of literary equivalent of Iceland spar. Some readers will find, as reviewer Sophie Ratcliffe does, that this "final scene has disturbing resonances," as if the crew "were setting out on a self-effacing mission to destruct" (22). "Of all the attempted explosions in the book," Ratcliffe concludes, "this is the biggest" (22). Other readers will find, as reviewer Denis Scheck does, that this paragraph is "perhaps the loveliest happy end in modern literature." Whatever future is promised in that final paragraph is expunged by its contradictions. In Berardi's words, "dystopia" has taken "center stage," conquered "the whole field of the artistic imagination," and drawn "the narrative horizon of the century with no future" (43). It was the modern world, wrote Logan, "that had not yet learned to distrust" science and invention (246). "Postmodernism [...] doesn't make any sense to me," wrote Virilio (Armitage 25). But it was postmodernism that made us aware



of modernity's naïve trustfulness and is now absorbed into the frightened distrust that characterizes hypermodernism.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>I am grateful to Leona Toker for making me aware of postmodern idiosyncrasy and giving me advice and encouragement on an early draft of this essay. For their information on summer temperatures in Europe almost a century ago, I am indebted to meteorologists Ahira Sanchez-Lugo, Peer Hechler, Gerhard Müller-Westermeier and Enric Aguilar.

<sup>2</sup>I am not the first to associate *Against the Day* with two Pynchons and contrasting authorial roads. Daniel Grausam places *Against the Day* "at the intersection of two diverging historical trajectories, one into the past and one into the future" and imagines "either a sharply deterministic and teleological Pynchon who sees history as a process of entropic slide into greater states of disarray or [an] antithetical Pynchon of potentiality, whose historiographic investigations continually gesture towards lost possibilities and alternative paths not taken" (221).

<sup>3</sup>This term hypermodern comes from an article in the journal *Theory, Culture & Society* in which John Armitage asks Paul Virilio about his thoughts on "the problem of what might be called 'super' or 'hypermodernism'" and is answered that "As far as 'hyper' or 'super' modernism is concerned, I think we are not out of modernity yet" (26). In a footnote to his question, Armitage lays claim to "Hypermodernism [, ...] a term I reserve for a forthcoming book on Virilio" (52). That book, a page by page reproduction of the journal issue plus an index, is entitled *Paul Virilio: From Modernism to Hypermodernism and Beyond*.

<sup>4</sup>There is a growing, interactive website, "Pynchon Wiki: *Against the Day*," in which self-selected aficionados of this novel anonymously verify historical events that appear fictional and discredit background material that deceptively appear to be factual.

<sup>5</sup>For a discourse supportive of confusion and disorientation in contemporary fiction, see Kohn, "Postmodernist" 341-45.

<sup>6</sup>I am grateful to John Stachel, the founding editor of the Einstein Papers Project at the Institute for Advanced Studies, for correcting and explaining this technical material. In his personal communication, dated 06/12/09, he informed me that "the fact that a hyper-hyperboloid is four-dimensional already rules out any visualization of [...] images that it could cast on our visual system."

<sup>7</sup>For an example of hypermodern video art, see Kohn *Motorization*.

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# Spenser as Prometheus: The Monstrous and the Idea of Poetic Creation<sup>\*1</sup>

MAIK GOTH

## 1. Introduction

Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*, one of the richest, most ambitious and complex poems in the English language, develops the early modern concept of the poet as creator. Sir Philip Sidney, the most prominent of Spenser's contemporary writer-critics, explains in his *Defence of Poesy* that the word "poet" derives from the Old Greek verb ποιεῖν, "to make."<sup>2</sup> Poets, according to this widely current definition, are makers fashioning characters and incidents for their grand creative designs. Spenser's own literary *aventure*, which joins epic and romance traditions to create a heroic master text to "fashion a gentleman or noble person in vertuous and gentle discipline,"<sup>3</sup> documents its author's creative ambitiousness: the poem relates innumerable quests and stories of a vast cast of characters set mostly in Faeryland, a realm of Spenser's own invention. It also presents a plethora of monsters such as dragons and human-animal composites. As this cast is interspersed with a great number of dragons and human-animal composites, the monstrous becomes an integral part of poetic creation. Spenser thus confronts a major contemporary tradition that reprimanded monsters and grotesque beings as the unwholesome outgrowth of a self-indulgent imagination.<sup>4</sup> Drawing on Spenser's version of the Prometheus myth, which narrates how the Greek god created Elfe, the ancestor of the Faeries, this article assesses Spenser's making of monsters for *The Faerie Queene*, and relates it both to Sid-

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<sup>\*</sup>For debates inspired by this article, please check the *Connotations* website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debgoth01813.htm>>.

ney's definition of the poet's creation as an "other nature" and to the early modern concept of the imagination. The analysis brings to light that, for Spenser, poetic making, even that of monsters, is essentially a Promethean act.

## 2. The Context: Second Nature and the Imagination

Before I turn to the examination of Spenser's take on the Prometheus myth and analyse its conceptual relevance for the poem, I shall briefly introduce the famous tenet of the *natura altera*, which Sidney explains in his *Defence of Poesy* (published in 1595, nine years after Sidney's death). In this treatise, which S. K. Heninger sees as a "sophisticated apology for the human imagination,"<sup>5</sup> Sidney eulogises the poet's creative powers, and, significantly, includes mythical monsters in his appraisal of the poet. The poet, Sidney writes,

lifted up with the vigour of his own invention, doth grow in effect another nature, in making things either better than nature bringeth forth, or, quite anew, forms such as never were in nature, as the Heroes, Demigods, Cyclops, Chimeras, Furies, and such like: so as he goeth hand in hand with nature, not enclosed within the narrow warrant of her gifts, but freely ranging only within the zodiac of his own wit. Nature never set forth the earth in so rich tapestry as diverse poets have done [...]<sup>6</sup>

Following J. C. Scaliger's famous argument that the poet is a secondary god creating a secondary world, Sidney here fervently praises poets as creators bringing to life a superior "second nature,"<sup>7</sup> which they fashion either through improving on post-lapsarian nature or through inventing beings "quite anew." The creatures Sidney gives as examples of such new forms (after citing the heroes and demigods of mythology) are not random choices but form what appears to be a deliberately composed triad: the "Cyclops, Chimeras, Furies" provide a miniature taxonomy of possible monstrous beings, with the one-eyed Cyclops representing giants and strange races, Chimeras epitomising composite monsters, and Furies exemplifying human-animal



composites. Sidney thus shows his awareness of the teratological possibilities informing the making of mythological creatures, as well as their usefulness for making exciting poetry. Quite surprisingly, Sidney not only refrains from stigmatising fantastic creatures *a priori*, but values them as expressing the poet's creation of an imaginative world, thus making monsters, not only the half-divine but also the significantly hideous like the Chimera, examples of poetic achievement. This theory also suggests that poetry, by dint of the imagination, is a privileged art form that can shape beings "quite anew" on its own while drawing on perceived reality,<sup>8</sup> a tension made manifest in Sidney's conflicting statements that the poet goes "hand in hand with nature" but is "not enclosed within the narrow warrant of her gifts."

The fullness of the new poetic world, which Sidney here describes as a "rich tapestry," originates from the poet's power of "invention" and "wit,"<sup>9</sup> two terms that are closely associated with the workings of the human imagination, the source of the poet's creative work.<sup>10</sup> In his treatise, Sidney explicitly establishes the imagination as an independent faculty in which the idea is located<sup>11</sup> and which furnishes the poet with the divine potency to effect a second creation by turning ideas, i.e. ideal images, into fore-conceits, and finally into proper conceits.<sup>12</sup> These give an ideal nature to the fictional world which surpasses factual reality:<sup>13</sup> in the writer's creative faculty, the ideal image becomes an image in his mind, which is then reified as an image or representation in his poem.<sup>14</sup> The poet therefore figures as a maker endowed with the ability to act at his own command within the expanse of his own imagination.

However, if monsters for Sidney exemplify the beneficial use of the imagination (he never returns to the topic again in his treatise), in *The Faerie Queene* Spenser expands the monstrous into a central poetic concept. Seeing the workings of the imagination as the *sine qua non* of poetic creation, he personifies it in the Castle of Alma episode (II.ix-xi), which allegorises the human body as a castle under siege. In this passage, the brain is anatomised as a tripartite turret, the individual compartments of which represent the three main faculties of the soul:

Phantastes, the personification of fantasy, resides in the first chamber; an unspecified agent that might represent judgement in the second;<sup>15</sup> and Eumnestes, i.e. memory, in the third.<sup>16</sup> While Phantastes inhabits a fly-infested chamber, the walls of which are covered with paintings depicting strange beings and romance characters (thus evoking Sidney's "rich tapestry"), the room of the second sage is painted with the deeds of authorities, political institutions, and the *artes*. Quite differently, Eumnestes's chamber is devoid of wall-paintings; instead, it is hung with parchment scrolls and books recording past history.<sup>17</sup> Spenser's allegorical anatomy of the human psyche hence also presents the interplay between the individual faculties of the soul. It is in Eumnestes's chamber that Spenser presents his version of the Prometheus myth, to which I shall now turn, before I will eventually return to Phantastes's chamber at the end of this article.

### 3. Prometheus's Creation

As is the case with every other classical myth, literary accounts of the Prometheus myth sometimes differ substantially from one author to another. The standardised version narrates how Prometheus, whose name means "forethought" (from Old Greek *προ-* + *μηθ-* or *μαθ-*, *to think*, as in *προ-μηθής*),<sup>18</sup> creates Man from clay, modelling him on the form of the Olympian gods,<sup>19</sup> and animates him either with fire stolen from heaven,<sup>20</sup> or with his own divine breath or spirit.<sup>21</sup> As punishment for stealing fire from the gods, Zeus has Prometheus chained to mount Caucasus, where an eagle eats away his ever re-growing liver.<sup>22</sup> According to this myth, Prometheus's act of creating Man is akin to an artisan manufacturing a clay sculpture.<sup>23</sup> Prometheus thus emerges as a *deus artifex*, i.e. a divine artificer, a role that is also emphasised by the many versions that depict his creation of the beasts.<sup>24</sup>

Spenser's version of the Prometheus myth is recorded in one of the scrolls stored in Eumnestes's chamber. While young Arthur, not yet King of Britain, reads the *Chronicle of Briton Kings* to acquaint himself

with the history of his people and his own destiny, Guyon, a knight of Elfin extraction, devotes his attention to a volume called the "*Antiquity of Faery lond*," which begins the history of the Faeries with the tale of their origin:

It told, how first *Prometheus* did create  
A man, of many parts from beasts deryu'd,  
And then stole fire from heuen, to animate  
His worke, for which he was by *Ioue* depryu'd  
Of life him self, and hart-strings of an *Aegle* ryu'd.

That man so made, he called *Elfe*, to weet  
Quick, the first author of all Elfin kynd:  
Who wandring through the world with wearie feet,  
Did in the gardins of *Adonis* fynd  
A goodly creature, whom he deemd in mynd  
To be no earthly wight, but either Spright,  
Or Angell, th'author of all woman kynd;  
Therefore a *Fay* he her according hight,  
Of whom all *Faryes* spring, and fetch their lignage right. (II.x.70.5-71)

Spenser here invents a Promethean myth of his own to explain the creation of the Elves. The narrative of a deity manufacturing a man who finds his mate in a garden, where both become the *authors* of the Faery race, presents a procreational pattern substantially based on the Edenic narrative in the Book of Genesis. In his revision, Spenser substitutes God the Maker with the pagan deity Prometheus, who creates the ancestor of all Faeries or Elves in *The Faerie Queene* as "[a] man, of many parts from beasts deryu'd" (70.6). As Prometheus created "[a] man" and not "Man" as such, the passage clearly identifies the Greek god as the founding father of the Elves, a particular race in Spenser's literary cosmos that closely resemble humans. Moreover, as neither the characters in Faeryland nor the narrator can distinguish consistently between human beings and Faeries, Spenser implies that there are no physical markers that help tell the Elves from the Britons, despite their different origins.<sup>25</sup> This renders the analogy between humans and Faeries more complete.

Spenser is very specific about the raw material Prometheus uses in the creation of Elfe: as the latter is “of many parts from beasts deryu’d,” Spenser makes clear that Prometheus patterns Elfe entirely on animal parts. Spenser’s omission of any other ingredient creates a version of the Prometheus myth that differs from most traditional ones, in which Prometheus creates Man from clay in the likeness of the gods. By emphasising Elfe’s animal origin and nature, Spenser elaborates on the concept of the animal human, which is an important strand in the history of early modern ideas.<sup>26</sup> Spenser’s use of Prometheus to elaborate on what Jürgen R. Meyer has recently termed the “Renaissance humanimal,”<sup>27</sup> is not without precedent. Lotspeich traces the influences for this passage to Horace and to Natale Conti, one of Spenser’s chief sources for mythological material.<sup>28</sup> Horace relates that the primal mud from which Prometheus created Man was insufficient to complete his creation, so that he had to gather additional material to finish his work. Among other things, he placed the lion’s anger into Man’s stomach.<sup>29</sup> In the early modern period, the Italian mythographer Natale Conti elaborates on Horace’s version, explaining that Prometheus furnished Man with the fear of the hare, the astuteness of the wolf, the boastfulness of the peacock, the fierceness of the tiger, the wrath of the lion and the magnitude of the soul.<sup>30</sup> If anything, Conti’s version is therefore designed to give a mythological explanation for the beastly qualities of human behaviour.<sup>31</sup>

Conti’s mythographical entry is significant, because it helps to emphasise the chief characteristics of Spenser’s version. Like Conti, Spenser accentuates the animal heritage of Prometheus’s creation, but applies the aetiology to his fictional invention, and thereby re-contextualises it into his own referential system. The most important deviation is Spenser’s literalisation of Conti’s version: where Conti uses the Prometheus myth to explain the animal characteristics of human behaviour, Spenser emphasises that Elfe was literally manufactured out of the “parts” of animals, and hence turns Conti’s quasi-psychological explications, where characteristic traits are referred back to different animals, into a narrative about the body.

Matthew Woodcock, who has devoted an entire book to the idea of *Elf-Fashioning*, points out quite rightly that Spenser's brief tale of Prometheus is replete with "references to artifice and 'making.'" <sup>32</sup> But while Woodcock states that the Elves are "manufactured," he offers no sustained analysis of the creation myth. Yet, the myth pertains to the very core of "making" in *The Faerie Queene* and, against the backdrop of Sidney's definition of the poet's nature, also to the very essence of poetic creation. The circumstance that Spenser's take on the Prometheus myth focuses on making Elfe from animal material and bringing him to life with the fire stolen from Jove allows for the deduction that the poet deliberately emphasises the transgressive act of animating parts derived from animals to create a new species, a latent composite that looks like "[a] man." That transgression is involved becomes all the more plausible as it is not explicitly clear which of Prometheus's acts caused Jove's anger in Spenser's version: the creation, the theft of the fire, or, indeed, both. Hence, it could be argued that Prometheus's transgression is constituted by the pursuit of his own creative designs. <sup>33</sup>

Spenser is not the only early modern writer resorting to the Prometheus myth in a poetological context. In his "Hymnus in Noctem," the first of two poems constituting *The Shadow of Night* (1594), George Chapman explicitly identifies poets with Prometheus. Half-way through the poem, Chapman gives an account of human beings with degenerate and hence monstrous souls, an observation that he uses as an introduction to a discussion of more general poetic issues, namely the nature of the poet and the *telos* of poetry. In the following passage, which emphasises the poet's didactic duty, he makes his readers aware of Man's possible monstrosity:

*Therefore Promethean Poets with the coles  
Of their most geniale, more-then-humane soules  
In liuing verse, created men like these,  
With shapes of Centaurs, Harpies, Lapithes,  
That they in prime of erudition,  
When almost sauage vulgar men were growne,*

*Seeing them selues in those Pierean founts,  
Might mend their mindes, asham'd of such accounts.*<sup>34</sup>

This passage characterises poets as Promethean beings, whose quasi-divine souls can create monsters, ranging from hybrid races like Centaurs and the gigantic Lapithians to infernal creatures such as the Harpies, and animate them with the force of “living verse.”<sup>35</sup> The notion that “verse”—which refers to the individual members and “organic units” of poetry and here metonymically applies to poetry at large—<sup>36</sup> is a “living” entity that in turn bestows life on the beings created by the poet opens a channel to Spenser’s Promethean myth. To be more precise, the notion of *living* verse recalls the name which Spenser’s Prometheus chose for his creation, namely *Elfe*, which, according to Spenser (*FQ* II.x.71.1-2), means “quick” or “living.” Spenser’s explanation elevates the Prometheus myth to a metapoetical level, because poetry emerges as an art form that animates. In the allegorical world of the poem, Prometheus could be deemed the fictional cipher for the real creator of the Faeries, namely Spenser the poet, who brings to life a new race, as well as a cast of new characters, deities, and monsters. The qualities that define Prometheus are therefore equally applicable to the poet. Spenser describes Prometheus as a godhead that can create a new organic being through the process of physical derivation. This makes Prometheus a “maker” and, thus, the poet’s kin. In his version of the Prometheus myth, Spenser hence elaborates on the notion of the creator-poet, and thereby resorts to and “images forth” Sidney’s idea of the poet as a maker developing a secondary nature, which here is exemplified by Prometheus’s creating a secondary Man through creative derivation.

#### 4. Spenser’s Creations

If one takes Spenser’s revision of the Prometheus myth seriously, Faeryland is populated with the descendants of *Elfe*, a “humanimal” created as an emulated version of the animals. In addition, however,



Spenser's version of the Prometheus myth may also be read as an allegory of the poet's creative process. In fact, the scrutiny of overtly monstrous creatures in *The Faerie Queene* reveals that Spenser fashions a large number of composite beings by using a method analogous to the one used by Prometheus in the Faerie chronicle. I will take a closer look at two of these notorious creatures, namely Duessa and Geryoneo's dragon, in order to show that, on a more abstract level, Spenser emerges as a Promethean poet who creates new monsters as physical and intertextual beings through the process of calculated derivation.

Like other beings, monstrosities are communicated to the readers by means of descriptions that mirror the process of creation and place the monster into the overall framework of the poem.<sup>37</sup> Spenser's description of Duessa is a case in point.<sup>38</sup> The chief temptress and deceitrix of *The Faerie Queene*, she allures many a character with her dazzling beauty. When she is stripped bare her ugly body is revealed under her richly ornamented "roiall robes" (FQ I.viii.46.2).<sup>39</sup> Her upper half is that of a "loathly, wrinckled hag" (46.8). Her bald head is covered in scabs and scall, her "rotten gummes" (47.4) lack teeth, and her breath is odorous. Her breasts are described as "dried dugs" that hang down "lyke bladders lacking wind," emanating filthy matter (47.6-7), while her scabby skin is wrinkled "as maple rind" (47.8). Spenser is, of course, eager to evoke his readers' disgust through the graphic depiction of disease and deformity. The description of Duessa's bottom half in the next stanza is even more repulsive:

Her neather parts, the shame of all her kind,  
 My chaster Muse for shame doth blush to write;  
 But at her rompe she growing had behind  
 A foxes taile, with dong all fowly dight;  
 And eke her feete most monstrous were in sight;  
 For one of them was like an Eagles claw,  
 With griping talaunts armd to greedy fight,  
 The other like a beares vneuen paw:  
 More vgly shape yet neuer liuing creature saw. (FQ I.viii.48)

That Duessa's stunning beauty drew attention away from this kind of corruption underlines that Spenser conceives of her as the "embodiment of falsehood."<sup>40</sup> Her name, which is traditionally interpreted as a reference to her double-dealing deception or "duplicity,"<sup>41</sup> might also encode her bi-natural appearance as half woman, half animal: Duessa is a compound whose physical features make manifest her sinful nature, a circumstance stressed by Spenser's use of scatological detail.<sup>42</sup> Her deformed physique is determined by the complete absence of symmetry, which is emphasised by the pun on the adjective "vneuen." In this context, the term "rompe" takes on special significance, for it indicates that Duessa is created by uniting various disparate parts of predatory animals, which is also stressed when her breasts are likened to mammal teats in the previous stanza. In other words, the poet's penchant for new combinations ("More vgly shape yet neuer liuing creature saw") points to the method of fashioning grotesque novelties from existing animal parts. Fox's tail, eagle's claw and bear's paw are, of course, mutually exclusive limbs, a circumstance that is emphasised by the fact that these animals belong to different habitats. In order to connect these disparate *membra*, Spenser utilises rhyme as rhetorical glue, thus combining the "Eagles claw" (fully anatomised with talons) with the "beares [...] paw." In this description, Spenser strictly adheres to form to depict the deformed: he works his way directly from the upper to the lower half of her face before turning to her breasts and skin, her tail, and, finally, her feet. Thus, the entire passage parodies the arrangement of the Petrarchan beauty catalogue.<sup>43</sup> This strategy brings her ugliness and her deprivation into clear focus. Truly "abominable," she is—in the etymological sense—*ab homine*,<sup>44</sup> more monster than beast, blending animal deformity with human heinousness. Hence, Duessa exemplifies how Spenser creates beings from reconfigured body parts. Like Prometheus's Elfe, Duessa is "of many parts from beasts deryu'd," but combined into an overtly monstrous hybrid. In effect, Horace's and Conti's metaphors for the beastly aspects of human

behaviour are embodied in the physicality of Spenser's (admittedly allegorical) figure of Duessa.

If composite beings like Elfe and Duessa bring into palpable relief the combinatory possibilities of the Promethean poet, so do dragons, a type of creature which is particularly important for *The Faerie Queene*. Although Book I is usually at the centre of dragon criticism, as it features no less than three specimens,<sup>45</sup> I will instead turn to Book V, Canto x. In it Prince Arthur battles and vanquishes the composite female dragon owned by the triple-bodied giant Geryoneo, a cruel tyrant who forces Belge, mother of seventeen children, to sacrifice her offspring and people to this "dreadfull Monster" (*FQ* V.x.13.7). Dragons will of course be dragons—and so the monster greedily devours their carcasses, "both flesh and bone" (29.7).<sup>46</sup> Geryoneo's dragon is a composite deformity, exceeding, the narrator tells his readers, any other monstrosity seen by those who lived to tell.<sup>47</sup> This female monstrosity has the face of a maiden to hide her terrifying features and to beguile her victims,<sup>48</sup> as well as the ability to utter blasphemous speech.<sup>49</sup> Her body is a combination of animal parts:

Thereto [i.e. her face] the body of a dog she had,  
 Full of fell rauin and fierce greedinesse;  
 A Lions clawes, with powre and rigour clad,  
 To rend and teare, what so she can oppresse;  
 A Dragons taile, whose sting without redresse  
 Full deadly wounds, where so it is empight;  
 And Eagles wings, for scope and speedinesse,  
 That nothing may escape her reaching might,  
 Whereto she euer list to make her hardy flight. (*FQ* V.xi.24)

Spenser's catalogue of attributes is more than a mere enumeration of body parts, as he meticulously anatomises and explains the significance of the she-monster's canine torso, leonine claws, eagle's wings, and dragon's tail and sting.

Since Spenser resorts to a rhetorical description-*cum*-explication to bring the monster in full view, the extended syntactical parallelism enacts his creation of the monster's body on the stylistic level of the

text as well: hence, physical creation and poetic fashioning work along similar parameters. As Spenser's 'formalist' stance adds shape to the deformed monster, Geryoneo's beast is as much a paradoxical product as Duessa, because Spenser creates a disfigured monster through "well-wrought" poetry.<sup>50</sup> The creation of the monster on the stylistic level is done through the assembling of various intertextual parts. A telling example is when he likens Geryoneo's dragon to the Sphinx (V.xi.25). Spenser largely buttresses the physique of the dragon on Natale Conti's description of the Sphinx, which Conti assigns "the head and handes of a mayden, the bodie of a dogge, wynges lyke a byrde, nayles like a lyon, a tayle like a dragon, the voyce of a man."<sup>51</sup> The incompatible physical features of the Sphinx correspond to those of Geryoneo's monster in such a way that they form the basic design, or blueprint on which Spenser models his emulated creature. The horrifying physique of Geryoneo's dragon is thus largely an intertextual creation. This supposition is also borne out by the name of its owner, which derives from the triple-bodied giant Geryon,<sup>52</sup> and from Dante's Gerion, the serpentine image of Fraud,<sup>53</sup> on whose back Dante and Virgil descend to the eighth circle of hell. Textually, Spenser, when creating a monster serving Geryoneo, seems to have taken his cues from (1) Dante's transferring the giant's name to a dragon, and (2) from Natale Conti's remarking that Geryon owned a dragon.<sup>54</sup>

Geryoneo's dragon is thus not only of "many parts from beasts deryu'd," but also 'of many parts from texts deryu'd.' Spenser starts out with a number of descriptive sources (notably the references in Conti), then by combining them he rebuilds his own version, among others, through the rhetorical or stylistic means such as mentioned above, and finally animates his creation in the context of his—and here I would like to hark back to Chapman's text—"liuing verse." The idea of derivation put forward in the Prometheus passage is thus also applicable to Spenser's textual practices, for even in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the verb "to derive" could be applied to the construction of texts and the formation of words.<sup>55</sup> The anatomical

analyses of Duessa and Geryoneo's dragon hence reveal Spenser to be a Promethean poet, who creates new monsters as physical and inter-textual beings through the process of calculated derivation and poetic animation.

### 5. Prometheus, Spenser, and the Imagination

Monstrous beings like the ones treated in the previous section make manifest Spenser's, as it were, 'constructionist' agenda; they also put the spotlight firmly on the human agency that ultimately constructs them, namely the poet's active and creative imagination. The discussion of Spenser's poetic making as exemplified by his monstrous creatures brings the argument back full circle to the context in which Spenser embeds his tale of Prometheus: the Castle of Alma. Prometheus dwells, as it were, in a scroll stored in Eumnestes's chamber of memories, and is hence the memorial token of a divine and autonomous creative process which, as has been shown, tells of the animation of a new living being made from different parts. By embedding the version of Prometheus's tale into his allegory of the tripartite brain turret, Spenser implicitly relates the creational myth to the larger issue of the imagination.<sup>56</sup> Phantastes, Spenser's allegory of fantasy, whose fly-infested chamber is painted with the types of monsters and romance characters that also appear in *The Faerie Queene*,<sup>57</sup> has surprising similarities with Prometheus. The imagination is usually assigned the capacity to put together disparate material into newly fashioned beings. Huarte, among others, emphasises that the imagination "hath force not onely to compound a figure *possible* with another, but doth ioyne also (after the order of nature) those which are *vnpossible*."<sup>58</sup> This brings out an important similarity with Prometheus's compounding Elfe. In his anatomy of the brain cells, Spenser emphasises that Phantastes is endowed with "fore-sight," as well as with "quick pre[-]iudize," a word, as A. C. Hamilton informs us, that means "prejudgment," but also "fore-thought."<sup>59</sup> Phantastes thus has

the ability to look into the future, and to create with premeditation, a quality that is also emphasised by his ponderous melancholy. Phantastes's creative ability connects readily with Prometheus's nature, because his name (Greek Προ-μήθευς) defines him through his ability to "fore-think."<sup>60</sup> It is exactly the ability of "forethought" in both Phantastes and Prometheus that stresses deliberation as the defining quality of fashioning, and characterises poetic creation—even that of monstrous or human composites—as intentional. This correlation between the names and natures of Prometheus and Phantastes are hardly coincidental in a work where names form such complex patterns of meaning, and which draws so heavily on contemporary poetical issues.<sup>61</sup>

As fantasy has access to memory and can create new combinations from what it has stored, Good Memory (Eumnestes) is the decisive tool for the visualisation of new beings, since this faculty provides the matter, or raw material for creating these new combinations from physical and textual data. Making poetry is therefore an act of creation based on the combination and animation of physical and textual material, which—to use the central term from Spenser's Prometheus myth—is "deryu'd" from memory, a process which is at work in Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*, and parallels Prometheus's fashioning Elfe from the parts of animals.<sup>62</sup> In the context of this theory, the poet is not merely the vessel of divine inspiration; rather, he emerges as a Promethean maker in his own right. It thus becomes apparent that Spenser's fashioning, literally com-posing a poem, full of extraordinary characters, strange bodies, and topographical details, is just as much an act of making as Prometheus's fashioning Elfe: Prometheus, like Spenser, is a poet in the etymological sense of the word.<sup>63</sup> In the words of Theseus in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, one could say that both Prometheus and Spenser indulge in "bod[ying] forth [...] things unknown" by giving shape to their "airy nothing[s]," i.e. their very own ideas and imaginings.<sup>64</sup> Like Prometheus, Spenser gives these beings names; the poet, however, transcends the god by designing for them a "local habitation," namely Faeryland and its



adjacent textual realms, which is very much a compound of topographical referents, animated within the confines of his poem. In his treatment of the Prometheus myth, Spenser hence reflects on his own critical awareness of the poet as a maker who brings to life a second nature in which he also places different types of new monsters as defining and consciously fashioned parts of his "rich tapestry."

## 6. Concluding Remarks

Prometheus's alleged deeds have earned him various epithets. On the one hand, the theft of fire and the creation of Man marked him as an antagonist of the gods, and stigmatised him as a lawbreaker driven by excessive vanity and curiosity.<sup>65</sup> The myth also lent itself to positive allegorical readings, turning Prometheus into the hero of civilisation, as the bringer of culture, i.e. of philosophy, letters and learning,<sup>66</sup> characteristics that are in no small part influenced by the etymology of his name. In his *Genealogie deorum*, Boccaccio stresses the necessity to read myths allegorically, and sets up the concept of the "duplex Prometheus": while the first is the syncretistic cipher for God, the maker of man, the second is a wise teacher that turns ignorant, and unruly men into a civilised people. As Prometheus's educational programme is basically a second creation that turns human beings from physical into cultural beings, Man likewise has a "double nature."<sup>67</sup> In a recent article, Susanna Barsella interprets Boccaccio's use of the Prometheus myth as a strategy to reclaim for himself "the lofty role of 'civilizator.'"<sup>68</sup> In a more critical move, Spenser, who acknowledges the tension between the poet's creativity and its dangers throughout his work (in figures like Bonfont/Malfont, and Archimago), emphasises that the poet must act transgressively by creating something new and living from disparate parts in order to create a work that likewise helps civilise, i.e. fashion "a gentleman or noble person in vertuous and gentle discipline."<sup>69</sup> This observation renders more profound the conceptual link between the creator of Elfe and the maker of *The Faerie*

*Queene*, precisely because both employ analogous methods. Since the monsters and monstrous beings in and outside of Faeryland consist of reconfigured and animated body parts, which are also frequently derived from preexisting textual material, the poet of Faeryland establishes the Promethean discourse as the sub-textual matrix on which he patterns the poet's office. The paradigm of Prometheus thus ultimately accounts for the "living verse" of *The Faerie Queene*, which is very much a coagulation derived from different texts and genres amalgamated into a unified whole by Spenser the poet. Construction and animation permeate the different aspects of his work, and constitute the basis of his craft.

If contextualised in the discourse of poetic fantasy in the early modern period, *The Faerie Queene*, as the manifest outcome of Spenser's deliberate use of the imagination, can be read as its author's engagement with the tenets Sidney voiced in the *Defence*. Like Sidney's poet, Spenser, a likewise forethinking artist, brings to life a secondary creation by reifying his abstract ideas, and by placing them in a secondary world. But Spenser's use of the monstrous as an integral part of his poem goes one decisive step further, because Spenser expands the monstrous into a central poetic concept. As the monsters and monstrous beings in the poem "image forth" aberrations, corruption and vices within in the framework of an "extended allegory," they become the textual manifestation of the *deus alter's* calculated making. Spenser, as an early modern Prometheus, seeks to reassess the task of the poet as an act in which the creator becomes a rightful secondary god if foresight and forethought guide his steps.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>I would like to express my gratitude to Åke Bergvall for generous advice and criticism, as well as to the anonymous *Connotations* reviewer, and the indispensable Murat Kayı. This article is part of my forthcoming PhD thesis, *Transforming*

*Imagination: Permutations of the Monstrous in Edmund Spenser's The Faerie Queene*, supervised by Luuk Houwen. All quotations from *The Faerie Queene* are taken from A. C. Hamilton's edition.

<sup>2</sup>See Sidney, *Defence* 77: "The Greeks called him a 'poet,' which name hath, as the most excellent, gone through other languages. It cometh of this word ποιῆν, which is, to make: wherein, I know not whether by luck or wisdom, we Englishmen have met with the Greeks in calling him a maker [...]." Spenser must have been aware of this, as E. K.'s gloss to the "April Eclogue" (19) suggests.

<sup>3</sup>"Letter to Raleigh" 8. Line references of the "Letter" are to Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*, ed. Hamilton, 714-18.

<sup>4</sup>The tradition goes back to Horace's *Ars Poetica* 1-5, where the poet describes a disproportionate creature made up of a human head and a female torso, a horse's neck, bird's feathers, and a fish's tail. In the sixteenth century, Tasso advises strongly against the use of monstrous creatures in poetry (527). The monster also encroaches on early modern poetic discourse: while Pellegrino criticizes the romance as a monster with many heads and diverse limbs (cited in Javitch 107), Ascham claims that readers became marvellous monsters under the impact of a poetry that transforms them into animals (Ascham 228); Gosson goes so far as to accuse poets as 'monsters of nature' (Gosson 67).—For early modern views on the imagination as the suspicious locus of monstrous creation, see Bright 106 and Burton 1: 159-60. These views are thoroughly discussed by Rossky 49-73.

<sup>5</sup>Heninger, "Aesthetic Experience" 85.

<sup>6</sup>Sidney 78.

<sup>7</sup>J. C. Scaliger states in his *Poetices libri* (1561) that the poet is a *deus alter* creating a *natura altera*, for he does not retell events like historians, but creates new lives and matters like a second god. Although Scaliger does not postulate the creation of entirely new realms, his poetical statement contains the germ of what Sidney later turns into his fully-fledged *Defence*; see Scaliger 1: 70-72.

<sup>8</sup>This is the classical history vs. poetry argument; see Leimberg 103-04. Lobsien characterises the transforming power of the imagination as a key quality of poetic making (22-26).

<sup>9</sup>On the significance of *inventio*, see Pierre de Ronsard, *Abbrégé de l'Art poétique françois* (in *Œuvres complètes* 2: 1178), and Gascoigne, *Certayne Notes of Instruction Concerning the Making of Verse or Ryme in English* (in Smith 1: 47-48); these texts are treated in Wels 66-67, and Heninger, *Touches* 294.—In the *Naugerius*, Fracastoro uses similar terms when emphasising the importance of *inventio*, whereby poets "add sublimity and wonder to discourse" ("hec tum magnitudinem, tū admirationē affere sermoni solēt"; see Fracastoro 128 and 41).

<sup>10</sup>This view is stated in Juan Huarte's widely-read *Examen de Ingenios* (103): "From a good imagination, spring all the Arts and Sciences, which consist in figure, correspondence, harmonie and proportion: such are Poetrie, Eloquence, Musicke, and the skill of preaching: the practise of Phisicke, the Mathematicals, Astrologie and the gouerning of a Common-wealth, the art of Warfare, Paynting,

drawing, writing, reading, to be a man gracious, pleasant, neat, wittie in managing, & all the engins & deuises which artificers make [...]."

<sup>11</sup>Also noted by Herman 66-67.

<sup>12</sup>See Sidney 79. Wood 95 gives a good explanation of the three stages of poetic creation in Sidney's *Defence*.

<sup>13</sup>On the idealness of the poetic image see Herman 66-67, and Wels 79.

<sup>14</sup>Cf. Theseus's speech in Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream* 5.1.14-17: "And as imagination bodies forth/ The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen/ Turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothing/ A local habitation and a name." Plett offers an exhaustive discussion of Theseus's speech (*Midsummer Night's Dream* 5.1.4-22).

<sup>15</sup>See Miller 185-86 and 255-56, as well as Healy 100. Hamilton eschews to disclose the sage's identity, but argues that the sage's tasks of receiving and processing sense perceptions are rather similar to those of the poet (note to *FQ* II.ix.53.2-5).

<sup>16</sup>According to early modern science, the brain consisted of three faculties, namely: (1) common sense, which receives the information transmitted from the five senses; (2) the imagination, which can penetrate the nature of things; (3) and memory, the repository that stores these perceptions, and from which the imagination can call forth things. See the discussion in section 5.

<sup>17</sup>See *FQ* II.ix.47-60.

<sup>18</sup>For the etymology of the word "Prometheus," see the entry on "προμηθής" in Frisk 2: 599, and "Prometheus" in *Der Neue Pauly* 10: 402.

<sup>19</sup>See Apollodor, *Library* 1.7.1, Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 1.69-88, and Lucian, "Prometheus," 12.

<sup>20</sup>See Hesiod, *Works* 50-52.

<sup>21</sup>Boccaccio relates that Prometheus breathed life into Man (*Genealogie*, IV.xlii [47C]).

<sup>22</sup>The major possible transgressions are: bringing fire to Man, and tricking Jove of the sacrificial offerings; see Hesiod, *Theogony* 507-616, esp. 521-25, *Works* 42-105, and Apollodor, *Library* 1.7.1.

<sup>23</sup>Lactantius severely criticises Prometheus, emphasising that the novelty and subtlety of Prometheus's art stirred his witnesses into wonder (*Epitome* 20.12-13).

<sup>24</sup>Aesop explains in fable 240 ("Prometheus and the Human Beings"; Perry 3: 415) that Zeus ordered Prometheus to create Man and the animals. As he had formed more animals than human beings, Zeus told him to destroy some of the animals and to forge men from their material. These beings had a human form, but animal characteristics. The epimythion states that the fable explains the existence of "beastly" humans. In other versions of the myth, all beings are created by Prometheus's brother Epimetheus. As Plato writes in the *Protagoras* (320C-322A), Epimetheus used up all the material and qualities for the animals, leaving Man a naked and vulnerable being. Prometheus, however, stole fire from

heaven and gave it to Man, and with it the intelligence to survive through cultural means. For Prometheus as a bringer of culture, see note 66.

<sup>25</sup>See the respective entries in Osgood's *Concordance*. Hume 145-61 emphasises the differences between Britons and Elves.

<sup>26</sup>On the use of "to derive" in the context of source and origin see *OED*, "derive, v." 6.c. In fact, Bacon marks Man as being with the highest degree of composition, because Prometheus created him by mixing clay and animal parts (*Works* 6: 747).

<sup>27</sup>For the full discussion see Meyer 25-37.

<sup>28</sup>Lotspeich 102-03. The influence of Conti on *The Faerie Queene* is generally agreed upon. Nelson in fact calls Conti "Spenser's favorite mythographer" (263).

<sup>29</sup>See Horace, *Odes* 1.16.13-6: "fertur Prometheus addere principi/ limo coactus particulam undique/ desectam et insani leonis/ uim stomacho apposuisse nostro." West translates the stanza thus: "They say Prometheus had to add to the primeval slime/ a particle cut from every animal [MG: *undique* actually means 'from all over the place']/ and grafted the violence of a rabid lion/ on to our stomach."

<sup>30</sup>See Conti, *Mythologiae* 4.6.

<sup>31</sup>It thus stands in the tradition that originates from Aesop's fable 240.

<sup>32</sup>Woodcock 130.

<sup>33</sup>Spenser might have culled the idea that Jove's eagle ate away Prometheus's heart from Cooper 1565.

<sup>34</sup>The quotation is taken from the poem's first edition.

<sup>35</sup>The marginalia of the first edition explain this passage at some length: "He [i.e. the poet] calls them Promethean Poets in this high conceipt, by a figuratiue comparison betwixt thē, that as Pro[metheus] with fire fetcht frō heauen, made men: so Poets with the fire of their soules are sayd to create those Harpies, and Centaures, and thereof he calls their soules Geniale." Such an exhaustive marginal note would only be warranted if Chapman's "figuratiue comparison" was unusual and needed explaining.

<sup>36</sup>This topos also figures in Shakespeare's *Sonnets* (e.g. in Sonnet 18).

<sup>37</sup>This conceptual overlay is similarly argued in Hanafi 25: "Description not only describes, it also creates, orders, sets the object in a context of rhetorical meaning and institutional forces."

<sup>38</sup>The ensuing discussion of Duessa is culled from Goth 164-67.

<sup>39</sup>The entire passage covers *FQ* I.viii.46-48.—Cf. also the end of Fradubio's tale for a first rendering of Duessa's ugliness, here, however, *sans* lower body parts, which are hid in water (*FQ* I.ii.38-41).

<sup>40</sup>Hough 132. Cf. also Alpers 147.

<sup>41</sup>Craig 455 identifies her thus.

<sup>42</sup>See Hankins 101-02 for a discussion of possible influences.



<sup>43</sup>Krier 134 makes a similar observation, but does not bring her findings to bear on the discourse of the monstrous.

<sup>44</sup>The etymology is also explained by Hamilton, note to *FQ* I.viii.47.5.

<sup>45</sup>Namely: Errour, Orgoglio's dragon, and the Dragon terrorising Eden. For a discussion of these creatures see Goth 161-64 (Errour), and 143-47 (the Dragon of Eden and Orgoglio's dragon).

<sup>46</sup>Geryoneo and his monster are first mentioned in *FQ* V.x.6-13; Arthur's encounter with the dragon covers stanzas 21-32 of the ensuing Canto.

<sup>47</sup>Belge explains that the dragon's "vgly shape none euer saw, nor kend,/ That euer scap'd" (*FQ* V.xi.20.5-6).

<sup>48</sup>See *FQ* V.xi.23.7-9: "For of a Mayd she had the outward face,/ To hide the horrour, which did lurke behinde,/ The better to beguile, whom she so fond did finde." The image calls to mind representations of the maiden-faced Satanic serpent in medieval and early modern art.

<sup>49</sup>See *FQ* V.xi.20.6-9: "[...] for of a man they say/ It has the voice, that speaches forth doth send,/ Euen blasphemous words, which she doth bray/ Out of her poysnous entrails, fraught with dire decay."

<sup>50</sup>That Spenser's *descriptio monstri* is overtly symmetrical becomes apparent when Geryoneo's monster is compared to the Sphinx in Boiardo's *Orlando Innamorato* I.v.69-75, and to Gerion in Dante's *Inferno* XVII.10-15, which are both described less formalistically.

<sup>51</sup>In Conti's original: "caput & manus puellae, corpus canis, vocem hominis, caudam draconis, leonis vngues, alas auis" (*Mythologiae* 9.18; see also Lotspeich 108). The translation is taken from Thomas Cooper's famous sixteenth-century *Thesaurus*.

<sup>52</sup>The giant first appears in *Theogony* 287-94 and 979-83, where Hesiod draws his lineage from Chryasor and Kallirhoe. Spenser might have acquired his information from Natale Conti, *Mythologiae* 6.1, as Lotspeich 63 observes.

<sup>53</sup>Dante names the beast "quella sozza imagine di froda" ("that filthy image of Fraud"; *Inferno* XVII.7). For the full episode see XVI.127-XVII.136.

<sup>54</sup>Conti, *Mythologiae* 7.1. The dragon was born of the notorious monsters, Typhaon and Echidna (see also Lotspeich 63).

<sup>55</sup>See the respective entries in the *OED*, "derive, *v.*" 6.a., 9.b., 10.b.

<sup>56</sup>See note 16 on the general setup of the brain chambers. In this triangle of forces, the task of fashioning things anew falls to the imagination, which, however, needs to be kept in check lest the irrational takes control over Man's governing ratio. See Bright 39-67 and 100-07, and Burton 1: 130-77, as well as Rossky.

<sup>57</sup>See *FQ* II.ix.50. In ll. 8-9, Spenser lists "Infernall Hags, Centaurs, feendes, Hippodames,/ Apes, Lyons, Aegles, Owles, fooles, louers, children, Dames."

<sup>58</sup>Juan Huarte, *Examen de Ingenios* 132 (emphases added). John Davies of Hereford notes that "Fantacie,/ [...] doth so forme reforme, and it deforme,/ As



pleaseth hir fantasticke faculty" (*Works* 9). It is through this mechanism that the imagination creates "things vnlikely" from "things likely." LaPrimaudaye 155 also underlines the imagination's ability to reassemble received data. For a similar view, see Rossky 58-59.

<sup>59</sup>The explanation is Hamilton's (note to *FQ* II.ix.49.7).

<sup>60</sup>Thus, as late as Bacon, the god was interpreted as a kind of Providence; see Bacon 6: 747.

<sup>61</sup>The link between Prometheus and the imagination is also pointed out in a different context in the notes of the "May Eclogue," where E. K. records that Prometheus "did first fynd out the hidden courses of the stares, by an excellent imagination" (*Variorum* 7: 57).

<sup>62</sup>The verb "to derive" can also describe mental processes, as it means "to obtain by some process of reasoning, inference or deduction; to gather, deduce" (*OED*, "derive, *v.*" 7. gives evidence from the 1500s and 1600s).

<sup>63</sup>See for example Sidney 84, and Puttenham 3.

<sup>64</sup>See Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* 5.1.14-17.

<sup>65</sup>Isidore of Seville, in fact, marked him as the inventor of idolatry, because he first created humans in effigy (see *Etymologiae* VIII.xi). See also Lactantius, *Epitome* 20.12-13, and the entry in Cooper's *Thesaurus* (Prometheus "first inuented makynge of ymages").

<sup>66</sup>First put forward by Theophrast (Fragment 50). Bremer (35-38) discusses Prometheus's role and function as the bringer of human culture and self-responsibility in the classical age.

<sup>67</sup>See Boccaccio, *Genealogie* IV.xliv [47C]. In the early seventeenth century, Bacon thus assesses Prometheus "not as the founder only but also as the amplifier and enlarger of the human race," and hence the driving force behind any cultural progress (see *De sapientia veterum* in Bacon 6: 745). Bacon argues that Prometheus's giving fire to man is the origin of science and craftsmanship. Truly Promethean human beings are characterised by wisdom and thoughtfulness (Bacon 6: 751).

<sup>68</sup>This is argued in Barsella 120-41.

<sup>69</sup>Spenser, "Letter" 8.

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## Dickens and the Comic Extraneous\*

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What, then, constitutes the extraneous in fiction, let alone the comic extraneous? When Dickens is at issue, it is probably simpler to describe the comic first: he has accustomed us to the recurrent appearance in a given text of flat caricatures who delightfully repeat their signature tunes, coming and going without apparent significance in the same one-sided fashion. But are they always one-sided, and if not, do they cease to be caricatures? As to the generally extraneous in Dickens, George Orwell (45-46) had no doubt that "*unnecessary detail*" (his italics) was "the outstanding, unmistakable mark" of the novelist's writing. He says, in this respect, that when Dickens tells us a family is having dinner, he cannot resist adding, between parenthetical dashes, "baked shoulder of mutton and potatoes under it." But Orwell grants that it is through such detail that "the special Dickens atmosphere is created." Indeed thickness of detail, far from being extraneous, is the mark of the true novelist. That is the way novelists see. It is with these two reflections in mind that I wish to consider whether Mr. Guppy of *Bleak House* and Flora Finching of *Little Dorrit* should be regarded as representative of the comic extraneous in Dickens. I have to confess, at the outset, that when I published my book on Dickens some forty years ago, though I'm sure I relished both Guppy and Flora, I must have considered them quite extraneous to the important matter of the texts concerned, for I find now that I have only

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\*Reference: H. M. Daleski, *Dickens and the Art of Analogy* (London: Faber, 1970).

For debates inspired by this article, please check the *Connotations* website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debdaleski01813.htm>>.



two incidental references to Guppy in my chapter on *Bleak House* and no mention at all of Flora in the chapter on *Little Dorrit*.

Guppy is created through the particular linguistic modes in which he expresses himself, and is not merely provided with comic tags. He comes to us rather through a complex mixture of styles. He is first and foremost a Cockney, and the Cockney in him keeps breaking out, though it is overlaid by his legal pretensions and his devastating use of legalese. The Cockney is there when he first presents himself to Mrs. Rouncewell at Chesney Wold: "Us London lawyers," he says, "don't often get an out" (*Bleak House* 81). This London lawyer is not yet even an articled clerk, though in the course of the narrative he does duly attain this status. And he can't help giving himself away with his bad grammar and his habitual slang.

The mixture of styles that characterizes both his speech and his image of himself is perfectly caught in his first major appearance, the occasion of his preposterous proposal to Esther Summerson (I. 9). In this scene his formula as a caricature is established, though the fertility of Dickens's comic genius is so great that subsequent repetitions never stale. Guppy has dressed specially for the occasion, looking "so uncommonly smart" that Esther hardly recognizes him (111). He prides himself on his forensic eloquence, and whenever and wherever he can, makes use of legal terminology, almost invariably inappropriately. Thus he starts his proposal by asserting, to Esther's astonishment, that "what follows is without prejudice"—meaning that it cannot be used in evidence against him. "It's one of our law terms, miss," he condescendingly explains. And he concludes the proposal not only by stating he adores her but that he wishes "to file a declaration." In between he lists his qualifications for acceptance by her, and does so with an eye for exhaustive detail that reflects the master's, giving a full account of his past, present, and future earning capacity. Nor does he omit to bring in his mother, who, in a delicious slip, is pronounced "eminently calculated for a mother-in-law," who can be fully trusted not only with "wines" but also with "spirits or malt liquors." His combination of the elevated and the homely is incompa-

rable, as he declares, for instance, that his "own abode is lodgings." And always, at inappropriate moments, he is let down by his aitches, stating that his abode, being "open at the back," is "considered one of the 'ealthiest outlets" (113), just as his romantic feeling for Esther, he insists, was aroused when he first saw her and "put up the steps of the 'ackney-coach" she was in (114).

We should not allow ourselves, however, to be taken in by the repetition of Guppy's formulaic presentation. In this respect he certainly is a caricature, but we may be surprised to discover that he is by no means one-sided. In fact his many-sidedness becomes so disconcertingly evident that we have to revise our view of him and of his fictional status. Quite unexpectedly, he turns out to be an interesting character rather than a caricature, as repeatedly different traits are concretized in his presentation.

Despite the obtuseness that is so palpable in his proposal to Esther, Guppy is exceptionally sharp and perceptive. The moment he sees the portrait of Lady Dedlock on his visit to Chesney Wold, he is struck by a resemblance that he cannot place. Though he has only seen Esther once and for a short time on her arrival in London, he soon enough makes the connection. There follows the proposal to her and the dramatization of another striking aspect of his character: he is an unmitigated opportunist, with an eye very steadily fixed on the main chance. Seeing an opportunity to exploit Esther's apparent connection with Lady Dedlock, he quickly decides to get in on the ground floor and propose to her. Before the proposal, he first confirms his sense of the resemblance when he repeatedly looks at Esther in a "scrutinising and curious way" (112).

When Esther rejects the proposal out of hand, he then resorts, with a strange innocence, to revealing his cards. "I have been brought up in a sharp school," he says, "and am accustomed to a variety of general practice. [...] Blest with your hand, what means might I not find of advancing your interests, and pushing your fortunes!" To cap it all, he insists he has been in love with Esther from the moment he first saw her. "Love," he emphatically declares, came before "interest" (114).

Thereafter he publicly adopts the role of the suffering, rejected lover, declaring, with a resounding displacement of adjective and a revelatory dropping of an aitch, that he has “an unrequited image imprinted on his art” (397). We begin to see that a great deal is packed into his presentation.

An even more devious side of Guppy is revealed in the superb scene when he confronts Lady Dedlock with all the facts he has astutely amassed about her and Esther and Hawdon. He ends by proposing to bring her the “bundle of old letters” Hawdon has left behind. She moves to end the meeting and is apparently about to give him money, but he self-righteously states he is “not actuated by any motives of that sort” and “couldn’t accept of anything of the kind” (364). When his friend Weevle later complains, however, that he cannot make out how obtaining the letters from Krook is “likely to be profitable,” Guppy insists that, in this matter and apart from hoping to further his interests with Esther, he is “no fool” (400), though blackmail or a shady sale are terms he would not care to use.

Despite his repeated protestations of unrequited love, Guppy’s passion for Esther proves to be only skin-deep when he registers her pockmarked face, and the “image [...] on his art” is easily erased. But the complexity of his presentation is such that, even when he falls back into the forensic mode and asks her to admit, “though no witnesses are present,” that it was she who had repelled and repudiated his former “declaration” (478), he is deeply “ashamed,” as she notes (480). A further inherent decency also asserts itself when, quite disinterestedly, he informs Lady Dedlock that the letters have not been destroyed as was supposed, and that Smallweed and Co. have that same day been using them to blackmail Sir Leicester. Dickens’s Working Plans for this scene bear the note “Mr. Guppy’s magnanimity” (799).

Guppy may exercise great skill and ingenuity in putting together the details of the story of Lady Dedlock and Hawdon and Esther, but he remains woefully without any insight into himself and his position. Accordingly, when he finally becomes an attorney and is sure of his

worldly prospects, he does not hesitate to renew his proposal to Esther, seemingly having overcome his repugnance and reverting to a cherished role. He proudly states then that her image has not been “eradicated from [his] art” as he had supposed (756). He is quite bewildered when he is turned down.

Guppy, therefore, is hardly a caricature, and his detailed presentation is far from being extraneous in the narrative. Indeed, he is a central figure in the plot, and there is no need to take an uneasy pleasure in a supposedly dubious fictional presence in an important text. His significance, moreover, is not one that we ‘construct’ in seeking overall coherence, but is impressed on us by the narrative itself. It is he who makes the connection between Lady Dedlock and Esther and so brings about the convergence of the two seemingly separate narratives when Lady Dedlock reveals herself to her daughter. And he is the one who is behind Lady Dedlock’s flight to her death when he warns her that Sir Leicester has met the blackmailing group. Furthermore, the idea of connection is also a major theme in the novel, as disease is made to link Tom-all-Alone’s and other slums to Bleak House and fashionable London areas.

In *Little Dorrit*, Flora Finching’s comic formula is at once established in all its unstoppable flow of associative abandon. One short example of this must suffice:

“And to think of Doyce and Clennam, and who Doyce can be,” said Flora; “delightful man no doubt and married perhaps or perhaps a daughter, now has he really? then one understands the partnership and sees it all, don’t tell me anything about it for I know I have no claim to ask the question the golden chain that once was forged being snapped and very proper. [...]

Dear Arthur—force of habit, Mr. Clennam every way more delicate and adapted to existing circumstances—I must beg to be excused for taking the liberty of this intrusion but I thought I might so far presume upon old times for ever faded never more to bloom as to call [...] to congratulate and offer best wishes. A great deal superior to China, not to be denied and much nearer though higher up!” (268).

That reference to China and “higher up” is inimitable, relating as it does to the step-ladder she has just climbed to Clennam’s office.

Little need be said about the constituents of Flora's comic formula not only because it is so directly expressive but because the narrator says it all in charting Clennam's exasperated reactions to her. She is "diffuse and silly" (150); she never "[comes] to a full stop" (151); she interweaves "their long-abandoned boy and girl relations" with the present in an "inconsistent and profoundly unreasonable way" (153-54); she is "disjointed and voluble" (269); she "[plunges] over head and ears into loquacity" (282); and she holds forth "in a most distracting manner on a chaos of subjects" (684). It would appear that the author himself was still smarting from the real-life experience on which Flora is based.

Like Guppy, however, though in a less complex manner, Flora is not one-sided. She has a capacity that he notably lacks for real self-knowledge. On the memorable occasion when news of Mr. Dorrit's fortune is broken to Little Dorrit, she heartily congratulates her "from the bottom" of her heart, though, she adds, she is "sensible of [often] blundering and being stupid" (416). And unlike Guppy she can accurately register the reactions of others. She immediately takes in that Clennam is "disappointed" in her on their first meeting, adding she well knows she is "not what [he] expected" (153). She also at once intuits Little Dorrit's situation, responding to her with an innate kindness of disposition when she gives her employment, generously supplies her with food, and presses her face between her hands "like the gentlest of women" (281). Furthermore, she takes in Little Dorrit's account of her life "with a natural tenderness that quite [understands] it, and in which there [is] no incoherence" (287). In addition she tends "to be always honest" when she gives herself time to think about it (286). Finally, she even conquers her own fixation and, prior to the marriage of Clennam and Little Dorrit, not only grants that her "visions have for ever fled and all is cancelled," but manages to rise above herself and "heartily" wishes the couple well (819).

Flora, then, like Guppy, unexpectedly turns out to be more than a caricature with a comic formula that is detailed over and over again with thick particularity. Indeed, she is seen from a sufficiently varied

number of angles to take on a roundness of form that is not merely attributable to her fondness for porter and “a great deal of sherry” (158). Unlike Guppy, however, she has no significant role in the plot, though she does occupy what appears to be a carefully chosen position in the narrative. The opening 150 pages or so of *Little Dorrit* must be among the darkest and most depressed in Dickens’s work. This prevailing dismalness is broken with Flora’s first appearance, and she continues to figure as a needed counterbalance throughout this dour, grim book. It is notable too that, of all the characters in the novel, it is Flora who figures in the scene that immediately precedes the final episode of the marriage. Moreover, she is in no way extraneous to a number of thematic threads. She is stuck in the past, like a very Barnacle to a post, not to mention major characters such as Mr. Dorrit and Mrs Clennam. And if she so “[runs] away with an idea” (536) that she never gets anywhere, the Circumlocution Office might easily accommodate her. One has to be very careful, it appears, not to make quick assumptions about the nature of Dickens’s art—as I would appear to have done some forty years ago.

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(Un)Surprises Uncovered:  
A Reply to Jennifer Geer, Jean-Jacques Lecercle,  
and Michael Mendelson\*

ANGELIKA ZIRKER

I was like a child, constantly wondering,  
and surprised at nothing.  
George MacDonald, *Lilith* 17

I am delighted at the responses to my article on (un)surprises in Lewis Carroll's *Alice*-books and would like to thank Jennifer Geer, Jean-Jacques Lecercle, and Michael Mendelson for entering into a critical debate with me.

The three responses all seem to, at least partly, look at the topic from a psychological perspective. Jennifer Geer regards Alice's attitude as reactions to the familiar, and the unfamiliar, respectively; Jean-Jacques Lecercle assumes that Alice's being surprised or unsurprised goes back to schizophrenia (281); and Michael Mendelson sees the *Alice*-books as stories of developmental growth (cf. 298). I only agree with some of these readings and would like to emphasize the concept(s) of play that underlie the structure of the *Alice*-books.

In the books, Alice enters worlds of play: games are being played throughout—among the most obvious examples in *Wonderland* are the Caucus Race (ch. 3), the game of Croquet (ch. 8) and the appearance of

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\*Reference: Angelika Zirker, "'Alice was not surprised': (Un)Surprises in Lewis Carroll's *Alice*-Books," *Connotations* 14.1-3 (2004/2005): 19-37; Jennifer Geer, "(Un)Surprisingly Natural: A Response to Angelika Zirker," *Connotations* 17.2-3 (2007/2008): 267-80; Jean-Jacques Lecercle, "Response to 'Alice was not surprised,'" *Connotations* 17.2-3 (2007/2008): 280-86; Michael Mendelson, "The Phenomenology of Deep Surprise in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*," *Connotations* 17.2-3 (2007/2008): 287-301.

For the original article as well as all contributions to this debate, please check the *Connotations* website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debzirker01413.htm>>.

playing-cards all the way through the concluding chapters; *Through the Looking-Glass* is even based on a game of chess. Within these game worlds, psychology and psychological reactions are deliberately being played with. Alice's reactions are therefore not to be read as mimetic instances; rather, they are psychological elements which are deflated by their transformation into various play moves. The attempt to read the *Alice*-books as a kind of *Bildungsroman* which derives its *raison d'être* from the psychological development of its protagonist is therefore inappropriate: play in these narratives is not an element of psychology, but psychology becomes an element of play. The child's psychology becomes relevant in so far as play is one of the most important activities of children.

The overall playful mode influences and affects Alice's reactions, her surprises, and her 'unsurprises.' The first instance of surprise occurs, however, even before the issue of Alice's reactions arises, namely in the difference between the framing poems and the tales of Alice's adventures within the worlds she enters: expectations as to (sentimental or psychological) readings are being subverted, and the text itself points this out from the very beginning.

### The Framing Poems

Jennifer Geer writes that the "frames soften the adventures' surprises by employing images and poetic conventions that would have been familiar to Carroll's nineteenth-century readers" (268). I couldn't agree with her more in stating that Carroll draws on a literary tradition in the framing poems of the *Alice*-books. Not only does he refer to the topos of idealised memories of the "golden afternoon" (*WL* 3),<sup>1</sup> but the overall nostalgic tone and even the rhyme scheme are reminiscent of a particular type of poetry which was fashionable in the nineteenth century.<sup>2</sup>

It is precisely in this that the framing poems are so very different from the tales proper. Whereas in the poems the speaker expresses

longing and nostalgia, the tone in the tales is sometimes threatening and bewildering, sometimes playful and funny but it is never nostalgic.<sup>3</sup> This difference in tone leads to some tension between the framing poems and the actual tales, as the frame sets up certain expectations regarding the story that is to follow, which are then upset.

Let me illustrate this point with a specific example. In the fourth stanza of the poem introducing *WL*, the speaker writes: “The dream child moving through a land/ [...] In friendly chat with bird or beast” (21-23).<sup>4</sup> Yet, Alice hardly ever finds herself “in friendly chat” with any of the creatures she meets in the course of her wanderings. Her conversations with them are irritating and confusing but rarely friendly—the only exceptions being her encounter with the White Knight in *LG*, who bears features of Carroll himself (cf. Gardner 247n2), and her meeting with the Fawn in the wood where things have no names (and then only because the Fawn does not recognize her as a potentially threatening “human child”).<sup>5</sup> Whereas the introductory poem makes us expect a somewhat sentimental child-in-Eden scene, we actually enter a world of play where games are taken as seriously by adult readers as they are by children.

Hence, the framing poems do not really “soften” Alice’s adventures but rather evoke expectations as to the nature of the tales that are then disrupted and destroyed in what follows. They enhance the sense of surprise through this evocation as the reader suddenly finds himself in a world of play where familiar rules are no longer applicable, expectations no longer hold, and even the notion of surprises and what is surprising becomes doubtful.

### “Down the rabbit hole”

The tale of *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* begins with her following a rabbit down a hole. When she first sees the rabbit, she is not surprised at seeing a *talking* rabbit as such but rather at his having a watch. The “conventions of children’s fiction” (Mendelson 292) are

hence not “disturbed by a rabbit in gentleman’s attire” (292) but rather by his having a watch: this is what stirs Alice’s curiosity. This point is emphasized in the text: “(when she thought it over afterwards, it occurred to her that she ought to have wondered at this, but at the time it all seemed quite natural); but when the Rabbit actually *took a watch out of its waistcoat-pocket* [...], Alice started to her feet [...] burning with curiosity” (9-10). It is only through reflection that the Rabbit’s overall appearance no longer seems natural and therefore becomes surprising. The real surprise at the moment of the encounter is produced by the unfamiliar watch.

One of the difficulties regarding Mendelson’s approach to surprises in the *Alice*-books lies at the beginning of his article, where he develops a distinction between two kinds of surprises: surprise that eclipses the ordinary, that is “a premonition of significance,” as opposed to surprise that is based on “recognitions that are simply unanticipated” (287); in the latter case, surprise “quickly passes because we find a way to accommodate its unfamiliarity” (287). He is interested in what he calls “deep surprise,” surprise that is “momentous” (in Kenneth Grahame’s terms), that “presages something potentially meaningful” (287) and that, according to Mendelson, brings about development and change in Alice.

This distinction, however, collapses when he gives an example from the text, namely Alice’s fall down the rabbit-hole. He states that, during the fall, Alice starts to engage “with the novelty of the experience” which then “gives way to reverie” (294). She starts not only to think about the length of her fall, but also about her cat Dinah, which Mendelson calls an “assimilation of the bizarre to the familiar” (294). But if this is really the case, then his two categories of surprise merge: she is not so much surprised but rather starts wondering—which could be seen as an effect of her being surprised at what is unfamiliar. But this surprise passes and she starts to think of all different kinds of things. At the same time, her fall down the rabbit hole is certainly “meaningful,” if not necessarily in terms of her psychological development but rather for the development of the story as a whole.

What is more, while she is falling down the hole, Alice starts playing around with words and ideas; for instance, she thinks about what might happen if she fell down the stairs after this experience:

“Well!” thought Alice to herself. “After such a fall as this, I shall think nothing of tumbling down-stairs! How brave they’ll all think me at home! Why I wouldn’t say anything about it, even if I fell off the top of the house!”  
(Which was very likely true.) (10; my emphasis)

This ‘playing around’ is actually one form of pretend play. And without being aware of it, she makes a joke here<sup>6</sup>: she would indeed be unable to say anything if she did fall down the stairs; the parenthetical comment by the narrator points this out. Her play goes on shortly after this. When Alice thinks about her cat who might catch bats, she starts to play around with language, with sounds: “But do cats eat bats, I wonder?” (11). She then transforms this question into “Do bats eat cats?” ‘Cats’ and ‘bats’ are a minimal pair and she simply swaps the initial sound. Her usual reaction to surprise is “to wonder what was going to happen next” (10), which is followed by different kinds of plays and games.

### Pretend Play

One of these games is Alice’s pretend play. Lecercle refers to an early example of this in *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, just after Alice has shrunk and “shut[...] up like a telescope” (14). She starts crying and tells herself to “leave off this minute” (15), “for this curious child was very fond of pretending to be two people” (15). Lecercle reads this statement as evidence for his thesis of Alice’s “mild schizophrenia” (281).

Developmental psychology has long shown that pretend play is quite natural and normal in children.<sup>7</sup> By relating Alice’s behaviour to schizophrenia, Lecercle follows a cliché in Carroll-criticism that is connected to psychoanalytical readings of the *Alice*-books<sup>8</sup> and that

was especially popular in the early 1980s.<sup>9</sup> When Alice pretends to be two people at the same time, she is playing; a split personality can simply be part of playing a game: “Man exists in two spheres simultaneously, not for lack of concentration or out of forgetfulness, but because this double personality is essential to play” (Fink 23). In play, everyone can be someone else for the duration of the game; this is why we like to play from time to time: play allows us, among other things, to escape from who we usually are—and a child, in this respect, is no different from this.

I should like to think that there is more to the *Alice*-books than a mere psychological projection (and also more to Carroll than simply his search for a psychological outlet for his schizophrenia which he projected onto Alice in his tales). Preconceived ideas of this kind hardly ever do justice to a text. To suppose that Alice’s behaviour is grounded on some pathological problem is as far-fetched as the idea of her becoming a “subject” in the course of the text, i.e. that the *Alice*-books are some kind of novel of development. Lecercle assumes that there are ideological pressures on Alice. This becomes evident in remarks like “And if the individual is interpellated into a subject by ideology, a process that concerns all individuals and never fails, it leaves open a space for counter-interpellation [...]. This double dialectics of determination [...] and of interpellation by ideology, the workings of which are as eternal as the Freudian unconscious [...] is the source and rationale for the literary dialectics of surprise and unsurprise” (285). I would be curious to see in which way the games played by Carroll could become expressive of such an eternal truth.

A further example will prove the point that a psychological reading does not do justice to what actually happens in the text. At the beginning of the second chapter of *WL*, Alice opens out “like the largest telescope that ever was” (16) after eating the cakes she finds in the hall:

“Curiouser and curiouser!” cried Alice (she was so much surprised that for the moment she quite forgot how to speak good English). (16)



Alice is surprised, and she is so surprised that she forgets how to speak good English—she is not surprised “at what she can utter beyond and against the rules of language” (284); this is only a *consequence* of her surprise. What she is doing here is rather typical of a child much younger than Alice: she follows linguistic rules rigorously. The regular comparative of adjectives in English is formed by adding the suffix *-er* to the adjective: big—bigger, large—larger, nice—nicer. In analogy to that, Alice invents the form curious—curiouser—and shortly afterwards realizes that she is talking “nonsense” (17). She learns through play: she follows a linguistic rule (not unlike a foreign learner) but then recognises that this is not the correct form. In this situation, Alice is far from “establish[ing] her personality and becom[ing] a subject” (284); she is *interacting* with herself.

#### Alice’s Interaction(s)

I appreciate Jennifer Geer’s reading of surprises in the *Alice*-books and how she addresses the “question of what is natural.” She finds that there are “different definitions of nature”:

Alice’s working definition of the natural as something that is ‘part of the world she is accustomed to’ ties it to her cultural and social experience as an upper-middle-class Victorian girl. For her, a natural situation is one that conforms to some aspect of this experience. On the other hand [...] Alice is able to accept the fantastic because she is a child [...]. This argument rests on a conception of nature that is far more essentialist than Alice’s working definition; it assumes that children have an affinity for the fantastic that is independent of social and cultural variations. Technically speaking, this is a contradiction in Zirker’s argument, but it reflects the books’ own shifting definitions of what is natural. (Geer 271-72)

Geer seems to see a contradiction in my reading of the term natural: firstly, ‘natural’ refers to what corresponds with Alice’s experience, i.e. what she knows and has seen or experienced before; secondly, it can also refer to what is fantastic as the fantastic is part of the child’s

experience, e.g. from fairy tales, and therefore a 'natural' part of the child's world. The child therefore does indeed have "an affinity for the fantastic that is independent of social and cultural variations" (272) but this does not exclude a similar affinity for what has been experienced before and thus become natural. In Alice's case, both the fantastic as well as social and cultural concepts are natural to her. This is not so much a contradiction as a combination or amalgamation of different concepts that relies on the different kinds of experience a child is exposed to: "I was like a child, constantly wondering and surprised at nothing" as Mr. Vane, the protagonist in George MacDonald's novel *Lilith*, puts it. Children wonder, but because they are accustomed to different realms of experience—the social and cultural world they grow up in as well as the realm of fairy tales and fantastic stories—they are hardly ever surprised. As Geer explains, "[l]ike many common terms, 'natural' may mean several things, and ordinary usage tends to overlook the differences between them" (272). Carroll's notion of what is 'natural' is not restricted to "ordinary usage" and therefore he "question[s] the nature of nature and of natural behaviour" (272), but he also plays with the different connotations the word may have in different perspectives: Carroll plays with the question of how a child perceives the world.

Through the eyes of a child, what is perceived as natural changes perpetually: not only is a child constantly confronted with new experiences that qualify the evaluation of something as natural or unnatural; the child also moves in different realms, e.g. in the realm of the fairy tale, of reality, etc. There is not necessarily an affinity in the child for the fantastic but more so for the "willing suspension of disbelief." A child has a yet unfixed notion of what is natural and only vague ideas of "social and cultural variations" due to lack of experience.

The *Alice*-books therefore illustrate that what appears to be natural (or not) and what is surprising (or not) is a matter of experience and perspective—one need only think of Alice's reaction to the White Rabbit. When adults return to childhood, which is what they are

supposed to do when entering Wonderland and the world behind the mirror, they have to adapt themselves to different and unknown rules. Such a change in perspective implicates the realisation that what they think is natural or conforming to rules known in their adult world does not necessarily apply to the world they now move in. “[W]hat the natural might be” (279) thus depends on one’s perspective on the world.

This becomes particularly clear, as Geer points out, in Alice’s encounter with the Unicorn in chapter seven of *LG*: “The Unicorn offers a mirror image of Alice’s view of nature, an alternate perspective in which unicorns are perfectly ordinary and children are fabulous monsters. [...] [T]he Unicorn’s perspective reverses her conceptual framework rather than challenging its basic premises” (275). That such a reversal of “conceptual framework[s]” would appear in a mirror world should not really be surprising to either Alice or the reader. It shows, however, that she is not yet accustomed to this reversed way of thinking as it contradicts her experience (and also her preconceived ideas); it has not as yet become natural *to her*, but it is natural (and logical) in the context of the world she moves in<sup>10</sup>: it is thus not the Unicorn who is a “fabulous” monster but the child.<sup>11</sup> The characters within this world of play perceive one another as real, and hence they identify Alice as different. Carroll reverses the ‘normal’ order throughout his books and thus plays with different concepts.

This is why I would also hesitate to agree with Michael Mendelson regarding another point he makes. He compares Alice’s behaviour in the Rabbit’s house (chapter 4: “The Rabbit Sends in a Little Bill”) with that in the concluding chapter after she has upset the jury-box. Mendelson writes:

[...] her confinement in the Rabbit’s house, where she *outgrows* her ability to move and so must stay and submit to the Rabbit’s assaults [...]. In the courtroom, however, she has *grown into* her own and can act as she thinks best. [...] Alice’s change is progressive, the development of a bolder, more assertive person, someone prepared to respond with resolve when opportunity appears. (297)

He concludes that she has not only literally grown but also matured. But this interpretation is based on a reading of the text that overlooks significant hints regarding the very fact that Carroll explicitly did not aim at showing any maturation on Alice's part. Neither is she clearly presented as a child at the end (within the day-dreaming of her sister) nor does she change from submission to outspokenness. When she is in the Rabbit's house and grows so large that she cannot leave it, she gives Bill the Lizard a kick when he wants to climb down the chimney and defends herself against the Rabbit who wants to burn down the house: "And Alice called out, as loud as she could, 'If you do, I'll set Dinah at you!'" (36). She is as 'bold' and "assertive" this early in the story as she is in the final scene when she ends her adventures by crying out "You're nothing but a pack of cards!" (109).

While she travels in her dream worlds, Alice's development is pending. If she 'develops,' this is a move within a game. In *Through the Looking-Glass* she starts off as a pawn and wants to become Queen, which she does in chapter nine, but this does not mean that she has become a grown-up—neither have the Red and the White Queen 'developed' within the game. Becoming a Queen is a game, and it is something that is being played with.<sup>12</sup> Hence, the text hints at the reverse direction: in the play worlds of Wonderland and behind the Looking-Glass, maturation and developmental growth are not the issue. Alice is characterised as a child throughout the tales.

\* \* \*

The above examples are meant to illustrate one particular issue or even a pattern in the *Alice*-books, namely that of play. The *Alice*-books are not psychological narratives, although psychological reactions, for instance, may be used as elements of play. Hence, Jean-Jacques Lecercle's question "is the dialectics of surprise and unsurprise a psychological one" (282) is, in my opinion, not an appropriate one as this dialectics depends on the ability to play and to enter a world of play by reading the *Alice*-books. Alice is not "forgetting the rules of

[grammatical] decorum" (284) when she cries out "curiouser and curiouser"; this is rather one of the games Carroll plays and that the reader is supposed to understand in order to share the fun.

Taking this overall playful approach into consideration also solves the problem of the ending of the *Alice*-books. She does *not* achieve a "quantum leap of character" (Mendelson 289) but stays very much the same. The narrative of *WL* ends with Alice's older sister, who "[l]astly, [...] pictured to herself how this same little sister of hers would, in the after-time, be herself a grown woman; and how she would keep, through all her riper years, the simple and loving heart of her childhood" (12.111). Alice's sister pictures the younger girl as "remembering her own child-life" (111) in later years.<sup>13</sup> It is the intention of the *Alice*-books to stir this memory of childhood and to enable the adult reader to re-enter childhood in order to relive experiences and to think differently again, namely more playfully.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>All further quotations are from the Oxford edition of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There*, ed. Roger Lancelyn Green.—For this idealisation see, e.g. Černý, who refers to Sidney's golden world and emphasises that Carroll does not, in the first place, refer to weather conditions but to the moment of his first telling the tale of Alice: "[Carroll dachte] nicht in erster Linie an das Wetter [...], sondern [wollte] dem Moment der Entstehung ein Wertattribut verleihen"; "Autor-Intention" 291. For the real weather conditions on July 4, 1862, see Gardner's comment: "It is with sadness I add that when a check was made in 1950 with the London meteorological office [...] records indicated that the weather near Oxford on July 4, 1862, was 'cool and rather wet'" (AA 9n1). For Carroll's treatment of the topos of a 'golden' time, see also the poem "Solitude" (1853), where he makes use of a very similar imagery: "Ye golden hours of Life's young spring,/ [...] Thou fairy-dream of youth!" (CW 860-61).

<sup>2</sup>See, e.g., Tupper's "Of Memory": "He gazeth on the green hill-tops/ And the partial telescope of memory pierceth the bland between,/ To look with lingering love at the fair star of childhood" (22); and Samuel Rogers's *The Pleasures of Memory*: "Childhood's lov'd group revisits every scene,/ The tangled wood-walk

and the tufted green!/ Indulgent MEMORY wakes, and, lo! they live!/ Cloth'd with far softer hues than Light can give./ Thou last best friend that Heav'n assigns below,/ To sooth and sweeten all the cares we know;/ Whose glad suggestions still each vain alarm,/ When nature fades, and life forgets to charm/ Thee would the Muse invoke!—to thee belong/ The sage's precept, and the poet's song" (81-90.7).

<sup>3</sup>Cf. Kelly: "Alice is constantly at odds with the creatures and situations of Wonderland" (82).

<sup>4</sup>Cf. also the very notion that Alice is a "dream-child."

<sup>5</sup>Another case in point is the beginning of *LG*, which Geer describes as a "safe, cozy point of departure" (269). We meet Alice while she is playing one of her favourite games, she pretends. And while she is playing this pretend-game, she remembers one incident: "And once she had really frightened her old nurse by shouting suddenly in her ear, 'Nurse! Do let's pretend that I am a hungry hyaena, and you're a bone!'" (1.126). This is anything but cosy.

<sup>6</sup>This is actually the first death joke in Alice's adventures. The concept of death jokes goes back to William Empson (cf. 268-70; 287). Gardner refers to Empson in his *Annotated Alice* (13n3).

<sup>7</sup>Greta G. Fein defines 'pretend play' as follows: "In pretend play, one object is used as if it were another, one person behaves as if she were another, and an immediate time and place are treated as if they were otherwise and elsewhere"; „Pretend Play: Creativity and Consciousness" 283. See also Fein's overview regarding research on pretend play, "Pretend Play in Childhood: An Integrative Review." According to Fein, pretend-play is an expression of creativity: "[...] pretend play is viewed as a natural form of creativity" (283). This has already been stated by James Sully: "[...] the characteristic and fundamental impulse of play, the desire to be something, to act a part" (36).

<sup>8</sup>Another commonplace in the context of psychoanalytical readings goes back to the essay "Alice in Wonderland Psycho-Analyzed," published by Anthony Goldschmidt in Oxford in 1933. His reading was the first instance of explaining the *Alice*-books as "sexual symbolism in any medium" (279). This interpretation (which was four pages long) resulted not only in long psychoanalytical tracts on the *Alice*-books but also in the idea that Carroll was a paedophile. What critics failed to recognize, however, was that Goldsmith's reading was meant as a spoof: "His friend and fellow Carrollian, Derek Hudson, claimed that his 'tongue was half-way into his cheek' when he [Goldschmidt] wrote it" (Leach, *Shadow* 36). Leach refers to backgrounds of myths around Carroll, especially in the context of earlier biographies (cf. her chapter "A Necessary Otherness," 15-60, esp. 19-43). Subsequent generations of psychoanalytical critics misinterpreted Goldschmidt's spoof, which resulted in questions like: "What was his [Carrolls] relation to his sex organ anyhow?" (Schilder 291); see also Róheim and Skinner. In 1921, J. B. Priestly made fun of German professors, asking what would happen to the *Alice*-books once they got hold of them and started to read them psychoanalytically and -pathologically.



<sup>9</sup>See, e.g., Gilles Deleuze, *Logique du Sens*, chapter 13: “Du Schizophrène et de la petite fille” (101-14); Jacqueline Rose, *The Case of Peter Pan* 3; Géza Róheim, “From Further Insights.” According to Miyoshi, Alice’s split into two persons can be regarded as being symptomatic of the Victorian era: “[I]n the nineteenth century, each individual was ‘divided against himself’” (*The Divided Self* ix). He does not explain, however, why “each individual” suffered from this condition.

<sup>10</sup>Georgina Barry refers to the concept of perspective: “[...] our normative conceptions are relative only to our environment. Alice perceives Fabulous Monsters and is perceived as a Fabulous Monster” (84).

<sup>11</sup>This incident seems to trouble critics. James Suchan, for example, claims that the encounter between Alice and the Unicorn illustrates “the ambivalent attitude that Victorian adults held about children”: “If the Unicorn is right in his assessment of Alice, she belongs more to the lineage of fictional heroes and heroines like Heathcliff, Cathy, and Becky Sharp than with innocent waifs like Little Dorrit, Sissy Jupe, and Oliver Twist” (78). William Sacksteder explains: “The Lion and the Unicorn both call Alice ‘the Monster,’ as indeed she is in the original sense of a hybrid. For she partakes of two worlds, the natural, represented by the Lion, and the imaginary, represented by the Unicorn” (352). This view, however, ignores the fact that both, Lion and Unicorn, appear in their form of heraldic signs and figures from a nursery rhyme, i.e. they belong to a fantastic and imaginary world in the first place.

<sup>12</sup>This is also true for the game of chess that is being played: it does not follow the usual rules: “[Carroll] based his story, not on a game of chess, but on a chess lesson or demonstration of the moves such as he gave to Alice Liddell [...]. That is to say, he abstracted from the game exactly what he wanted for his design, and expressed that as a game between a child of seven-and-a-half who was to ‘be’ a White Pawn and an older player (himself) who was to manipulate the other pieces” (Taylor 102).

<sup>13</sup>This becoming a child again has a salutary effect: “Kein erwachsener Mensch kann die Kindheit mehr haben, wer aber liebend zu seinem eigenen Urbild in der Kindheit hinblickt, hat daran ein Mittel gegen die Selbstverwerfung und also gegen die Menschenverachtung” (Leimberg 456).

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## Ambiguity and the Poets\*

ELEANOR COOK

A stranger meeting ambiguity for the first time might well be taken aback by her mixed reputation. She is disliked and avoided in some realms, whereas in others she is welcome. A philosopher like J. L. Austin will patrol the streets of language in order to identify ambiguity in his book, *How To Do Things with Words*. Ambiguity is the bane of translators, who must decide whether it is intentional or merely casual, and if casual, whether the author is careless or lazy or ignorant. We do not want ambiguity in legislation. Nor do we want it in our wills or in our financial affairs. (Lawyers, of course, like linguists, “[consider] ambiguity as productive because it triggers processes of disambiguation” [Bauer par. 6]) Nor do we want ambiguity in our traffic signs. A recent visitor from Australia, driving on the express highway around Toronto, noticed signs for collector lanes. He assumed—logically enough—that these were toll highways, collecting money, and so avoided them, overshot the city, and was late for dinner. In fact, collector lanes simply siphon off—that is, collect—traffic that is preparing to exit.

On the other hand, ambiguity is a useful and even welcome guest in some places. It is an excellent device for concealing views. The oracles are said to have used ambiguity regularly, though these turn out to be literary oracles more than historical ones, as far as we can tell. Macbeth’s witches offer a well-known later example. The gods are prone to ambiguity or amphibology, according to Chaucer’s *Criseyde*: “He hath not wel the goddes understonde/ For goddes speken in amphi-

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\*For debates inspired by this article, please check the *Connotations* website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debcook01813.htm>>.

bologies,/ And, for a sooth, they tellen twenty lyes [lies]" (*Troilus and Criseyde* IV.1405-07). In academic life today, ambiguity also has its uses. Suppose a selection committee for a senior position at your university receives a letter of recommendation on behalf of Professor X. How does it read the sentence: "You will be fortunate indeed if you can get Professor X to work for you." Intentional ambiguity or not?

For a literary scholar and critic, the general dimensions of ambiguity can appear singularly difficult to map. It seems to be not so much an unknown land mass as a mythological creature, a Proteus, who changes shape whenever you wish to capture him—*Proteus ambiguus*, as Ovid calls him (*Metamorphoses* II.9). This many-sidedness is sometimes blamed on William Empson's well-known book, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, which he published in 1930, in his twenties. Most of his examples are drawn from poetry. It is not a taxonomy, as one might expect from the title. As his editor, John Haffenden, puts it: "*Seven Types of Ambiguity* [...] offers less a methodology than Empson's own methodised brilliance" (4).<sup>1</sup> Pertinent criticism at the time objected among other things that Empson "had [...] been too prodigal in his associative [...] interpretations," and that "he too often worried the parts without reference to the whole" (4). But the term spread, thanks largely to the so-called New Critics, though by 1947, one of them, Cleanth Brooks, wrote that he held no brief for the term "ambiguity" (or for "paradox" or "irony"): "Perhaps they are inadequate. Perhaps they are misleading. It is to be hoped in that case that we can eventually improve upon them" (195). By 1957, William K. Wimsatt and Brooks acknowledged that "the term 'ambiguity' was perhaps not altogether happy, for this term reflects the point of view of expository prose, where one meaning, and only one meaning, is wanted" (637). That is, the norm for poetry has always included what they call "multiple implication" (638)—a useful enough phrase, if clumsy. In 1958, Roman Jakobson accepted the term "ambiguity," defining it as "an intrinsic, inalienable character of any self-focussed message, briefly, a corollary feature of poetry" (85). He went on to quote Empson.<sup>2</sup> (Jakobson's essay, by the way, was first published in English.) Mean-

while, Empson revised his book somewhat for later editions, then about 1973 mischievously wrote to a friend:

Reviewers were telling me, as soon as *Ambiguity* came out, that not all poetry was ambiguous, and I could see that the method worked best where the authors had had some impulse or need for the process; but, as it had become my line, I went on slogging at it for two more books.<sup>3</sup> Then I thought I had given a rounded view of the subject, and unless challenged to debate had no need to go on about it. (*Argufying* 3)

In 1984, the debate was still not settled. Max Black, the philosopher of language, wrote that since Empson's book, the term "ambiguity" had been "inflated to the point of uselessness" (Black 176).

Aristotle, for whom ambiguity was a fault, laid all this out in his attacks on what W. B. Stanford calls the "deliberate abuse of language [...] verbal equivocations" (Stanford 7), whether by Sophists or by rhetoricians. But of course the Greek tragedies are full of ambiguities, for example, in Aeschylus where they are chiefly intended to deceive, and in Sophocles where they are chiefly unwitting.<sup>4</sup> In the nineteenth century, two German scholars attempted an end-run around Aristotle, by arguing that "Rhetorical Ambiguity and Poetic Ambiguity should be treated as quite distinct species" (6n2).<sup>5</sup> And yet, as a later classical scholar observes, for the logician, the rhetorician, and the poet, "the same formal analysis holds, though it is true that often the meshes of the rhetorical categories are too coarse to catch the suppler minnows of poetry" (6). Stanford leaves implicit his own double use of Greek *amphiboleus*, which also signifies casting a fishing-net.

I have run through a familiar literary history in order to set aside the very wide sense of the term "ambiguity." Any fictive construct, whether in prose or poetry, will exploit the richness of diction, syntax, genre, address, and so on, including possible ambiguities. It is the particular context that gives literary meaning, just as it is the particular context that gives meaning to a single word. Words in a poem exist in relation, never in isolation. "[T]here are no bad words or good words [in a poem]; there are only words in bad or good places," to quote Winifred Nowotny (32).<sup>6</sup>



For me, the most interesting and useful cases in poetry are particular ones where ambiguity gives rise to wider effects. I want to start with types of ambiguity familiar to both linguists and literary critics: lexical ambiguity, including ambiguity in oral performance, and semantic ambiguity. Then, a class of ambiguity using associative language or sound structure rather than signification, at least in the first instance. Then, very briefly, ambiguity in genre, before coming to an example of ambiguity governing an entire poem. I shall end with two modern examples of Aristotelian ambiguity.

But first, a cautionary note. The terms “ambiguity” and “indeterminacy” are not synonymous, though they may well overlap. Ambiguity chiefly signifies one or two or maybe three different meanings, with a few more in one type. Indeterminacy signifies indefiniteness.<sup>7</sup> In examples of logical ambiguity in literature, the fun lies in working out the alternatives, and further in working out the relation of the alternatives. Indeterminacy allows for many alternatives. Modernism is sometimes seen as especially given to indeterminacy, but modern writers include Robert Frost and Marianne Moore and the T. S. Eliot of *Four Quartets* and others for whom indeterminacy (and even ambiguity) is not a hallmark.

Most poems in Elizabeth Bishop’s remarkable first collection, *North & South*, were written in her twenties, including the example here, “Chemin de Fer,” whose first stanza offers an example of lexical ambiguity<sup>8</sup>:

Alone on the railroad track  
 I walked with pounding heart.  
 The ties were too close together  
 or maybe too far apart.

[...]

The hermit shot off his shot-gun  
 and the tree by his cabin shook.  
 Over the pond went a ripple,  
 The pet hen went chook-chook.

"Love should be put into action!"  
     screamed the old hermit.  
 Across the pond an echo  
     tried and tried to confirm it.     (7)

While the "ties" are obviously ambiguous (referring to the railroad track or to an emotional bond suggested by the pounding heart), the last stanza offers an example of ambiguity that occurs outside the poem, so to speak, as the word "action" rings in the reader's ear. What is that echo saying? What echo is the "I" of the poem, the persona, hearing? Is she hearing "action, action, action"? Or is she hearing "shun, shun, shun"? And if she is hearing both, what is the relation of "action" and "shun"?

Where two meanings are presented, the reader, I think, needs to ascertain whether they are opposites like black-white or contraries like black-green. And if they are contraries, what is the angle of difference between them? Shunning is not the opposite of action; the opposite of action is inaction. Shunning is a contrary, as with the old pairing of action versus contemplation (which is certainly not inaction). Then we recall that shunning can also be part of an action, and not just acoustically.

The device in this ballad poem seems to me to imitate a heart that is divided, for reasons indicated in the pun in stanza 1 on railroad ties and the metaphorical ties of a "pounding heart." That is, ambiguity here presents a mimesis of a divided heart or a divided mind.

Of course, the ambiguity in context is doing even more. The echo is trying "to confirm" the sentence but, as we know, the poor nymph Echo can't confirm anything. She is condemned to repeat and repeat. Here again is a mimesis, now suggested more tentatively, a mimesis of a heart that keeps repeating and repeating the same old alternatives. Acoustically the sounds do just that in our mind's ear.

This is lexical ambiguity, made richer by oral performance. There is of course the further ambiguity that the sentence is screamed by someone characterized only as a "dirty hermit," a figure out of ballad or folk tale, given the poem's generic behaviour and its metre. Do we

take the sentence at face value or not? And what about that adjective “dirty.” Does it signify merely “unkempt” in the usual way of hermits or is this an attribute of his mind? The lexical ambiguity here extends to character and genre.

In another example, ambiguity exists only temporarily, for a single line. Here is Milton, in the opening lines of *Paradise Lost*. They read:

Of Mans First Disobedience, and the Fruit  
Of that Forbidden Tree, whose mortal tast  
Brought Death into the World, and all our woe [...] (l.1-3)

And so on, in Milton’s masterly style, with its distinctive commanding rhythm, latinized syntax and much more. We are so familiar with these lines that we must stretch our minds and imagine a first-time reader in order to hear the brief ambiguity in the last word of line 1, “Fruit.” This first-time reader might well assume that the word carries its abstract meaning of “result,” so that we expect something like: ‘Of Man’s first Disobedience, and the Fruit/ Thereof that led to loss of Eden.’ But no. Instead, Milton breaks our expectations with the line-break—and for all poets, and especially for Milton, words at the start and finish of the line are worth attention. He moves to the literal meaning of “Fruit” as in the creation narrative in Genesis, the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge. This lexical example is an ambiguity of scale, so to speak: one piece of fruit as against enormous results. Milton has thereby highlighted the implicit significance of the small decisions we make, how they may lead to much larger consequences.

Of course, the unobtrusive preposition offers a rich field for ambiguity. “If as a poet,” writes Christopher Ricks, “you seek the simplest and most permanent forms of language, you are bound to give special importance to prepositions and conjunctions—those humble fundamentals, *in, up* [...] *of*, and so on. If as a poet you are concerned above all with relations and relationships, you are bound to give special importance to those words which express relationships: prepositions and conjunctions” (120). And not only poets. At lunch one day at Victoria College, Northrop Frye told us that he had lain awake the

night before thinking about the differences between “break up” and “break down.” Besides Ricks’s essay on prepositions in Wordsworth, there is one by John Hollander titled “Of *of*: The Poetics of a Preposition,” from which I drew the Milton example. Here are some other instances, the first by Wallace Stevens from his poem “The Man Whose Pharynx Was Bad.” The opening stanza sets the tone and the subject:

The time of year has grown indifferent.  
Mildew of summer and the deepening snow  
Are both alike in the routine I know.  
I am too dumbly in my being pent.  
[...]

The malady of the quotidian... [ellipsis sic] (81)

In Stevens’s memorable phrase from the third stanza, “the malady of the quotidian,” the “of” is quietly ambiguous. Its back-and-forth offers a mimesis of the state of mind afflicted by the malady of the quotidian, and raises the question of causation. Is the cause of this malady the dull routine of everyday (an outside cause)? Or is it caused by the person experiencing it rather than everyday life (an inside cause)? Or both, and in what proportion? Stevens’s phrase pinpoints the general malady in such a way that it covers various particular cases. Similarly with his phrase “a mind of winter” from his well-known poem “The Snow Man.”

Or think of the title of Northrop Frye’s best and best-known book, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*. Is this Frye’s invention of an anatomy of critical terms, approaches, concepts? Or is this structure, this anatomy, intrinsic to criticism, something that Frye has discovered? Or, as with the phrase, “the malady of the quotidian,” is it some combination of outside and inside causes? Frye’s answer to that lies, not surprisingly, with the metaphor of an “anatomy.”<sup>9</sup> Where there is a question of causation, the ambiguity of “of” can be very useful.

Sometimes oral performance uncovers ambiguity. There is a minor example in Wallace Stevens’s poem, “The Lack of Repose,” which is centered on a writer aware of the traditions behind him:

[...]. It is the grandfather he liked,  
With an understanding compounded by death

And the associations beyond death, even if only  
Time. What a thing it is to believe that  
One understands, in the intense disclosures  
Of a parent in the French sense. (269)

“In the French sense”? But a parent in the French sense is a *parent*, whereas in Stevens’s poem the word is not italicized, and so not read as a foreign word. Only at the end of the line do we realize that it is ambiguous in both sound and sense. We then reread the line, remembering that *parent* in French is not only a synonym for “parent” in English, but also signifies a relative, a kinsman. The angle of difference between the two meanings is not large, though it is noticeable. It allows Stevens in a very short space to compress an entire argument about a line of tradition: our literal family and our literary family, the difference between our parent’s generation and the generation of our grandparents and beyond.

Ambiguity in acting, incidentally, includes more than oral performance. Gesture, bearing, and so forth can make a character appear ambiguous. More interesting are known stage effects, especially the playing of female roles by male actors in Shakespeare’s time, and the doubling of roles in a theatre company. Stephen Booth has some fruitful observations to make on this latter practice in contemporary performances of Shakespeare.

As for ambiguity in sentence structure, Richard Wilbur’s poem “The Beautiful Changes,” the title-poem of his 1947 collection, is often cited (*Collected Poems* 462). Is “beautiful” an adjective or is it a noun? Note what a difference this makes if the poem is concerned with the beauty of a human being, say, a woman called Mary. As adjective, it might imply ‘the beautiful changes in Mary’ as against the unattractive changes in Mary. As noun, it suggests a much wider understanding: that our ideas of the beautiful themselves change, including the changing beauty to be found in Mary. This is ambiguity that moves us

from stereotype to the enrichment and subtlety of a memorable love-poem.

One area of ambiguity that acts differently is the area of association. I don't mean a word's field of association, as in the illustrative quotations in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. I mean sound association, the area that writers of charm verse exploit—all those lulling incantatory lines, say, on sleep. (Tennyson's "The Lotos-Eaters" is well known).<sup>10</sup> My example is from a short poem on the autumn season, again by Stevens, called "Metamorphosis" (238-39). As the language breaks up in the last line, the associative process that is common to charm poetry takes over. Logic comes into play only after association has done its work, as with dream language:

Yillow, yillow, yillow,  
Old worm, my pretty quirk,  
How the wind spells out  
Sep - tem - ber... .

[...]  
Oto - out - bre.

[...]  
The street lamps

Are those that have been hanged,  
Dangling in an illogical  
To and to and fro  
Fro Niz - nil - imbo.

The last line sounds like one of those word-puzzles offered to newspaper readers: how many words can be made of these letters or syllables? Fro to frozen, Niz to frozen nose (French *nez*), nil as death (by hanging) and as zero temperature, then a state of being in limbo—in short, November in the northern temperate zone. The last syllable of November is omitted. Stevens has prepared for this disintegration that is part of metamorphosis with the refrain lines of September and October that divide the syllables and end with Brr. The last stanza



apparently can't make it to the end, having died metaphorically and left any Brr behind.<sup>11</sup>

All these effects of ambiguity contribute to the full reading of a poem, but I want to offer an example where ambiguity is at the heart of a poem, where we cannot read it at all without thinking about ambiguity. This type of ambiguity is like ambiguity of genre, which is more considerable in its consequences and more difficult to do. Henry James's extraordinary short novel *The Turn of the Screw* is a *locus classicus*. It is as if a coroner were listening to evidence about the death of a child. Who or what or what combination of causes killed this child? How reliable is the chief witness? Or, in generic terms, is this a tragedy or is it a conspiracy novel? Writing about doubles presents a special case of back-and-forth ambiguity, sometimes resolved, as in "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde," sometimes not, as in José Saramago's recent brilliant novel, *The Double*.

In poetry, my example of an ambiguity governing an entire reading is at once very simple and very difficult. It consists of Blake's two familiar paired poems, "The Lamb" and "The Tyger," the first from his *Songs of Innocence* and the second from his *Songs of Experience*. It is not so much a question of genre as of the questioner himself:

#### The Lamb

Little Lamb who made thee  
 Dost thou know who made thee?  
 Gave thee life & bid thee feed.  
 By the stream & o'er the mead;  
 Gave thee clothing of delight,  
 Softest clothing wooly bright;  
 Gave thee such a tender voice,  
 Making all the vales rejoice:  
 Little Lamb who made thee  
 Dost thou know who made thee.

Little Lamb I'll tell thee,  
 Little Lamb I'll tell thee;  
 He is called by thy name,  
 For he calls himself a Lamb:

He is meek & he is mild,  
 He became a little child:  
 I a child & thou a lamb.  
 We are called by his name.  
     Little Lamb God bless thee,  
     Little Lamb God bless thee.

(Plate 8)

### The Tyger

Tyger Tyger, burning bright,  
 In the forests of the night:  
 What immortal hand or eye,  
 Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

In what distant deeps or skies  
 Burnt the fire of thine eyes?  
 On what wings dare he aspire?  
 What the hand, dare seize the fire?

And what shoulder, & what art,  
 Could twist the sinews of thy heart?  
 And when thy heart began to beat,  
 What dread hand? & what dread feet?

What the hammer? what the chain,  
 In what furnace was thy brain?  
 What the anvil? what dread grasp,  
 Dare its deadly terrors clasp?

When the stars threw down their spears  
 And water'd heaven with their tears:  
 Did he smile his work to see?  
 Did he who made the Lamb make thee?

Tyger Tyger burning bright,  
 In the forests of the night:  
 What immortal hand or eye,  
 Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?

(Plate 42)

Blake is one of the rare artists who excel in two media: poetry and visual art—for him, chiefly engraving. He illustrated these two poems, and the tiger illustration is especially noteworthy. It has nothing to do

with the fearful creature depicted in the poem. Blake knew well how to draw fearful creatures, but the tiger we encounter at the bottom of the page, after reading the poem, is an amiable household pet, a child's shabby stuffed toy. Blake has foregrounded the great disparity between the verbal and the visual tiger. An ambiguous creature indeed.

As for "*The Lamb*, usually considered a fine example of namby-pamby, [it] is a poem of profound and perilous ambiguity," to quote Harold Bloom; it "raises for us the crucial problem of the *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, the pairing of matched poems, here *The Lamb* and *The Tyger*" (33). Throughout the series, Blake implicitly raises the question of the relation between innocence and experience. Innocence turns out to be a highly ambiguous term. It is very easy to assign it to children, and then say that they acquire experience and grow up in body and mind and spirit. What happens to a sense of innocence in the adult? Does it mature into a sense of goodness—not the same thing as innocence? Or is it lost? What kinds of innocence are disingenuous or even dangerous in an adult? Blake's wider implications are clear from his evocation of Jesus as Lamb. Christ the Lamb of God, yes, and familiar from the *Agnus Dei* in many a requiem. (*Agnus Dei qui tollis peccata mundi [...]. Lamb of God who takest away the sins of the world [...].*) But the Lamb of God is also a sacrificial lamb, as we know. In fact the flock of sheep illustrating Blake's poem may well be headed for the dinner table. In short, ambiguity here gives rise to religious or at least ethical thought far beyond its usual domain.

My final two examples are at the opposite end of the scale, and are a little frivolous. Ambiguity in Aristotle included different significations for one word. Philo followed him in this, giving as example the word "'dog' which means a terrestrial animal, a marine monster [dogfish] and a celestial star."<sup>12</sup> Some ancient philosophers also included the ambiguity of one proper name used for different people. For a modern illustration of ambiguity in proper names, I recommend John Ashbery's poem, "Memories of Imperialism," where he conflates Admiral George Dewey, conqueror of Manila with Melvil Dewey,

inventor of the Dewey decimal system used in library classification.  
Thus:

Dewey took Manila  
And soon after invented the decimal system  
that keeps libraries from collapsing even unto this day.  
A lot of mothers immediately started naming their male offspring "Dewey,"  
which made him queasy. He was already having second thoughts about  
imperialism.

In his dreams he saw library books with milky numbers  
on their spines floating in Manila Bay.  
Soon even words like "vanilla" or "mantilla" would cause him to vomit.  
The sight of a manila envelope precipitated him  
into his study, where all day long, with the blinds drawn,  
he would press fingers against temples, muttering "What have I done?"  
all the while. (34)

As for different significations of a single word, and more, here is  
Richard Wilbur on the word "punch" in his charming illustrated  
rhymes for children, *Opposites* and *More Opposites*:

The opposite of *punch*, I think,  
Might be some sort of *fruitless drink*,  
Unless we say that *punch* means *hit*,  
In which event the opposite  
Is *counter-punch* or *shadow-box*.  
Or if we think of *punching* clocks,  
I guess the opposite of *punch*  
Is *always to be out to lunch*.  
What if we capitalize the P?  
*Judy's* the answer then, since she  
And *Punch*, although they chose to marry,  
Are each the other's adversary—  
Each having, ever since they wed,  
Pounded the other on the head.  
How many things we've thought of! Whew!  
I'm getting punchy. That will do. (More Opposites 21)<sup>13</sup>

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Quoted from an unpublished and undated letter to Roger Sale (c. 1973).

<sup>2</sup>Jakobson adds: "Let us repeat with Empson: 'The machinations of ambiguity [I like that metaphor "machinations"] are among the very roots of poetry.'" The quotation from Empson is from the 1947 edition (np).

<sup>3</sup>He refers to *Some Versions of Pastoral* (1935), and *The Structure of Complex Words* (1951).

<sup>4</sup>Cf. Stanford 137-73, and see *passim*.

<sup>5</sup>The dissertations, the "two best" on the subject, are *Die Amphiboile bei Aeschylos und Sophokles* by J. Pokorny (Mähren, 1884-85) and *Die Amphibolien bei den drei griechischen Tragikern* by L. Trautner (Nürnberg, 1907) (cf. Stanford 6-7). "Aristotle discusses ambiguity in his *Topics, De Sophisticis Elenchis and Rhetoric*" (Stanford 5).

<sup>6</sup>I hardly need to remind readers of *Connotations* that dictionary meaning in the *Oxford English Dictionary* consists of grammatical function, etymology, signification (or what most people understand "meaning" to be), and illustrative quotations. These latter are invaluable for a word's field of association, which a translator needs to master.

<sup>7</sup>Marjorie Perloff is sometimes cited in this context. She does say that Empson's "famous 'seven types of ambiguity'—that is, the multiple layers of meaning words have in poetry [...]—give way to what we might call an 'irreducible ambiguity'—the creation of labyrinths that have no exit" (34). But she also distinguishes between her use of the term "indeterminacy" and Jacques Derrida's: "'Indeterminacy,' as I use the term in this book, is taken to be the quality of particular art works in a particular period of history rather than as the central characteristic of all texts at all times" (17n19).

<sup>8</sup>Lexical ambiguity for me is the ambiguity of a single word in a given context. A lexicon ideally has no ambiguities; lexicographers try to eliminate them. What a lexicon indicates is the possibility of ambiguity.

<sup>9</sup>Anatomy is both the science of the structure of the body, and a skeleton or bodily frame itself.

<sup>10</sup>The primitive form of this is called babble by Frye, who explores it in *Anatomy of Criticism*. "The rhetorical analysis founded on ambiguity in new critics is a lyric-centered criticism which tends, often explicitly, to extract the lyrical rhythm from all genres" (273). He goes on to analyse "the oracular associative process" that he has "identified as one of the initiatives of lyric [...]". One of the most direct products of this is a type of religious poetry marked by a concentration of sound and ambiguity of sense, of which the most familiar/ modern example is the poetry of Hopkins" (293-94).

<sup>11</sup>Frye observes in *Anatomy of Criticism* that "verbal association is still a factor of importance even in rational thought" (see 334-35).

<sup>12</sup>*De Plantatione Noe* 37. 151, referred to in Wolfson 168.

<sup>13</sup>Wilbur also knows full well that he is introducing doubleness in another way in his word "fruitless" and in his phrase "out to lunch."

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## “No Real Men”: Mary Butts’s Socio-Sexual Politics A Response to Andrew Radford\*

ROCHELLE RIVES

It is no exaggeration to say that Mary Butts is one of the most difficult and enigmatic writers of modernist prose. And it is perhaps her own personal sense of exclusion—as manifested in her short stories, journals, and novels—from the burgeoning modernist “establishment,” if we can call it that, and her consequent exclusion from the modernist literary canon, that has incited much of the recent critical interest in Butts’s life and work. Butts’s professional life was certainly troubled, to say the least. Her work, dismissed by Virginia Woolf as “indecent” and thus unsuitable for publication by the Hogarth Press, and by Marianne Moore as “out of harmony” with the *Dial*, remains difficult to place within any coherent modernist context (qtd. in Blondel 122, 188). More particularly, Butts herself was never able to fully infiltrate any defined modernist set. Andrew Radford attempts to address this exclusion in his essay, “Excavating a Secret History: Mary Butts and the Return of the Nativist,” asking why Butts’s “stylistic contribution to British interwar fiction has been overlooked by [contemporary] academic criticism” (81). While I am unable to fully agree with this claim, given the increasing number of recent critical publications on her work, I would venture to say that Radford’s question can be better understood by extending his discussion toward a clearer assessment of Butts’s frequently hostile relation to modernist sets, groups, and imperatives.

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\*Reference: Andrew Radford, “Excavating a Secret History: Mary Butts and the Return of the Nativist,” *Connotations* 17.1 (2007/2008): 80-108.

For the original article as well as all contributions to this debate, please check the *Connotations* website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debradford01701.htm>>.

Indeed, Butts's novels and short stories manifest a blend of conservative and progressive politics that, despite her professed hostility towards them, aligns her with other modernists such as T. S. Eliot, D. H. Lawrence, H. D., and Wyndham Lewis, whose 'conservative' ideals—whether reflected in the reverence for political and aesthetic authority and tradition or in the repudiation of women and other groups—simultaneously encode more 'progressive' political and aesthetic formulations and ideologies. While this argument is much larger than the scope of this response allows, I would like to focus on Radford's assessment of Butts as a 'conservative' writer (cf. 81). Reading a rather wide cross-section of Butts's corpus, including novels such as *Ashe of Rings* (1925), *Death of Felicity Taverner* (1928), and *Armed with Madness* (1932), along with her journal entries and short stories, Radford does not seek to place Butts within a particular modernist genealogy, nor does he draw clear connections between Butts's prose and the often radical, experimental aims of her modernist contemporaries. However, he does add a new layer of historical complexity to the growing body of criticism on Butts by focusing elsewhere—the pastoral landscape of nineteenth-century realism. Interpreting Butts's exclusion from modernist sets and contemporary criticism as a result of her "punitive political agenda" and "intolerance" (81), he addresses her work in terms of its concern for a mystical, bucolic Englishness, as a "visceral alternative version of 'Hardy's country'" (82). Her fiction, he rightly argues, registers a sense of embattlement aimed at a "pernicious modern moment whose dynamism of progressive enlightenment had induced a split between the self and the environment" (82). In contrast, she imagines the rural English landscape, the Wessex of Hardy's "literary topography" (83), as a "stable location" (82) grounded against the intrusion of "deracinated 'foreign' figures" (83), a means of "returning 'England' to its rightful, indigenous, patrician inheritors" (80).

In other words, Butts is conservatively recasting Hardy's bucolic realism in a project that, Radford argues, is defined by Butts's nativist demonization of the foreigner as racially, ethnically, and sexually

inferior. In this vision, women, particularly Scylla of the *Taverner Novels*, are “priestly heroines”; chastity is not a priority, as they infuse the narrative with “libidinal gusto” (Radford 101). In the case of *Armed with Madness*, women do restore order to an aesthetic community that is consistently on the brink of chaos and disintegration. It is also true that women become the agents of the exclusionary nativism Radford identifies, functioning as emotional stabilizers and centers that enable collective attachment to place and location. As Jacqueline Rose has suggested, and this point accords with Radford’s own perspective, *Armed with Madness* “force[s] its reader into a position of discomforting historical identification” (99) with a trauma born from the experience of the first world war, manifesting itself in the “perceptual peculiarity” of Butts’s prose (100). One of these discomforts is Butts’s anti-semitism, particularly evident in her depiction of Paul in her story “The House Party,” or *Death of Felicity Taverner’s* Kralin, a Russian Bolshevik Jew, “who would sell the body of our land to the Jews” (*DFT* 346). Yet equally problematic, as Radford observes, are figures such as the American Dudley Carston, who, in *Armed with Madness*, arrives to a “lawn stuck with yuccas” and an “intolerable silence” (*Armed* 3). This is a bucolic but dehumanized locale, materializing around explicit distinctions between a sublime, raw beauty and the more urban, domestic milieu of London. As a stranger, Carston disturbs the ritualistic cadences of this impoverished aesthetic community with both his active desire to seduce Scylla, whose need to extricate herself from such libidinal homage drives another level of the plot. If this novel viscerally sanctifies rural England, then it does so by developing against the traditional romance plot, so that women essentially remain chaste, yet removed from trite romantic narrative formulations that would fix them as objects of desire. For example, after the first evening of Carston’s visit, Scylla guards her position of centrality in the house by accepting the good night kiss of Clarence, given “with a flourish indicating affectionate indifference to their difference of sex” (17). In emphasizing the “affectionate indifference” of man and woman, Butts creates a community of lack by placing

women outside a heterosexual logic of desire. Here, the *absence* of sexual energy augments the woman's power as "priestly heroine[...]" (Radford 101).

This situation represents a "yearning for a racially distinct bucolic motherland," as Radford attests, but it is by all means a perverted one (95). Yet Radford suggests that in *Armed with Madness*, "communal coherence depends" upon the "heterosexual alliance" requiring the "worship of a fecund female principle and a sumptuous ancestral legacy" (89). While I agree with Radford that this interest in the rural as the ground for a community built around exclusion dominates Butts's work, Radford's formulation clearly overlooks what others have found so bizarre, so difficult to categorize: Butts's sexual politics. That is, the logic of a text such as *Armed with Madness* rests on distinctions between the country and the city that extend far beyond the parameters Radford identifies. In this case, Radford aligns heterosexual reproduction with the feminine and the "communal coherence" of the rural (89). However, in *Armed with Madness*, as in other works, I would argue precisely the opposite, to suggest that Butts, as a writer intensely interested in the lives of gay men, and in love triangles involving gay men and apparently straight women, stakes the novel's development against the conclusion of the heterosexual romance. This dynamic also reflects Butts's conception of urban life, or the city, which Radford does not fully theorize; rather, he overly generalizes Butts's vision of the urban as merely the agent of deracination and uncritical progressivism. As I have argued elsewhere, Butts's consistent interest in the queer dominates her work.<sup>1</sup> Besides *Armed with Madness*, other stories such as "Scylla and Charbydis," "Green," and, of course, "The House Party," all deal with the lives and loves of gay men. Bruce Hainley has deemed Butts an "ecologist of the queer"; in this description, the term "fag-hag" not only describes Butts's affiliations as a woman, but a "style of writing" (21). Furthermore, in her epistolary novella, *Imaginary Letters*, illustrated by Jean Cocteau, Butts emphasized her interest in the "sensual passions of men for men" (11). Finally, the "indecent" Woolf saw in Butts's work was related to her

explicit depictions of homosexual relations. Given this setting for the reception of Butts's work, we can return to Radford's question of why it was possibly overlooked by both her contemporaries and more recent literary critics. That is, running alongside Butts's anti-semitism and derision towards other "unsavory" strangers is her overt acceptance, in fact, fascination with, the homosexual man.

Let us take a closer look at *Armed with Madness*. Jascha Kessler argues of this text that Scylla Taverner is an "earth goddess" set among "half-men, either undecided sexually, or shell-shocked, manic-depressive [...]" (213). When Scylla takes a trip into London, she visits a pair of friends, Phillip and Lydia, who urge her to get married, fearing that people take Scylla for "that kind of woman" (119) because "everyone thinks that you sleep with each other in turn" (120):

"Scylla, why don't you marry Clarence: People say he's a beauty, and it's time you picked up a husband—"

"She wouldn't," said Lydia, —"[...]. But she can't go on like this."

"Go on like WHAT?" Phillip answered her.

"You know what people say about a set with no real men in it."

"What is A REAL MAN?" (121)

Phillip and Lydia not only represent a heteronormative narrative and social paradigm but also stand for the city, at least in Butts's mind, as it exercises the reasoned control of cultural and aesthetic production. As a result, Scylla decides defiantly to "not look outside our set," returning to the bucolic environment that centralizes her importance by freeing her from a romantic narrative of development that ends in marriage.

Yet this environment, and her centrality to it, is not unproblematic. Butts is unable to imagine Scylla and her set outside the precarious and isolated milieu that has engendered it. This world is not merely rural or bucolic, but an inhospitable sublime that is irreducible to copy. A "flint-dressed road" leads to a "lawn [...] stuck with yuccas and tree-fuchsias, dripping season in, season out, with bells the color of blood" (11). As Radford suggests, this place does not offer empathy to strangers, but is strategically designed to fend off human intruders.



Guarding the house, "where the windows were doors and stood open" stands "a yucca," which "taller than a man, had opened its single flower-spike" (162). This carefully designed setting is an affront to humanism and its promises of "personal" relation. Nature has in essence subsumed the human, transcending conventional, human hospitality. Radford is correct in asserting that this is an "embattled bucolic enclave [...]" (82), but it is one that is completely aware of itself. In fact, the novel organizes itself around a dilemma of insularity, resolved at its ending only by the arrival of a stranger, Boris, a Russian sailor of questionable origins, who appears in Butts's short stories and will become an important player in *Death of Felicity Taverner*. In contrast to the American, Dudley Carston, Boris is our "stranger ... our nurse," an ultimately empathic figure whose detachment renders him fit for the "affectionate indifference" that supports their community (161).

The contrast between Carston and Boris suggests that, while the novel positions itself against strangers who would distort the vulnerable community it presents, the healing balm of the stranger is essential to the restoration of order in a community whose empathic abilities develop through violence. That is, if *Armed with Madness*, as Radford suggests, "posits a visceral alternative version of 'Hardy's country'" (82), then the novel is unable to do so without recourse to violence. In fact, perhaps even more disturbing than the anti-semitism and disdain for strangers is the violence and cruelty, both physical and emotional, that pervades Butts's novel. Ultimately, one cannot read her affront to "whimsical pastoralism" (Radford 82) without attempting to make sense of this gratuitous violence, which places the novel alongside other texts such as D. H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers*. Elsewhere, I have tried to make sense of this violence both in terms of the novel's narrative structure and in terms of Butts's distrust and resentment of identifiable modernist groups, such as Bloomsbury.<sup>2</sup> I will touch on these arguments here, but it is first necessary to describe exactly how this violence takes place, and how it seems, rather per-

versely, to serve this “mystical formulation of femininity” Radford identifies (82).

While the aesthetic community of artists *Armed with Madness* depicts is clearly invested in fortressing itself from the intrusion of outside influences, particularly from forces of objectification that emanate from the city, it accomplishes this not by self-fortification, but through repeated, ritualistic self-inflicted violence. In this case, violence is directed towards the woman, the “sole stay” of a group of men (7). Despite this apparent centrality, Scylla is the subject of serious misogyny. Ross, one of the bunch, remarks to Scylla that he “detest[s] women” (44). Later, Picus wonders “[w]hy do I hate all women?” (110). Certainly, this prickly situation drives Dudley Carston in his romantic quest to rescue Scylla, whom he sees as a “young woman alone among young men” who are “so careless of their women” (22, 35). But his attempts to woo Scylla are perpetually frustrated by Scylla herself. Both she and the text refuse to judge this misogyny, rejecting sentimental moralism in lieu of detachment.

In this situation, Scylla, the “hypothetical virgin,” “sometimes a witch and sometimes a bitch,” willingly takes part in a cyclical group dynamic involving the “peacocks of her world” (5, 11). More so than Scylla, Picus attempts to ostracize Carston by orchestrating the game that drives the novel’s rather obscure plot. Claiming to have found a jade cup at the bottom of a well, which might be the Sanc-Grail, Picus fuels a rather tumultuous hunt for the cup’s lost origins. He also decides to take Scylla as his lover, which catapults Carston into a jealous furor. Scylla, aware that this is simply a game to thwart the intruding stranger, does register the personal humiliation of having slept with a man who does not really desire her. Indeed, Picus has been the lover of Clarence, the war veteran, whose violence and inner turmoil explodes in the novel’s climax. To soothe her wounded vanity, Scylla retreats into detachment, masochistically imagining herself crucified, “lying out on the wood’s roof: translating the stick and leaf that upheld herself into herself; into the sea: into the sky...” (69). Unsuccessful in this project and feeling “[p]arodied [...] in her bed,”

she seeks a solution to her disturbed vanity, an unsexing that will restore order to a community that has violated its code of "affectionate indifference" (69, 17), at least as that indifference ideally characterizes relations between men and women.

Thus Scylla must become symbolically "un-sexed" to maintain her power in the community, as her "sexing" has catalyzed a rather too acute awareness of personalized pain that does not accord with the impersonal nature of the flinty, detached locale in which they live. Scylla then seeks out Clarence, and finds him in his cottage torturing a statue he has made of Picus, piercing it "with arrows of sharpened wood, feathered from a gull he had shot overnight" (143). Along with this sight, she notices torn drawings of herself "obscenely and savagely contorted" and pierced with "little darts made of fine nibs and empty cartridge-cases" (129). Like something from a horror movie, these "paper-martyrs" lie alongside a bird's "half-plucked body, bloody on the floor" (129). The violence becomes real when Clarence, "[d]azed with violence and grief," forcefully "throws" Scylla, "ties her with his lariat" against the statue of Picus, and begins shooting them both with the "indifferent arrow" (145). In this bizarre ode to Saint Sebastian, long a subject of gay and homoerotic iconography, Scylla positions herself as the male martyr to her community. She does not scream or betray pain, but instead reaches a "*clarté* the other side of forgiveness" (147). None of this is taken as we would expect. Clarence's arrow is "indifferent" because it produces no feeling, no excess of emotion. Judging from Scylla's response, the act is entirely ritualistic, devoid of sentimental emotional content and drama, particularly considering Scylla's rather willing, if not scripted entrance into this scene. In other words, the act is impersonal, and so too is Dudley Carston's ironically heroic rescue of Scylla, which underscores the emptiness of the heterosexual romance plot that provides a mock 'structure' for the novel.

Ultimately, Clarence's violence is interpreted as a "torture" that transcends his consciousness (129). His friends, including Scylla, acknowledge this and seem unwilling to explain or interpret his vi-

olence. Rather than turn him into a hermeneutically readable organization, they return to the visceral atmosphere of their world, which, a "pebble-throw from a gulf of air" promises "ruin for one who in camps and cities [...] had been heroic" (129). Clarence's heroism is denied here because such status depends on the conventional sociability and hierarchy of "camps" and "cities." In this precarious rural locale, gay men become the agents of aesthetic production and models for the avant-garde project in their agitated, often violent, vulnerability. This society, in its deliberate acts of self-marginalization, makes itself invulnerable to copy. Clarence's body, "branded with shrapnel and bullet and bayonet thrust" physically exteriorizes his own psychological trauma (128). His strength is "vast, delicate [...] not used, not properly understood [...]" (128). Similarly, Picus's face is rendered as an exterior, invulnerable in its fragility, "made-up," "steel gilt" "from the moon's palette" (14). These exterior marks comprise a form of emotional baggage that is not psychological, not offered as a form of narrated subjectivity, but rather imprints itself directly on their bodies. Because they do not possess conventional psychologies, no ascertainable motivations or inner intelligibility, they are also unable to be read as 'personalities.'

I believe this coding of the rural as impersonal, even anti-psychological, underlies the distinction Butts saw between the city and the country, the rural and the urban. Furthermore, I would argue that this reverence for the impersonal aligns Butts's work with that of other modernists such as T. S. Eliot, D. H. Lawrence, and Wyndham Lewis. Butts's refusal to romanticize the rural, along with her rejection of heterosexual romance in exchange for a skewed gay love triangle, contributes to the impersonal nature of both the narrative and the aesthetic community it honors. This kind of living is characterized by the "natural ferocity" of a "kind of ritual, a sacrifice, willing but impersonal to their gods" (5). This impersonality is not unlike that advocated by T. S. Eliot in his famous 1919 essay, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," which urges the poet to "surrender [...] himself as he is at the moment to something which is more valuable" (40), an im-

personal tradition, where emotion “does not happen consciously or of deliberation”; nor is it “express[ed]” or “recollected” (*SP* 43). Rather, poetic emotion is a “concentration” that avoids the overly “conscious” nature of the “personal” (*SP* 43).

While Eliot himself was not an admirer of Butts's writing, Butts professed in a 1927 journal entry that Eliot's work had been “before her,” and, typical of the self-aggrandizing alliances she frequently drew, stressed the similarity of their projects: “T. S. Eliot ... the only writer of my quality, dislikes me and my work, I think. But what is interesting is that he is working on the Sanc-Grail, on its negative side, the Waste Land” (qtd. in Blondel 186). *Armed with Madness* indeed frames its rather circuitous plot around the Sanc-Grail quest, but even more importantly, Butts employs the term “impersonal” explicitly in relation to her interest in classical literature. In a 1932 journal entry, Butts writes that “[o]nly in Homer have I found impersonal consolation—a life where I am unsexed or bisexed, or completely myself—or a mere pair of ears” (qtd. in Blondel 22). Here, Butts characterizes the classical world of Greek literature as a stage for impersonal escape, which also facilitates the “consolation” of transcending the rigid parameters of personality, especially as defined by sex. Becoming “unsexed” or “bisexed” enables her the freedom to access a more essential form of being. As Nathalie Blondel notes in her mammoth biography, this interest in Greek literature unites Butts with a number of other modernists, including H. D. and Virginia Woolf, who, in her famous essay, “On Not Knowing Greek,” asserted that “Greek literature is the impersonal literature” (*CR* 23). Greek literature, with its “lightning-quick, sneering, out-of-doors manner” is itself a setting, which, like that of the Taverner novels, produces not a character but a being (*CR* 24-25). “Tightly bound,” the figures of Greek drama—Electra, Antigone, and Ajax—represent the “stable, the permanent, the original human being” (*CR* 26, 27). We cannot interpret such drama, as each moment already “tells to the utmost,” where “[e]very ounce of fat has been pared off, leaving the flesh firm” (*CR* 26). Bare and muscular, Greek literature is immediate; it is not a subjective literature, but an



impersonal literature of exteriority in which “emotions stand still and suffer themselves to be looked at” (CR 34). Emotion becomes anti-subjective and anti-psychological, manifesting itself on the surfaces of things, immediately visible to the eye. Not subject to personalized acts of psychological interpretation, its characters yield no hidden recesses or depths, nothing that would resemble a personality.

If the rural English countryside is the embodiment of this sort of impersonal aesthetic, then “personality,” for Butts, resides within the conventional sociability represented by the city, a place of humanistic safety. Indeed, Butts employed the term “personality” in her scathing critique of urban intellectualism, “Bloomsbury,” written one year before her death in 1937. In the essay, she demonstrates both her *resentiment* and her sense of the group as a singular and recognizable “personality,” founded upon self-serving networks of affiliation. Her “hit list” explicitly targets the men that she connects to the group, T. S. Eliot, Wyndham Lewis, and Lytton Strachey, whom she characterizes as both overtly masculine in their aims of dominating the world of art and culture and as lacking virility. They are: “‘intelligentsia in excelsis,’ ‘[...] barren leaves,’ ‘N. B. G. [No Bloody Good],’ [...] ‘Mental Hermaphrodites,’ ‘brittle intellectuals’” (33). As a casual “observer, some sort of witness” to this phenomenon, Butts claims that she would never be out of touch “so far as Bloomsbury *personalities* were concerned” (33; italics in original). Bloomsbury’s “personality” involves its status as a cohesive group people recognize and more importantly, emulate.

The purpose of Butts’s work is to forge an impersonal anti-group lifestyle that resists copy and emulation. This is evident not only in the *Taverner Novels*, but in stories such as “In Bloomsbury,” and most obviously, “From Altar to Chimney Piece,” which contains her most venomous attack on Parisian salon culture. Originally titled “The Gertrude Stein Song,” this charge to a developing modernist establishment built upon inherited financial security and social prestige is an outright attack on Stein’s salon and its web of tightly guarded affiliations. But it is *Armed with Madness* that most explicitly fuses this



critique of urban intellectualism with Butts's bizarre theory of socio-sexual relations. Quite problematically, Butts is unable to imagine her critique of privatized, privileged social structures without recourse to violence. However, this violence also accounts for the intriguing difficulty of Butts's work along with its "disturbing association[s]" (Radford 89). Certainly, Radford's work advances Butts scholarship, particularly as he considers her writing beyond the "strange" nature of its subject matter, placing it within the larger, historical frame of a nativist English tradition that valorizes the rural landscape. In this vision, Radford is correct in arguing that Felicity Taverner, and most likely Scylla Taverner, is a "beguiling distillation of the endangered countryside itself" (89). My point here has been to connect this new layer of analysis of the city/country divide in Butts's work to her consciousness of modernism itself. And while Butts, as Radford points out, depicts this endangerment to national "purity" as it arises from the intrusion of "deracinated 'foreign' figures,"—it also develops from the invasion of a hetero-normative social organization (101, 83). Furthermore, Butts is firmly invested in maintaining this endangerment as a condition of an impersonal avant-garde aesthetic that rests on its fragility, its refusal to stabilize itself. Within this paradox, the stranger is the lifeblood of an aesthetic community, and a rural countryside, that, in a modernist vein, refuses to offer itself for realist copy.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>See my previously published articles on Mary Butts, "Problem Space: Mary Butts, Modernism, and the Etiquette of Placement," and "'A Straight Eye for the Queer Guy: Mary Butts' 'Fag-Hag' and the Modernist Group."

<sup>2</sup>See "'A Straight Eye for the Queer Guy': Mary Butts' 'Fag-Hag' and the Modernist Group."

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## Isabelle, a Man from Algeria: A Response to Verna A. Foster\*

LAURA RICE

*I advise you to take your own life [...] to prevent  
biographers from taking it in theirs.*

Letter from Henry Adams to Henry James<sup>1</sup>

Verna A. Foster's choice of Wertenbaker's *New Anatomies* to study the aesthetic and ethical implications of historical drama is apt: her reading dissects the play's structure and economy and scrutinizes the drama's embodiment of a historical figure, Isabelle Eberhardt. Foster applies Freddie Rokem's idea that historical drama has a peculiar "double or even triple time register [...]: the time of the events and the time the play was written and in some cases also [...] the later time when it was performed" (Foster 109; Rokem 19). The social and political understandings associated with these different layers may cause cognitive dissonance, confusion or misapprehension on the part of audiences.

In *New Anatomies*, Foster identifies a documentary source time (turn of the century Algeria under French colonial rule), an authorial production time (the late 1970s era of feminism reflected by Wertenbaker's interest in Eberhardt's "cross-dressing and its relation to the formation of sexual, gendered, and also religious and national identity" [109])—and finally, a reception time ("at the beginning of the twenty-first century" when audiences have a "quite different perspective on and fascination with relations between Westerners and Arabs"

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\*Reference: Verna A. Foster, "Reinventing Isabelle Eberhardt: Rereading Timberlake Wertenbaker's *New Anatomies*," *Connotations* 17.1 (2007/2008): 109-28.

For the original article as well as all contributions to this debate, please check the *Connotations* website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debfoster01701.htm>>.

[109]), “a post-9/11 world” (113). *New Anatomies* with its feminist concerns may seem somewhat ‘outmoded’ to contemporary audiences, Foster notes, but her larger point is that history plays, as a genre, are “particularly vulnerable” to changing contexts of reception (114). When, in addition, the play’s historical moment is embodied in an individual figure, the playwright’s selection of “formative experiences in her protagonist’s life” (115) involve aesthetic choices that have ethical implications which concern both the reception of the work and “the dramatist’s respect for the documentary record” (116). Foster argues that Wertenbaker “distorts Eberhardt’s life in a way that her audience will not be able to evaluate, as they might in the case of a well-known historical figure” (123), the irony being that Wertenbaker’s play is “a critique of just such forms of exploitative reconstruction” (123). In this response, we will broaden the context of the discussion of the aesthetic and ethical uses of documentary sources in art works about biographical figures, while keeping the focus on Eberhardt. We will examine how her particular life story raises issues around life/art relationships, performance theory, and the use of poetic license in historical documentation.

In “Reinventing Isabelle Eberhardt,” Foster raises issues as specific to historical drama that are largely generalizable to history and (auto-) biography in the postcolonial era. What happens on stage with its attendant aesthetic and ethical dimensions is emblematic of how we live our ‘unstaged’ lives. Performativity is a thread that runs through our contemporary understandings of history, politics, language and subjectivity.<sup>2</sup> Foster is wary of the free hand Wertenbaker exercised in shaping Eberhardt’s life—a free hand Wertenbaker herself recognizes: “When I am asked where my plays come from, I am always stuck for an answer. There are so many sources, a mishmash of autobiography, obsession, chance encounters, reading and conversations” (vii). Wertenbaker “was intrigued by the mental liberation in the simple physical act of cross-dressing”—a theory looked at below—and became fascinated by Eberhardt (vii). Equally fascinating is how those who write about Eberhardt end up linking their own autobiographies

with hers—by appropriation, documentation, identification, critique, apology, parody, and reinvention. In stumbling upon the fault lines running through the landscapes of gender formation, artistic inspiration, religious faith and cultural difference, Eberhardt manages to draw others after her onto this unstable terrain.

As a scholar of postcolonial comparative literature focusing on North Africa, I come to the aesthetic and ethical questions raised by Foster about *New Anatomies* through a focus on Eberhardt's life and work. The more one reads what she wrote (in journals, private letters, fictional works and public statements) and what was written about her (in military dossiers, the popular press, biographies, memoirs, and fictional reenactments of her life story), the more problematic the historical record becomes. As the great historian Edward Hallet Carr describes historiography: "No document can tell us more than what the author of the document thought—what he thought had happened, what he thought ought to happen or would happen, or perhaps only what he wanted others to think he thought, or even only what he himself thought he thought" (16).

The documentary record in Eberhardt's case is ambiguous. Wertebaker's handling of Eberhardt's historicity is on target for the purposes of her own play about the link between Eberhardt's cross-dressing and her mental liberation. Wertebaker, working largely from Eberhardt's journals, makes obvious alterations to the facts of Eberhardt's life: her favorite brother Augustin becomes Antoine, who runs away to join the French foreign legion without telling her, washes out, then marries H el ene Long (whom Isabelle nicknamed 'Jenny the working girl' after a popular song); Antoine like Augustin betrays their extravagant dreams: "Augustin was no longer the Byronic brother of her adolescence, the dandy whose female conquests had dazzled her" (*Nomade j' tais* 97). Her beloved mother Nathalie (her 'white spirit' or 'white dove') becomes Wertebaker's distracted, ineffectual but well-meaning Anna who eloped with the anarchist Trofimovitch (Trophimovsky in reality) and communicates via ellipses, while Isabelle's

thoroughly conventional, bourgeois older sister, Natalie, feels she had to become the mother for her younger siblings:

**Natalie** How can you call this pigsty a home?

**Anna** Darling, a young lady's vocabulary shouldn't include ... Your family ...

**Natalie** Family. (Looks around at them). In a family you have first a mother who looks after her children, protects them, teaches them ...

**Anna** Didn't I? You knew several poems of Byron as a child.

**Nathalie** A mother who teaches her children how to behave and looks after the house, cooks meals, doesn't let her children eat out of a slop bucket—

**Anna** Trofimovitch says meals are a bourgeois form of ... But don't we have ...

**Natalie** When I cook them. (12)

The characters are parodies but the tenor of Eberhardt's perspectives is captured; the "vivid modulations" of her protagonist's storytelling foregrounds performance. The Isabelle of *New Anatomies* embodies the linguistic virtuosity, unpredictable behavior, acerbic wit and naiveté that characterized Eberhardt as well as the perennial 'outsider' perspective, being a Russian in Switzerland and a European in North Africa. Wertenbaker's own multilingual, outsider status as a child from an eccentric family might explain her fascination with Eberhardt: "[T]he details of Wertenbaker's personal biography are contradictorily documented, a situation Wertenbaker seems in no hurry to clarify and which allows her a fluidity of allegiance across identity categories, that of nationality in particular" (Freeman).

Foster's discomfort about reception is two-fold. Firstly, audiences watching historical dramas about well-known figures "will engage in some form of comparison between the dramatic figure and the historical figure as he or she is otherwise," but with a "less familiar figure like Isabelle Eberhardt, [...] the dramatic character is likely the only one many audience members will know" (121). I would argue the documentary record for Eberhardt is such a confusing palimpsest that most works about her leave audiences grappling with contradictions. Secondly, Foster feels that Wertenbaker's script opens the door to



ethnocentric responses, folding national identity into gender identity: “The Brechtian-Churchillian dramaturgy of *New Anatomies*—its episodic structure, interspersal of turn-of-the-century music hall songs, and cross-casting”—does not off-set ethnic erasure. “All of the speaking parts are played by five actresses. Except for the actress playing Isabelle and her Arab self, Si Mahmoud, each actress plays a Western woman, an Arab man, and a Western man” (115). Lack of Arab perspectives in the play (especially Slimène Ehnni’s) can turn these secondary figures into “conventional stereotypes” (119).

In a recent piece about staging *New Anatomies*, Elizabeth Schwan-Rosenwald, artistic director for the 20% Theater Company of Chicago, comments:

So, as a Caucasian woman, how do I take a room full of women and help them present the embodiments of Arab and 19th century European men? [...] Timberlake [...] didn’t write the show so that the audience would lose sight of the fact that Caucasian women were portraying Arab men. Rather, I believe she wrote it as an exploration of an actress’s ability to tell a story with her body.

Embodiment here is not just about Eberhardt but also about performance of social roles. While Eberhardt may not be a well-known figure such as Luther, the contradictions of her personality encourage audiences to go beyond the particular casting of the play.

Theatre critic Mary Shen Barnige targets the play’s double nature:

Attempts to package Isabelle Eberhardt as a proto-feminist martyr have usually met with failure [...]. Wertenbaker’s portrait of Eberhardt confronts us with a scruffy ganymede who curses, spits, smokes kif [...]. Under Elizabeth Schwan-Rosenwald’s direction, the five women who play all the characters, male and female, retain their own voices and mannerisms, drawing our attention to their text’s intellectual dimensions. [...] The popularity of *New Anatomies* can be partly attributed to its opportunities for young actresses, but the enigma of Eberhardt herself is what continues to intrigue us. [S]he remains her own person, first and last, and her journey through this temporal world forever unfulfilled.

The director of a 2007 Missouri production told a reviewer: “I am one of those Americans who have been absolutely furious since the inva-

sion of Iraq, and though this play takes place at the turn of the 20th century, we seem to have learned very little in a hundred years from the mistakes of earlier ‘empire-makers’” (Gibbons). Wertebaker’s play, though it skirts along the edge of parody, escapes the pitfalls of the triple time register by addressing overlapping systems of oppression which resonate when the play is well-directed.

This resonance among gender, colonial and intellectual oppression happens in scenes, among Westerners, where cross-dressing and ethnocentric behavior are the subject, such as the imagined scene in Algiers where Isabelle, Natalie, Antoine and Jenny are living at close quarters. A pregnant Jenny squabbles with Isabelle who wants Antoine to “gallop over the desert” (18):

**Antoine** You’re worse than Arabs, you two, fighting about nothing.

**Isabelle** Is that what they teach you in the barracks?

**Jenny** He’s not in the barracks any more. He has a very good job.

**Isabelle** Sitting on your bum, staring at numbers.

**Jenny** And he’ll be promoted soon.

**Isabelle** To longer numbers. (21)

Antoine now complains that the desert is “not how we dreamt of it. It’s dangerous, uncomfortable, and most of it isn’t even sand” (21). Next, Natalie, who returns from the market, her arms full of materials and clothes, remarks how wonderfully “stupid these people are. They give you things for nothing”; Isabelle counters: “The word is generosity, gifts of hospitality” (23). Natalie gloats over her sartorial haul: “[I]t’s worth a fortune, that embroidery, that detail. They’re terribly clever for savages. [...] We’ll be the first shop in Switzerland to sell these oriental things. They’re all the rage in Paris” (23). Here, Wertebaker acts out a gloss on the idea that “the simple physical act of cross-dressing” leads to “mental liberation.” Isabelle is kept busy pointing out that the cloak Natalie has is “not for a woman,” the veil Jenny wraps around her face—“[Antoine], I’m in your harem. You’re the sheikh. Oh, come to me”—is “not a woman’s veil. Women in the desert don’t wear veils, only the Tuareg men do” (23). Finally, the

only cross-dressing Jenny and Natalie are offended by is when Isabelle helps the maid, Yasmina, into a French military captain's jacket: "it's ... blasphemy" (25).

A parallel cross-dressing scene at an avant-garde 'feminist' salon in Paris is hosted by Lydia: "Here we are, five women and four of us are dressed as men" (39). The only feminine attendee is Verda Miles, a British male impersonator who resembles vaudeville singer Vesta Tilley, whose "audiences adored [...] the rollicking and mocking edge she brought to her character studies of well dressed young swells, policemen, soldiers and sailors" ("Vesta Tilley"). This salon pastiche mimics the documentary record: Lydia is modeled after Eberhardt's would-be mentor Lydia Pashkov, who advised her to meet Sévérine, journalist for *La Fronde*—"Tell her you just arrived from the Sahara where you traveled dressed as a man," and to try to take Paris by storm: "If I were you, I'd go everywhere dressed as an Arab. That's the kind of thing that would floor them" (qtd. in *Nomade j'étais* 205, 207). Wertenbaker's Eugénie resembles Eugénie Buffet, a pied noir chanteuse from Tlemcen, Algeria, whose career Sévérine launched; she loves things native:

**Verda** [...] (to Isabelle) What a charming costume you have.

**Eugénie** The flowing simplicity of the African garb, so free, so ... Athenian.

**Verda** I'd like to copy it. You see. I have an idea for a new song, it would be an oriental melody, exotic, and with that costume ...

**Isabelle** It's not a costume, it's my clothes.

**Verda** Of course, that's what I meant. Do you know any oriental songs?

**Eugénie** Those oriental melodies—so biblical. (37)

While Wertenbaker's dialogue may seem farfetched, colonialist writers and artists regularly erased/replaced North Africans through anachronistic comparisons. Even Eugène Delacroix made this kind of intellectual blunder when he visited "the land of lions and leather" with the Mornay mission to the Sultan of Morocco in 1832:

It takes all the curiosity I've got to run the gauntlet of this mob. The picturesque is here in abundance. At every step one sees ready-made pictu-

res, which would bring fame and fortune to twenty generations of painters. You'd think yourself in Rome or Athens, minus the Attic atmosphere; the cloaks and togas and a thousand details are quite typical of antiquity. A rascal who'll mend the vamp of your shoe for a few coppers has the dress and bearing of Brutus or Cato of Utica. (192)

Historical drama today, especially when verging on the parodic as *New Anatomies* does, may encourage rather than discourage scrutiny of its reliability. As Elin Diamond observes, performance, in and of itself, destabilizes because every performance is both "a doing and a thing done": "Every performance [...] embeds features of previous performances: gender conventions, racial histories, aesthetic traditions—political and cultural pressures that are consciously and unconsciously acknowledged" (1). If, as Diamond puts it, "there is no unmediated real" (1), then not only is Rokem's reference "to the historical past as 'a chaotic and frequently unmediated reality'" worth scrutinizing (Foster 119; Rokem 10; my emphasis), but also Foster's gloss on Rokem's reference as well: "But there is no such thing as unmediated historical reality (*except for those who live through it*)" (Foster 119; my emphasis). On different levels, both Rokem and Foster suggest that we can access reality in an unmediated fashion. I would argue that not even first-hand experience escapes from the second-hand nature of our being in the world, our entrapment by mimesis.

As her diary reveals, Eberhardt delighted in mimesis but believed in the existence of truth as well: on the one hand, she had a number of pen names and enjoyed the astonishment her cross-dressing as a young Arab male student aroused in interlocutors when they discovered she was a European woman, but on the other hand, she took quite seriously "the question of becoming a *marabout* [saint]" (66). As she explains: "God is Beauty. The word itself contains everything: Virtue, Truth, Honesty, Mercy. Inspired by such faith, a man is strong ... His strength may even seem to be supernatural. He becomes what they call a Marabout" (71-72). Wertenbaker's cross-dressing Isabelle is Western woman, Arab man, Western man, and transvestite, inhabiting the space of "'category crisis,' disrupting and calling attention to

cultural, social, or aesthetic dissonances" (Garber 16). Colonial official Robert Randau records meeting her through Slimène Ehni:

His companion, elegant and diminutive, a horseman wearing a *haïck* tunic, a fine burnous of immaculate white, and shod in a spahi's [red leather boots], had strikingly lustrous eyes of black, a pale face, protruding cheekbones and red hair: [...] "Let me introduce Si Mahmoud Saadi" [...] "that is his name de guerre; in reality, this is Mme Ehni, my wife." (my translation)<sup>3</sup>

Randau, open-minded about Eberhardt's eccentricity, was an exception to the colonial rule, as was Captain Cauvet, head of the Arab Bureau (El Oued), who reported: "Aside from some eccentricities of behavior and dress [...] there was nothing in her speech or her actions that struck me as not being 'perfectly correct'"<sup>4</sup>; Battalion Chief Pugeat (Touggourt) reported that officers considered her to be "more of a nutcase than a dangerous person"<sup>5</sup>; the Russian Consul saw a person whose "presence could only lead to difficult incidents" (Kobak 129-30). Eberhardt makes separating 'reality' from performance difficult.<sup>6</sup>

Like *New Anatomies*, many of the early biographical works about Eberhardt begin at the end, with her demise in a flashflood at Ain Sefra. Having died young, she did not have much of a chance to shape her own legend, and others constructed her biography as a gloss on her obituary. General Lyautey reminisces: "We understood each other well, this poor Mahmoud and I ... I loved that prodigious artist's temperament, and also all that was in her that made functionaries, corporals, and mandarins of all shades flinch. Poor Mahmoud!" (180); and Victor Barrucand editorializes: "There was among us, a young Russian woman, just arrived from the still quite dangerous South Oranais, a woman who has fascinated all of Algeria by her adventures and by her tragic death" (1). As a drunken Isabelle says, at the play's beginning, to Séverine, who has followed her to the desert: "Trailed: the story, I know. Stealing it" (5).

Wertenbaker's toying with the documentary record is part of a long line of biographical alterations both purposeful and unconscious. The 1923 play by Henry Kistemaekers, "L'Esclave errante," concerns a French "amazone," Nicole Darboy, who "revolts against her condition



as a woman" (Beauplan). Rejecting her father's unethical capitalism but inheriting his fortune, Nicole puts her faithful suitor on hold, travels to the Sahara where, as "Si Ali, a horseman attached to the goum (indigenous army group) made up from the Hamyani tribe" (Kistemaeckers 17), she hangs out in "one of those African dives—at once a Moorish café, a kif-smoking den, and a canteen with dancing girls" (13)—and sympathizes with French prostitutes and local dancing girls who are harassed by a drunken bunch of Europeans in the French Foreign Legion. Well-known biographies of Eberhardt resemble their writers: Lesley Blanch's *The Wilder Shores of Love* (1954) formats her biography as a romance, and expatriate Paul Bowles's biographical "Preface" to his translation, *The Oblivion Seekers*, focuses on Eberhardt as an outsider and eccentric. Marie-Odile Delacour and Jean-Réné Huleu began their lifelong love affair with Eberhardt's work—and each other—by following Eberhardt's footsteps and writing a biographical novel, *Sables*, before editing Eberhardt's collected works and her selected letters. Edmonde Charles-Roux's two-volume biography of Eberhardt, a tour de force, is told in the context of literary and social associations that are as much Charles-Roux's as Eberhardt's—for example, Eberhardt's relationship to Lyautey is seen through the prism of Charles-Roux's own life experience and loyalties, her grandfather having championed Lyautey (Benamara 231). Foster's article itself depends largely on sources available in English that reflect a feminist approach (Rice, Kobak, Clancy-Smith) and, given her interest in Women's Studies, this shouldn't be surprising. Algerian scholar Khelifa Benamara's excellent *Isabelle Eberhardt et L'Algérie* relies on texts in French. Postcolonial scholar/journalist Rana Kabbani, daughter of a Syrian diplomat, describes Eberhardt, in her 1987 "Introduction" to Nina de Voogd's translation of Eberhardt's diaries into English, as having "the makings of a hardened addict" (vi), an "impractical and somewhat hysterical nature" (vii), being "[u]nable to learn from experience" (vii), "an apologist for French rule" (viii), and a "mouthpiece for patriarchy" (ix) who "felt only dislike and hostility" for women (ix). Kabbani's harsh reaction to



Eberhardt's diaries perhaps reflects her own life experience of feeling forced by circumstance and racism to choose between assimilation and confrontation in East-West relations. These biographies, focused on who Eberhardt was or was not, produce narratives shaped by the writers' relationship to their subject.

Recent works deal with the technologies of telling life story. In performance artist Leslie Thornton's video, *There Was an Unseen Cloud Moving* (1988), Eberhardt is played by four actresses; the fragmentary nature of the biographical archive is underscored by repetitive scenes, contradictory registers, conflicting interviews and texts that refuse to coalesce into one coherent narrative (cf. Zummer). "Isabelle's story," Mary Ann Doane notes, "is coincident with the emergence of technologies of representation (photography, phonography, cinema)"; and, according to Doane, Thornton investigates the "competing and contradictory nature of the traces/documents/artifacts which are usually activated to produce a coherent narrative in the writing or filming of biography" ("Brief Overview"). Jessica Thebus's "Performing Eberhardt" presents us with a solo performer who stands before a table on which five masks on sticks are placed: one is Eberhardt's face from a photograph of her in a sailor suit. Picking up a larger version of the same, the performer hangs it on the wall and looks at it:

I have no story just as I have no life. My story is pulverized every day, by the immediacy of life. So that I can no longer see clearly what is usually called one's life. Only the thought of death puts me back together again. (126)

She then takes up a pointer, becoming a self-assured academic. As she lectures, she picks up the masks on sticks and holds them before her face. Holding up a crude papier-mâché mask of a European woman, blue eyes and yellow fabric hair, she notes that Eberhardt "endured [...] an unsettled, eccentric upbringing"; switching to a "European man" mask, she adds that after her mother died, Eberhardt "began her desert wanderings"; switching to an "Arab Man" mask, she surmises that Eberhardt's "strange way of life disturbed the French government"; and switching to an "Arab Woman" mask finishes by

speculating Eberhardt was ravaged by the “combined effects of alcohol, disease, drugs, starvation and poverty.” As this papier-mâché round table continues, we realize we are hearing the real words of real critics—Lesley Blanch, Paul Bowles, Hédi Abdel-Jaouad, and Rana Kabbani. Their Eberhardts are clearly not of a piece: none of them is lying, yet none of them is telling the truth.

In *Seekers of Oblivion* (2004), Tunisian film maker Raja Amari juxtaposes timeless seascapes and desert landscapes with contemporary shots of the cities where either Eberhardt or her contemporary biographers lived; Amari also juxtaposes contemplative, first-person voice-overs of Eberhardt’s journal entries with interviews with people fascinated by Eberhardt’s biography or impacted by her legend. The film opens with Eberhardt’s journal:

—I am alone facing the wide expanse of grey murmuring sea  
 —I am alone as I’ve always been everywhere (ship rail)  
 As I will always be throughout the entrancing and deceiving universe  
 —Alone with behind me an entire world of vanished hopes, of fading illusions, of memories retreating every day more to the point of becoming almost unreal. [sea merges into desert]  
 —I am alone, and I dream  
 ... until the bell of eternal sleep tolls from the grave.

Next, we hear two voices, a woman’s—“To me she is like a shooting star,” and a man’s: “Her work never disappeared”—while seeing images of photos of Eberhardt, her manuscripts, and police dossiers, before seeing the interviewees, Marie-Odile Delacour and Jean-René Huleu. Other interviewees include Faiza Abdulwahab whose great uncle, Ali Abdulwahab, knew Eberhardt, members of the ‘Isabelle Eberhardt Fellowship’ in El Oued, and inhabitants of Ain Sefra where Eberhardt died. The Eberhardt of 1904 is juxtaposed to the Eberhardt of 2004.

Finally, *Isabelle l’Algérien* [Isabelle, a man of Algeria], written by Algerian Leïla Sebbar and illustrated by Sébastien Pignon, uses free indirect discourse to present the perspectives of people who encountered Eberhardt during her seven years in Africa—Lyautey, Arab

Bureau officials, Arab dignitaries, colonial writers, but also women (French philanthropist Lella Benaben, and Algerian marabout Lalla Zeyneb from El Hamel), and most of all humble people who crossed her path: legionnaires, convicts, nomads, prostitutes, workers, peasants, children, indigenous soldiers and rebels, and finally, Slimène Ehnni. Based on Eberhardt's stories and journals, and on biographies and memoirs, Sebbar's portrait of Eberhardt is a mosaic of perspectives with Eberhardt being the absent center. "Good Old Mahmoud" opens the collection: "The water, no longer stopped by the high bank, overflows and inundates the lower part of town with its torrent. [...] He is saved from the waters. She dies" (7; my translation). The collection ends, as Foster might have chosen, with Slimène Ehnni's perspective on Isabelle, the beloved, or 'Ziza':

She witnesses what shouldn't be seen, she says what shouldn't be said. A free spirit. They say that Lyautey manipulated her. It's not true. Slimène knows that. He believes what she tells him. Faithful and loyal, that's his wife. His one and only, and he asks himself if she loves him as on the first nights in El Oued.

She dies at Ain Sefra.

He is saved. He is alive. Ziza is dead. He wishes he were dead. (80-81; my translation)

Eberhardt, caught so perfectly in the pen and ink outlines by Pignon, is 'Isabelle, a man of Algeria,' Mahmoud Saadi who dressed and wrote in the masculine, a destabilized and destabilizing figure, hidden yet completely visible in her burnous. Perhaps, in its ethics and aesthetics, this fictional portrait comes closest to capturing the twentyfirst-century biographical truth Foster suggests we miss in *New Anatomies*.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Adams 494.

<sup>2</sup>In his introduction to *Mimesis and Alterity*, "A Report to the Academy," anthropologist Michael Taussig summarized the constructed nature of our being this way: "Now the strange thing about this silly if not desperate place between the real and the really made-up is that it appears to be where most of us spend most of our time as epistemically correct, socially-created, and occasionally creative beings. We dissimulate. We act and have to act as if mischief were not afoot in the kingdom of the real and that all around the ground lay firm. That is what the public secret, the facticity of the social fact, being a social being, is all about. No matter how sophisticated we may be as to the constructed and arbitrary character of our practices, including our practices of representation, our practice of practices is one of actively forgetting such mischief each time we open our mouths to ask for something or to make a statement" (xvii-xviii). Taussig sees our inevitable divorce from the "kingdom of the real" as the comedy of the human condition, whereas the seventeenth-century philosopher of language, Giambattista Vico, saw it as the root of our alienation and our inspiration: "[T]he sources of all poetic locution" are rooted in two [facts of life]: the "poverty of language and need to explain and be understood" (*New Science* 22). Ernst von Glasersfeld points out that Vico, whose slogan was "the human mind can only know what the human mind has made," touched off a debate in the scholarly journal *Giornale de Letterati d'Italia* by statements in his treatise on the construction of knowledge, such as: "Man, having within himself an imagined World of lines and numbers, operates in it with abstractions, just as God, in the universe, did with reality" (qtd. in "An Exposition of Constructivism").

<sup>3</sup>"Son compagnon, élégant et mince, cavalier en tunique de haïck, en burnous fin d'une blancheur immaculée, chaussé de *mestr* de spahi, avait des yeux noirs et d'un éclat singulier, le visage blême, les pommettes saillantes et le poil roux. [...] 'Je vous présente Si Mahmoud Saâdi' [...] 'c'est là son nom de guerre; en réalité il s'agit de Mme Ehnni, ma femme'" (64).

<sup>4</sup>"A part l'excentricité de ses manières et de son costume [...] il ne m'a rien été rapporté de ses discours et de ses actions qui ne fût parfaitement correct" (qtd. in Eberhardt, *Ecrits Intimes* 262-63; my translation and emphasis).

<sup>5</sup>"[J'ai entendu parler d'elle depuis plusieurs années par des officiers] qui la considèrent plutôt comme une déséquilibrée que comme un personnage dangereux" (qtd. in Eberhardt, *Ecrits Intimes* 265-66; my translation).

<sup>6</sup>Eberhardt gave a number of different reasons to explain her cross-dressing: "I went exploring by myself. My hat bothered me, though, for it set me apart from Muslims. I went back to don my fez ..." (*The Passionate Nomad*, Algiers, the 22nd [July 1900]); "The investigating magistrates have [...] not known what to make of my going about dressed as an Arab, sometimes as a man, and at other times as a woman, depending on the occasion, and on the requirements of my essentially nomadic life" (Letter to *La Dépêche algérienne*, June 4, 1901); "It did not occur to

[Captain Cauvet] that my preferring a burnous to a skirt, and dunes to the homestead could present any danger to the public welfare in the district annex" (Letter to *La Dépêche algérienne*, June 7, 1901); "For greater convenience and also as a matter of esthetics, I grew used to wearing Arab clothing" (To the Editor of *La Petite Gironde*, Apr. 23, 1903); "Those who are not in the Sahara for their own pleasure do not understand why anyone might come here, especially out of season ... and then I make the mistake of dressing like everyone else in the region" (Isabelle Eberhardt, *Lettres et journaliers* 56-57).

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## Peter Ackroyd's *English Music* as Romance of Englishness: A Response to Susan Ang\*

JEAN-MICHEL GANTEAU

Susan Ang's wide-ranging, thoroughly researched article gives precious insights into the poetic and epistemological questions raised by Peter Ackroyd's *English Music*, a novel that rehearses most of the novelist, critic and biographer's obsessions, and especially his fascination with T. S. Eliot's vision of tradition. It also provides an interesting complement to Susana Onega's chapter on the novel, in her groundbreaking *Metafiction and Myth in the Novels of Peter Ackroyd*. In the chapter partly devoted to *English Music*, she uses the English visionary tradition which Ackroyd explicitly espoused both in his fiction and non-fiction to build a demonstration that addresses the circularity of myth as an image of transmission from one generation to the next (112). However, what may be seen as Susan Ang's most original contribution is her choice of the motif of the quester, as part of the fertility myth that she sees at work in the novel, taking her lead from Eliot or Weston (224-27), a reading that testifies to the presence of a hypertextual link with the Grail legend.

Addressing this question of inter- and hypertextual references may seem the obvious thing to do with a work that both thematises and performs the idea of a canon of Englishness and chooses to do so, as often in Ackroyd's work, through the borrowing of characters and situations from previous texts or works of art, or by imitating the style

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\*Reference: Susan Ang, "OOOO that Eliot-Joycean Rag': A Fantasia upon Reading *English Music*," *Connotations* 15.1-3 (2005/2006): 215-42. See also: Annegret Maack, "Maintaining Plurality: A Response to Susan Ang," *Connotations* 17.2-3 (2007/2008): 302-09.

For the original article as well as all contributions to this debate, please check the *Connotations* website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debang01513.htm>>.

and manner of other authors. However, I would argue that what Susan Ang's selection of the fertility myth of the Grail type and the figure of the quester does is point, beyond a series of hypotexts, to an architext, i.e. a formula that moves away from the individual to the generic, thus referring to the text's inscription into a genre or a mode.<sup>1</sup> And the mode that is referred to here is that of romance. This is an aspect of Ackroyd's fiction that I have explored elsewhere, reading Ackroyd's novels as variations on what might be seen as the romance of Englishness (Ganteau, *Peter Ackroyd*), and there is little doubt that *English Music* belongs to that paradigm more than that of the Victorian *Bildungsroman* (even though the Dickensian contribution to the genre harbours a fair deal of the inflections characteristic of romance).

By romance, I do not simply mean medieval romance and its contemporary offshoots, even though such a thematic component is present in *English Music*, through the reference to Mallory; nor do I particularly mean the narrative of the Mills and Boon type, which trades in the consumption of stories of emphatically romantic love. What I have in mind is less strictly generic and more modal, and belongs to the anti-realistic tradition, represented in Ackroyd's canon (and present in *English Music*) by such different authors as Bunyan, Richardson, Sterne, Emily Brontë, Dickens, Carroll, and above all Blake, artists who turn their backs on the representation of the phenomenal world so as to privilege a presentation of the supra-phenomenal, or at least of the relationships and connections between both spheres, an impulse that is at the heart of the visionary tradition as defined by Ackroyd in his famous lectures "London Luminaries and Cockney Visionaries" and "The Englishness of English Literature." This is precisely what happens in *English Music*, a novel that presents the reader with a fairly realistic evocation of the social and cultural background of Edwardian England, and also with the psychology of the protagonist and narrator, Timothy Harcombe, while at the very same time exploring the limits of phenomenal and psychological realism through evocations of magical occurrences, or through the resort to metaleptic passages in which the protagonist walks

across the ontological frontier that separates his own world from those of the heroes and heroines of the English tradition. Such baroque orientation, in which the novel's poetic opaqueness and ornamentation is resorted to the better to thematise and to point towards the other of realism (cf. Ganteau, "Post-baroque Sublime?") buttresses the narrative's romantic dimension, thus making it qualify as romance more than (or as much as) novel. Such a modal element is clearly signposted through the protagonist as quester and of the reader as quester that Susan Ang sees as a cornerstone of the book's hermeneutics (225).

This is made clear in her evocation of the reader's enquiry into meaning, more than his/her imposition of meaning (226), a point substantiated through the evocation of the tropes of the lock and key(s) (230) to which she resorts to argue that plurality (as distinct from ambiguity) is consonant with the polyphonic eponymous music that vindicates a comprehension of differences rather than the closure of unitary meaning and melody (233-34). This, one may argue, is central to the identity of *English Music* in that it provides the vision of an aesthetic plurality that is predicated on the diffracting powers of romance, a mode used to problematise the realistic idiom of the *Bildungsroman* (as present in the odd-numbered chapters), to break it open, in other words to refuse its totalising claims. What I see at work in *English Music* is an ethics of romance that privileges the open over the closed, the infinite over the total, the other over the same.<sup>2</sup> That such a vision informs the odd-numbered chapters, with the various scenes staging encounters with the vulnerable and marginalised, together with the treatment of occurrences of the spectral, is fairly obvious, as if the more realistic idiom itself were bearing the exotic seeds of romance. Furthermore, it is even more clearly thematised and actually performed in the even-numbered, metaleptic chapters which thwart the linear logic of the narrative the better to promote harmonics over the line of melody (Ganteau, "Post-baroque Sublime?" 26). In other words, the baroque orientation of the novel (an apposite label for an author who lays the stress on the Catholic essence of English-

ness, in the polemical lecture “The Englishness of English Literature”), which highlights, in Deleuze’s terms of *Le Pli*, a fold that runs into infinity, is seen to collaborate with the non-linear poetics of romance, a mode which privileges the far as opposed to the near, the then as opposed to the now, the strange as opposed to the familiar (such binary oppositions crop up in some of the canonic evocations of the mode, from Congreve’s preface to *Incognita, or Love and Duty Reconciled* to James’s preface to *The American*, through Hawthorne’s preface to *The House of the Seven Gables*). I would then see romance as an operator of narrative pluralisation and opening, a vision eminently compatible with Susan Ang’s analyses. For in fact the Grail motif—and the nexus of associations that accrue with it—are but devices meant to refract the narrative, to break it open and postulate the prevalence of the illimited, a priority that *English Music* both exploits and performs.

If provisionality is to be found in *English Music*, as underlined by Susan Ang (and confirmed by Annegret Maack’s response to her article in terms of plurality [305-06]), it applies certainly to the unstable, indefinite movement of romance that explores more than it asserts, and multiplies questions instead of providing answers. This corresponds to the ever fluctuating vision of an English canon that the narrative does not present as finite, although it gives the reader access to a finite number of parodies and pastiches, in the even-numbered chapters. What is not provisional, though, is the wish to promote a polemical vision of Englishness as essentially visionary, and as based on Eliot’s conception of tradition as presence of the past (a notion that the metaleptic chapters put at the very top of the narrative’s agenda). Provisionality may thus be said to be mitigated in one respect at least, i.e. in Ackroyd’s project at work in the novel and throughout the *oeuvre* to promote cultural resurgence and continuity as a hallmark of the contemporary. This is documented time and again in Ackroyd’s writings, most notably in his long essay of cultural criticism, *Albion*, in which Englishness is defined as openness. In fact, one of the main images of this book is that of hybridity (Ackroyd takes the image of

the mongrel as a figure of the impurity of the English imagination), a cultural impurity that is predicated on the principle of assimilation. *Albion* harps on the idea that the English genius is that of adaptation or assimilation of things foreign (170, 237) or, put differently and in ethical terms, on the idea that Englishness is characterised by a ceaseless move out of the same so as to take the other into consideration. Of course, the idea of mere concern or meeting with the other—the basis of the ethical relation—is somewhat thwarted by the image of assimilation, which implies something that goes beyond the ethical, in that it might be said to appropriate the other and to encapsulate it in some totality, heterogeneous as it may be. Still, such a vision might be taken with a pinch of salt in that the resulting culture, even if it assimilates the foreign, does so not in terms of neutralization and appropriation, but rather in terms of welcome and accommodation, as made clear in the attendant image of “creative borrowing” that Ackroyd resorts to in his biography of T. S. Eliot (117, 237, 270). By rehearsing the music of *Albion*, *English Music* welcomes the texts of the past and, according to the rules of classical *imitatio* (thus in conformity with the Reynolds epigraph), repeats and takes them up within an original design, one of the characteristics that Ackroyd sees at work in T. S. Eliot’s *oeuvre* (*T. S. Eliot* 147) and which he dramatises in this narrative. It thus appears that Susan Ang’s titular reference to Joyce and Eliot, those masters of Modernism, of the mythic method and of intertextual overkill reverberates with more than one meaning. The relevance of the Grail romances that she shows convincingly in her article points at a further presence of Eliot in the practice of creative borrowing and *imitatio*, which enhance the ethical potential of a narrative that is open to alterity through cultural assimilation.

In the end, what the baroque aesthetics at work in *English Music* foreground, in their promotion of linguistic, structural, tropic, intertextual and hypertextual excess (through their tapping of the Grail legends, as underlined by Susan Ang), is some architextual inscription into the mode of romance. The narrative thus enters the Ackroydian paradigm of the romance of Englishness, a configuration that is va-



lued for its diffracting power and works through the accommodation of the other within the same. Such a setup favours the adoption and practice of an ethics of romance which is an ethics of alterity, bringing in the far and the strange right into the heart of the familiar so as to provide an encounter with otherness in endless stimulating, opening reaction with the same of tradition. What *English Music* posits then is a model of English culture as predicated on openness, process and accommodation, of tradition as dynamic, of the canon as syntagmatically and paradigmatically open to influences. In his *Notes for a New Culture*, an obvious titular homage to Eliot's *Notes towards the Definition of Culture*, Ackroyd lamented the decline of English culture throughout the twentieth century and more specifically after the Second World War (9). *English Music*, as emblematic of the ethical romance of Englishness that Ackroyd has ceaselessly contributed to building up, is his dedicated response to that early diagnosis and clinches his commitment and faithfulness to an original idea.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>I am borrowing this distinction between hypertextuality and architextuality from Gérard Genette's "Introduction à l'architexte" (89-95).

<sup>2</sup>This take on ethics is borrowed from the Levinasian and post-Levinasian conception of ethics as an ethics of alterity, as articulated by such critics as Robert Eaglestone, Andrew Gibson, or Sygmunt Baumann, among others, in the British context.

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