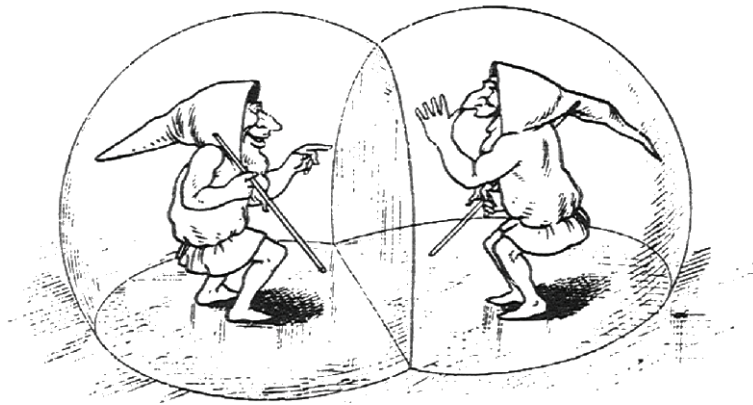


# Connotations

*A Journal for Critical Debate*



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# *Connotations: A Journal for Critical Debate*

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## A Response to Åke Bergvall's "Resurrection as Blasphemy in Canto 5 of Edmund Spenser's 'The Legend of Holiness'"\*

MATTHEW A. FIKE

Åke Bergvall clearly sets out his purpose in two statements early in his article. First, "I shall argue that Duessa's act of salvation is blasphemous and (consequently) ineffectual" (1-2). Second, "[t]he contention of this paper is that Duessa and her 'mother' Night, even as they bring linguistic confusion and stage a blasphemous mock-imitation of Christ's harrowing of hell, may be suffering the same fate" (2). The final phrase may mean "willing evil but working good" (2), but this may not be entirely clear.

The key concept, then, is blasphemy, which Bergvall, following Andreea-Tereza Nitisor, claims to be "'textual' and 'linguistic.'" "That linguistic profanation," writes Bergvall, "can be felt in the semantic confusion of canto 5," and so forth (2). The nexus of blasphemy, linguistic profanation, and semantic confusion is a bit shaky, but Bergvall offers a capable and sensitive close reading of canto 5, with an emphasis on the multiple readings that arise from ambiguous statements such as Duessa's "Thine the shield, and I, and all" (I.5.11). Bergvall writes: "In fact, there is no conclusive evidence which of the two knights Duessa is actually addressing, or indeed, *if* she is rather hedging her bets" (5; emphasis added). But the uncertainty here is the key point—the lack of evidence *is* evidence. As stated in my book, *Spenser's Underworld in the 1590 Faerie Queene*, "the remark may be

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\*Reference: Åke Bergvall, "Resurrection as Blasphemy in Canto 5 of Edmund Spenser's 'The Legend of Holiness,'" *Connotations* 16.1-3 (2006/2007): 1-10.

For the original article as well as all contributions to this debate, please check the *Connotations* website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debbergvall01613.htm>>.



addressed to either Redcrosse or Sans Joy (she *is* covering her bases)" (42; emphasis added). The ambiguity is purposeful, as the author later seems to agree: "indeed, she seems more than happy to exchange lovers depending on their luck in the jousts" (5).

Duessa's falseness is another nicely developed feature of Bergvall's article, but he is at his best in delivering insights on blasphemy, narrowly defined. His point about "Messianic delight at seeing the newborn Savior in chapter 3 of the Gospel of Luke" in connection with Night's mention of the "child, whom I haue longd to see" (L.5.27) is a very good reading (8). So is the insight, borrowed from A. C. Hamilton's note, that "some" in stanza 26 may refer to Christ as well as others. At these two points, the article delivers on the notion of blasphemy in its first statement of purpose. But there is a disconnection between the author's stated goal and what he actually achieves insofar as the true interest here—namely, confusion, developed often as falseness—is rarely blasphemous.

The article's second statement of purpose, which concerns the harrowing of hell, is somewhat at odds with Bergvall's assertion in paragraph 2 that his "contribution" is not source study. Demonstrating that canto 5 includes blasphemy requires reference to sources, as with the passage from Luke and the traditional understanding of Christ's harrowing of hell, which the Bible originates, the Fathers confirm, and texts like Langland's *Piers Plowman* dramatize. Or, as Bergvall admits later on, Duessa is "performing a false harrowing of hell, a blasphemous inversion of the literary sources" (6). Blasphemy subverts previous statements that connect in some way to a religious, theological, or Christ-related context; and such subversions do not necessarily have to involve confusion. Duessa's descent with Sans Joy clearly deviates from Christ's model in the harrowing, but does this constitute "a blasphemous inversion of the literary sources," or is the inversion merely parodic?

There are additional weak links in the argument at this point. First, to say that "Duessa [is] described as a Christ- or Theseus-figure" (6) incorrectly equates Christ and Theseus: one is a successful harrower

of hell, but the other must be rescued from the underworld by Hercules and cannot save his friend Pirithous. As well, Christ descends to liberate the righteous, whereas Duessa descends to seek healing for an evil man: the contrast constitutes parody, not blasphemy. Nor does Bergvall seem to know what “harrowing of hell” actually means. According to the *OED*, “harrow” means “to harry, rob, spoil” and is “[u]sed especially in the phrase *to harrow hell*, said of Christ” (“harrow,” 2.a.). Since Duessa’s descent is clearly not a harrowing in the traditional sense, it is precarious to expand the word “harrowed” so that it encompasses the action of both Duessa and Prince Arthur: the word is more specialized. Second, as I suggest in *Spenser’s Underworld*, Judith Anderson is probably not correct to state that Duessa’s descent is Redcrosse’s dream: if it were, how could he leave the House of Pride before she returns in stanza 45? Bergvall ought to realize the disconnection because he quotes the key lines: “‘The false *Duessa* leauing noyous Night, / Returnd to stately pallace of Dame *Pryde*,’ if only to find Redcrosse gone” (3). And third, blasphemy overstates Spenser’s technique to the extent that the *Aeneid* is the fundamental antecedent, and on the Virgilian connection much more needs to be said.

Throughout the article, Bergvall makes fruitful reference to Hamilton’s notes in the authoritative edition. It is somewhat ironic, then, that the author overlooks what is perhaps the most helpful statement ever written about Duessa’s descent in canto 5, namely, Hamilton’s analysis of it in *The Structure of Allegory in The Faerie Queene*:

In Virgil Aeneas’s descent climaxes the first half of his adventures. He hears the prophecy of his woes to be fulfilled in the second half of his journey, and he learns his full destiny. In Spenser Duessa’s descent climaxes the Red Cross Knight’s wanderings—he leaves the house of Pride only to fall before Orgoglio. Night prophesies his fall, and reveals that his adversaries are Night’s children. Duessa, like Aeneas, invokes the powers of Night; and Night’s account of the macrocosmic conflict between the children of Night and the sons of Day expands Anchises’[s] account of the fiery life-seeds shut up in the dark dungeon of the body. Clearly Spenser means to parody Virgil. In his poem the adversary, not the aged priestess of Phoebus, makes the

prophecy of woe; and the great mother of the hero's adversaries, not the hero's sire, reveals the hero's destiny. (70)

This passage makes perfect sense of Spenser's technique, which, to the extent that it invokes the classical, is parodic, not blasphemous. Imposing blasphemy on an episode whose main antecedent is classical is too heavy-handed; and nowhere does Bergvall explain how Duessa and Night "may in fact be willing evil but working good," if that is even what the author means by "suffering the same fate."

Ultimately, the article simply does not justify the title's claim that resurrection is treated blasphemously in canto 5. In fact, this is hardly an article about resurrection at all. The word appears only in the first paragraph's claim that the dragon fight—not canto 5 but canto 11—reenacts Christ's death and resurrection. The only other reference to something possibly related to resurrection is Bergvall's statement that "Sansjoy is brought down to hell and left there in the limbo of materialist medicine," a point he borrows from Douglas Trevor (9). Aesculapius is not even mentioned by name, and the author overlooks the idea that Duessa's descent is an image of what Redcrosse is still trying to do: namely, addressing spiritual problems with purely physical resources.

Regarding the dragon fight, the greater truth is that the three-day battle and the brazen tower echo Christ's harrowing of hell. As J. A. MacCulloch points out, in Patristic tradition the gates of hell are made of brass (219). In addition, the spiritual healing that Redcrosse receives from the tree and the well (versus the purely physical healing of Aesculapius) suggests the revivifying role of the sacraments in the life of the Protestant Christian: the harrowing of hell, though clearly present in the background, is not the central object of the allegory in canto 11. Thus "The Legend of Holiness," despite the inclusion of Catholic elements at the House of Holiness, culminates in a distinctly doctrinaire vision of what it takes for Protestants to make their way in the world.

In conclusion, Bergvall's article, though it contributes a useful close reading of canto 5 to the body of scholarship on *The Faerie Queene*, is

more about confusion as infernal parody than about resurrection as blasphemy. Bergvall is on the right track when he sees “Duessa’s rescue operation to save Sansjoy [...] as a confused parody of the main themes of the Legend of Holiness” (8). Exactly right. The article would have been more successful if the author’s stated purposes and the strong insights in this statement and throughout the body had been more properly in sync.

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## An Answer to Matthew A. Fike\*

ÅKE BERGVALL

Let me begin by thanking Matthew A. Fike for taking me seriously enough to engage with my article. I also want to acknowledge my debt to his excellent book *Spenser's Underworld*. Given the limitations of a reply like this, I shall cut to the quick by engaging with what I take to be Fike's major gripe, namely that "blasphemy overstates Spenser's technique to the extent that the *Aeneid* is the fundamental antecedent [for Duessa's descent]," which in turn means that "Spenser's technique, [...] to the extent that it invokes the classical, is parodic, not blasphemous" (4).

\* \* \*

I have of course never questioned the importance of the *Aeneid* as a crucial intertext for this passage, or indeed for book one as a whole. However, I do object to the adjective "fundamental" in the sense Fike seems to give it, i.e., that Spenser's use of Virgil would somehow obliterate other important intertexts such as the New Testament. The thought that Spenser's allegory in all its richness could be reduced to one, and only one interpretative grid seems to me ill advised.

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\*Reference: Åke Bergvall, "Resurrection as Blasphemy in Canto 5 of Edmund Spenser's 'The Legend of Holiness,'" *Connotations* 16.1-3 (2006/2007): 1-10; Matthew A. Fike, "A Response to Åke Bergvall's 'Resurrection as Blasphemy in Canto 5 of Edmund Spenser's «The Legend of Holiness,»'" *Connotations* 19.1-3 (2009/2010): 1-5.

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

In a paper soon to be published in *Renaissance Quarterly*, Lars-Håkan Svensson demonstrates in learned detail how throughout Redcrosse's fights with the Sans brothers, including the one discussed in my paper, Spenser actively engages with the *Aeneid*, in particular its ending, but that these classical allusions also have to be fitted into a larger interpretative picture: "the episodes making use of the ending of the *Aeneid* in book 1 of *The Faerie Queene* involve three evil brothers, clearly intended as participants in a theological allegory based on Galatians 5.22-23."<sup>1</sup> In the same way, I would argue, Duessa's descent, not *despite* but through the *transformation* of its classical antecedents, is fitted into a larger Scriptural picture. Consequently, I have no problem with Fike's proposition that the descent, "to the extent that it invokes the classical, is parodic" (4; my emphasis). However, to the extent that it invokes the *Christian*, the descent is also blasphemous. What I am trying to show in my paper is that, within the overarching religious allegory of book one, Duessa's descent functions in ways analogous to how she herself as the allegorical figure "Fidessa," complete with her iconic cup, blasphemously and ultimately fruitlessly prefigures her true counterpart within the House of Holiness, Fidelia (and as virtually all the other characters within its walls have been prefigured by their antithetical counterparts). Fike is of course correct in pointing out the "greater truth" that the harrowing of Hell occurs in canto 11, where the brazen tower and Redcrosse's dragon battle "echo Christ's harrowing of hell" (whether, as Fike claims, this "is not the central object of the allegory in canto 11" [4] had better be left for another time, especially since he seems to be fighting scholarly ghosts not found in my paper). However, it is perfectly in line with the allegorical methodology of Spenser's poem that Duessa's (ineffectual) attempt in canto 5 to "saue" and "cure" Sansjoy by descending into hell prefigures that later event in canto 11 by staging its very antithesis: where Redcrosse "harrows" hell she returns empty-handed, and where Redcrosse is resurrected Sansjoy remains in the land of the dead (the active/passive construction is deliberate: Redcrosse is both

the savior and the saved in canto 11, and thus prefigured by both Duessa and Sansjoy).

It is precisely these instances of antithetical prefiguring—of the House of Holiness of canto 10 by the various anti-figures populating the early parts of the book, and of the Easter drama of canto 11 by Duessa's descent—that together constitute the semantic and existential confusion enveloping the first nine books, a confusion, as I showed in my paper, structurally centered on Duessa meeting her mother (with its Messianic, and thus blasphemous overtones) as well as her descent into the underworld. In the same way that the House of Pride, within which the descent occurs, is the antithesis to the House of Holiness, so the descent itself, in its very parody of classical heroics, forms a blasphemous counterpart to the allegorical depiction of Christ's death and resurrection in canto 11.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Lars-Håkan Svensson, "Remembering the Death of Turnus: Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* and the Ending of the *Aeneid*," forthcoming in *Renaissance Quarterly*. The reference to Galatians is based on an interpretation of the names of the three Sans brothers: "The three brothers are negative embodiments of some of the fruits of the spirit mentioned in Galatians 5.22-23: 'ioye [...] faith [...] against such there is no Law'" (note 91).

## A Response to Margret Fetzer's "Donne's Sermons as Re-enactments of the Word"\*

EDMUND MILLER

In discussing the theatricality of John Donne's sermons, Margret Fetzer cites a competition between the sermon and the play for an audience at the beginning of the seventeenth century (11n1). But she suggests that Donne may have been unwilling to make direct allusions to the theater because of its "dubious moral status" (11n3). Donne, however, published an epithalamion on the marriage of Sir Robert Carr, Earl of Somerset, to the divorced Countess of Essex, a lady notorious quite apart from the peculiar details of the divorce case, including the murder of a witness. So Donne was not shy of association with situations of moral ambiguity. Indeed, Donne also wrote a prose defense of the divorce although it was not published.

In addition, Donne would have been familiar with theatrical performances from his time at the Inns of Court, where pageants were common. As a royal chaplain early in his ecclesiastical career, he would have been aware of masques performed at court and probably in attendance at some of them. And the Somerset wedding celebration was accompanied by the performance of two masques by Thomas Campion and another two by Ben Jonson over the course of several days. It is hard to believe that the author of one of the entertainments was not present for the performances of some of the others and impossible to believe that he was unaware of their subject matter and their use of mechanical devices, lavish costumes, choreography, and poetic language.

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\*Reference: Margret Fetzer, "Donne's Sermons as Re-enactments of the Word," *Connotations* 17.1 (2007/2008): 1-13.

For the original article as well as all contributions to this debate, please check the *Connotations* website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debfetzer01701.htm>>.



Whatever the views of his parishioners, he cannot have had been ignorant of stagecraft (like the controversialist William Prynne) or opposed to it in principle (like the anti-Catholic polemicist J. Rainsford cited by Fetzer). As Fetzer points out, Donne does not denounce the theater as many Puritan preachers and lecturers did (1).

In addition, Donne had a number of very personal connections to the public theater. He was the grandson of the playwright John Heywood (c. 1497-c. 1580). And Donne had an actor for a son-in-law. Donne seems to have known the actor Edward (or Ned) Alleyn (1566-1626) as early as the 1590s. At least, a letter of Alleyn's preserved in manuscript at Dulwich College (founded by Alleyn) refers to an acquaintance dating back to that period (Bald 74). An entry in Alleyn's diary shows that he dined with Donne on one occasion in 1620 (Bald 367). And in 1623 Alleyn certainly married as his second wife Donne's daughter Constance, and this involved marriage settlements<sup>1</sup> suggesting approval of the father of the bride (Donne's own marriage had, of course, not had such approval). Although—according to the *Dictionary of National Biography*—Alleyn's last recorded stage performance was in 1604, he was a very active theater manager, starting as partner of his first wife's step-father, Philip Henslowe. After Henslowe's death in 1616, Alleyn continued this work at least until a few years before his own death in 1626. Apart from buying scripts, he was a patron of writers like Thomas Dekker and John Taylor. With an acquaintance like Alleyn, who later even became a member of the family, it seems likely that Donne would have had inside knowledge of the theatrical practices of his day even if he had never attended a performance. And his daughter's marriage with his full consent would have been widely known and seen by everyone as tacit approval of the theater as a profession.

Donne's great theme in *The Devotions upon Emergent Occasions* is that all of God's creation is interconnected. He is famous for his refusal to compartmentalize life. Fetzer is quite right that Donne "did not leave behind his erotic passions when approaching God in his divine poetry" (1). But not only are his religious poems full of erotic imagery, his

love poems are full of religious imagery. In the sermons themselves, he cuts a wide swathe through imagery drawn from the unsavory elements of life without worrying that he might be inciting his listeners to vice. For example, in the sermon “Preached at White-Hall, March 8. 1621 [1621/2],” he explicates a biblical story of a famine as follows:

It brought Mothers to eat their Children of a span long; that is, as some Expositors take it, to take medicines to procure abortions, to cast their Children, that they might have Children to eate. (4.1: 50)

If Donne excludes theatrical imagery from his sermons it cannot be a consequence of unfamiliarity. Nor does it seem likely that he thought his listeners would have found such imagery inappropriate on Sabbatarian grounds. His patron King James promulgated a *Declaration of Sports*, authorizing the playing of games and dancing on Sunday although it disallowed “[i]nterludes” (107). Plays may have competed with sermons as public entertainment but not on the same day.

At any rate, Donne does, in fact, make use of theatrical imagery in his sermons. His sermons may not make specific allusions to particular plays or theatrical details, but they do make theatrical allusions of a more general kind. In an interesting passage in a sermon “Preached at S. Pauls in the Evening, Upon the day of S. Pauls Conversion. 1628. [1628/9],” Donne actually cites in parallel the possible bad effects of theater and sermon:

If I should aske thee at a Tragedy, where thou shouldest see him that had drawne blood, lie weltring, and surrounded in his owne blood, Is there a God now? If thou couldst answer me, No, These are but Inventions, and Representations of men, and I beleeve a God never the more for this; If I should ask thee at a Sermon, where thou shouldest heare the Judgements of God formerly denounced, and executed, re-denounced, and applied to present occasions, Is there a God now? If thou couldest answer me, No These are but Inventions of State, to souple and regulate Congregations, and keep people in order, and I beleeve a God never the more for this; [...]. (8.14: 332)

Even if “Tragedy” here means tragedy in the real world, there is no mistaking the theatrical origin of the image of a murderer later falling

dead himself. The ironic epistrophe “Is there a God now?” (repeated throughout a longer passage of which this is a part) emphatically makes the point that the listener must never answer “No” because God is not answerable to interpretation of happenings in the fallen world:

And though in the excesse of such outward declarations, S. *Chrysostome* complain of them, *Non Theatrum Ecclesia*, My masters, what mean you, the Church is not a Theater, *Quae mihi istorum plausuum utilitas?* what get I by these plaudites, and acclamations? (8.5: 149)

And the following passage applies theatrical images describing Job to the suggestion that listeners think of their lives as a performance before God as audience:

Make account that this world is your Scene, your Theater, and that God himself sits to see the combat, the wrestling. *Vetuit Deus mortem Job*; Job was Gods Champion, and God forbad Satan the taking away of *Jobs* life; for, if he die, (sayes God in the mouth of that Father) *Theatrum nobis non amplius plaudetur*, My theater will ring with no more *Plaudites*, I shall bee no more glorified in the valour and constancy of my Saints, my Champions. God delights in the constant and valiant man, and therefore a various, a timorous man frustrates, disappoints God. (6.4: 108)

Anticipating that his seventeenth-century listeners will make applications to their own lives, the following passage is particularly interesting for bringing together several theatrical terms, although “amphitheater” suggests that a classical theater and not a seventeenth-century playhouse is what these listeners are to envision:

He that relyes upon his *Plaudo domi*, Though the world hisse, I give my selfe a Plaudite at home, I have him at my Table, and her in my bed, whom I would have, and I care not for rumor; he that rests in such a Plaudite, prepares for a Tragedy, a Tragedy in the Amphitheater, the double Theater, this world, and the next too. (9.13: 309)

The following passage makes an interesting contrast between comedy and tragedy—in an emphatically contemporary context:

Because I am weary of solitarinesse, I will seeke company, and my company shall be, to make my body the body of a harlot: Because I am drouisie, I will

be kept awake, with the obscenitie and scurrilities of a Comedy, or the drums and ejaculations of a Tragedy: I will smother and suffocate sorrow, with hill upon hill, course after course at a voluptuous feast, and drown sorrow in excesses of Wine, and call that sickness health; [...] . (3.12: 271-72)

The theatrical allusions in Donne's sermons do not suggest advocacy of the theater. They do not even plead tolerance and sometimes occur in contexts describing disreputable behavior. But these theatrical allusions do indicate an expectation on his part that his listeners would be familiar with the theater and understand allusive images drawn from it.

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#### NOTE

<sup>1</sup>There was some confusion about the value of dower property not settled until 1624, after Donne had recovered from the serious illness that led to the writing of *The Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*. The property settlement is alluded to in Izaak Walton's "Life of Dr John Donne" (57-59) and discussed in detail in Bald (399).

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## Donne's Sermons as Re-enactments of the Word: A Response to Margret Fetzer\*

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Margret Fetzer is surely right that John Donne used theatrical strategies of impersonation and identification in his sermons so as to bring home the drama of salvation. By re-enacting Christ's passion and resurrection, Donne wished to open the hearts of his parishioners so that they might be reconciled to God. Through preaching he aspired to sway the obdurate and elicit the consent and cooperation necessary for grace. Nevertheless, while I agree with the broad outlines of Fetzer's analysis, I have a couple of reservations relating to mood and the chiaroscuro of soul-searching. The first pertains to the experiential affect of audiences at a theater or in church; the second pertains to exemplarity, given Fetzer's insight that Donne in the pulpit "illustrates what it is that his listeners are expected to do with the exempla he has provided" (7). By exploring the implications of Fetzer's observations, I hope to modify the emphasis of what is at stake in Donne's theatrical preaching.

My reservation about studies that identify similarities between the theater and church concerns their tendency to minimize the different atmospheres of each venue. Yes, St. Paul's was no doubt a noisy and distracting place, full of gallants showing off their fashionable wear. And yes, groundlings at the Globe might take away moral lessons from a show or experience feelings of sacramental fellowship and wonder at a climactic moment. These shared characteristics notwithstanding, if Londoners flocked in droves to the theater, leaving church

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\*Reference: Margret Fetzer, "Donne's Sermons as Re-enactments of the Word," *Connotations* 17.1 (2007/2008): 1-13.

For the original article as well as all contributions to this debate, please check the *Connotations* website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debfetzer01701.htm>>.

pews empty, as anti-theatricalists claimed, this is—to state the obvious—because people were having more fun at a play. Margret Fetzer—even more than Bryan Crockett and Jeffrey Knapp whose studies she cites—overlooks how punitive and paranoia-inducing attending church could be. On the Sabbath, people were often asked to look inward and take stock of their sinfulness. But in the theater, they could forget the condition of their souls and escape the nausea-inducing reminders of the likelihood of their reprobation. The fact that Donne's language is gloriously ludic and his delivery, by all accounts, entertaining would not have dispelled the sobering uncertainty of one's own election and the suspicion that the divine comedy he was restaging and inviting one to join had long ago closed its doors.

Recent books by John Stachniewski and James Simpson remind us that the doctrine of predestination could overshadow the promise of redemption. As Simpson puts it: "For the Christian living under the dispensation of predestination, everything has been decided before one acts. What remains for the Christian is to search for signs of election" (140). The world thus becomes "a very complex and finally unreadable text that is incapable of answering the question: am I saved?" (141). As a preacher, Donne tried to alleviate the discouragement induced by the fear of damnation. He concedes to his congregation at St. Paul's that "God hath accompanied, and complicated almost all our bodily diseases of these times, with an extraordinary sadness, a predominant melancholy, a faintness of heart, a cheerlessness, a joylessness of spirit, and therefore I returne often to this endeavor of raising your hearts, dilating your hearts with a holy Joy, Joy in the holy Ghost" (VII.1.68-69). Elsewhere, he hearkens to the sociableness of church and the communion of holy meetings, protesting too much perhaps that "Religion is not a *melancholy*; the spirit of God is not a *dampe*; the Church is not a *grave*: it is a *fold*, it is an *Arke*, it is a *net*, it is a *city*" (VI.7.152). Although Donne may be trying to seduce his parishioners with what Bryan Crockett, quoting Jasper Mayne, calls "holy cozenage" (50), he takes it for granted that his

audience is subdued and depressed. They are not in the holiday mood of playgoers.

Given the uncertainty of salvation and the constant gauging of one's own responses to the preacher's spoken Word, I have to quibble with Fetzer's footnote that John Austin's concept of "take-up" can be applied to the speech act of the sermon. Fetzer paraphrases Austin, noting that "some speech acts, such as, for example, bets, require a take-up on the part of the audience to be felicitous" (12). Take-up she understands as adequate response: "An adequate response would mean the listener's identification with the exempla offered by the preacher whereas a refusal to identify would render the speech act of the sermon infelicitous" (12). This analysis is too simple. In the Protestant theology of grace, take-up is anything but straightforward. In a mindset where receptiveness to the Word might betray a fatal hubris and where a hint of detected indifference might produce the abjection requisite for hope, the challenge is to interpret take-up. How can one know that one is, in Luther's formulation, *simul justus et peccator*? Reading oneself for signs of justification is a life-and-death matter far more urgent and complex than the inner assent or permission involved in Austinian take-up. Donne confesses this in the *Devotions* when he prays: "So though thou knowest all my sins, yet thou knowest them not to my comfort, except thou know them by my telling them to thee. How shall I bring to thy knowledge, by that way, those sins which I myself know not?" (68). Donne concedes that he ignores the manifold ways in which he may have sinned. Self-knowledge is so difficult that it imperils the perception of the event of take-up, understood as an act of faith. That is why Donne concludes Holy Sonnet 19 with the paradox, "Those are my best days, when I shake with fear." Fear may be conducive to grace, yet fear is hard to sustain. Donne is alarmed monitoring his own inattention at prayer: "I throw my selfe downe in my Chamber, and I call in, and invite God, and his Angels thither, and when they are there, I neglect God and his Angels, for the noise of a Flie, for the ratling of a Coach, for the whining of a doore [...]. A memory of yesterdays pleasures, a feare of to morrows dan-

gers, a straw under my knee, a noise in mine eare, a light in mine eye, an any thing, a nothing, a fancy, a Chimera in my braine, troubles me in my prayer" (VII.10.264-65). He offers himself to the congregation as an exemplar of a troubled Christian always already compromised by relapse and frivolity.

Fetzer discusses Donne's frequent recourse to the trope of exemplarity as a way of bridging the gap between God and man, preacher and congregation. She claims that Donne relies on both Protestant and Catholic notions of *imitatio Christi*, at once drawing on remembrance as commemoration and on practices of Ignatian meditation, to carry out his "project of live re-enactment" (10). His goal is to produce a feeling of simultaneity whereby "the past of Christ's passion and the present of our sins are brought very closely together" (9), so that "both listener and preacher meet and merge in the figure of Christ and his passion" (10). While I have no quarrel with Fetzer's description of Donne's "project" as aiming at closeness and merged identities, I question her claim that exemplarity and theatrical re-enactment are the principal means to that end.

As I have argued elsewhere, Donne's appeal to exemplarity goes together with typological thinking (cf. *Skepticism and Memory*). While exemplarity and typology often overlap in Donne's thought, it is important to distinguish between them when considering theatrical identification, because the "re-enactment" that typology sponsors is more problematic than that elicited by exemplars. While patterns or exemplars, words Donne uses interchangeably, inspire copying and "performative imitation" (9), types operate through a system of figural interpretation that assumes providential interpellation. Thus, Donne compares King Josiah to King James through a process of "application" premised on typology (IV.9.247-48). Elsewhere he explains this process: "The Old Testament is a preparation and paedagogie to the New. [...] the accomplishing of those promises to us in the New-Testament are thus applyable to us" (I.8.291). The Christian who understands the historical past and the religious present in terms of the binaries of typology—Hebrew exemplars operating as heroic



types whose shadowy promise is fulfilled in the brightness of the evangelical present—finds himself drawn into the drama of salvation. God is hailing him, summoning that individual to see himself as a participant in the symmetries of salvation history. As Donne puts it, when that man “compares the new-Testament with the Old, the Gospel with the Law, he finds this to be a performance of those promises, a fulfilling of those Prophecies, a revelation of those Types and Figures, and an accomplishment, and a possession of those hopes and those reversions” (I.8.298). The well-ordered and streamlined narrative produced by figural interpretation is reassuring, given its premise that the baffling and confused present can be understood as a repetition—with a difference—of the past. Because Biblical types like Jacob, Josiah, David, and Deborah lend coherence to the present, anything that expedites identification with them brings solace. What could be more comforting in a nominalist universe ruled by a *deus absconditus*? In other words, when Donne ventriloquizes God, positioning himself, Fetzer notes, as a “liminal figure” (7), he is doing more than offering himself as a consoling exemplar, at once God’s representative and an ordinary sinner; he is appealing to the typological imagination of his auditory, inviting them to see themselves as providentially interpellated.

The idea of providential interpellation encouraged by typological tropes differs from Fetzer’s notion of theatrical re-enactment. The belief that the long arm of God has reached down and singled out an individual, tapping him on the shoulder and knocking on his heart, differs from the bashful experience of identification occasioned by a dynamic preacher. Indeed, the language with which Donne describes the work of providential interpellation often verges on the violent. “He entred into thee, at baptism,” Donne preaches. “He hath crept farther and farther into thee, in catechisms and other infusions of his doctrine into thee; He hath pierced into thee deeper by the powerful threatnings of his Judgments, in the mouths of his messengers; He hath made some survey over thee, in bringing thee to call thy self to an account of some sinful actions; and yet Christ is not come into

thee" (I.9.308). This labor-intensive process of interpellation has nothing to do, Donne notes, with "an inordinate delight, in hearing the eloquence of the preacher; for, so thou hearest the man, and not *God*" (IV.8.225). Donne conjures different portraits of his audience: the superficial parishioner who enjoys the theatrical skills of the preacher; the dutiful parishioner who patterns himself on Christ; and the providentially interpellated soul who encounters grace. The "alignment" (7) with God that Donne achieves in his preaching emerges, then, from typology as much as from exemplarity. But it is well to remember that the typological imagination in its desire for providential centrality has more force—and is ultimately more dangerous—than the emulative imagination with its engagement in theatrical role-play.

Finally, I wonder how appreciation of the materiality of Donne's voice might affect Fetzer's analysis of his theatricality, given Donne's self-conscious allusions to "breath" in his sermons. Gina Bloom has recently written about the ways that voice is produced, transmitted and received in an effort to theorize the relation of voice and agency. Speaking of the seed-Word metaphor in Protestant sermons, for example, Bloom observes that "the originator of the voice is imagined to be omnipotent God—the human preacher acts as a mere messenger or intermediary, delivering the seed-Word from its unwaveringly authoritative site of production" (113). But the seed-Word does not necessarily produce fruit in the heart of the listener. As Bloom puts it: "Because spiritual hearing is a temporal and spatial practice—not an instantaneous act one chooses or refuses to perform—bad hearers may disrupt the inception of the Word at a range of stages during the hearing process" (120). Donne himself represents the ear as an imperiled organ at risk of invasion, and not merely thanks to the noise of a fly, the rattling of a coach or the whining of a door. He preaches: "Take heed that you heare them whom God hath appointed to speake to you; But, when you come abroad, take heed *what* you hear; for certainly, the Devill doth not cast in more snares at the eye of man, then at the eare" (VII.16.405; cf. Bloom 113). The voice of Satan competes with the voice of the preacher such that the parishioner is urged

to raise his aural defenses, while not being deaf to God. Bloom comments that Protestant sermons like Donne's "locate agency in the bodies of hearers, defining spiritual subjectification as an acoustic feat" (114), a disciplining of one's auditory organ that always threatens to elude control. While I see the problem of take-up and reception as one of interpretation—reading one's internal weather for signs of election and finding one's self illegible—I think Bloom's materialist emphasis on the opening and shutting of ears can supplement and support Fetzer's analysis of Donne's sermons as re-enactments of the Word.

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## Reanimation or Reversibility in “Valerius: The Reanimated Roman”: A Response to Elena Anastasaki\*

GRAHAM ALLEN

It has been a struggle to transcend the essentially biographical manner in which Romantic women writers like Mary Shelley have traditionally been read.<sup>1</sup> In her introduction to the Pickering edition of Mary Shelley's novels, Betty T. Bennett writes that “one of the major barriers Mary Shelley encountered in her audiences then—and now [was/is] the failure to accept that her major works are designed to address civil and domestic politics” (xlix). This blindness to the political and it must be said philosophical dimensions of Mary Shelley's work often comes from an over-concentration on biographical readings. Such readings, which I have elsewhere described in terms of “biographism,” involving a rather literalising equation of text and life, lack an awareness of the kinds of sophisticated disruption of the biographical and literary divide in which Mary Shelley's writing is frequently involved.<sup>2</sup> They also tend to make a too literalistic relation between literary thematics and psychoanalytical categories, reading tropes as though they were symptoms of or at least reflections on psychic conditions. Elena Anastasaki's account of the relation between the figure of the *revenant* and the disruptive force of poetry in Mary Shelley's and Théophile Gautier's prose fiction is, then, in its analysis

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\*Reference: Elena Anastasaki, “The Trials and Tribulations of the *revenants*: Narrative Techniques and the Fragmented Hero in Mary Shelley and Théophile Gautier,” *Connotations* 16.1-3 (2006/2007): 26-46; Claire Raymond, “Response to Elena Anastasaki's ‘The Trials and Tribulations of the *revenants*,’” *Connotations* 17.2-3 (2007/2008): 257-62.

For the original article as well as all contributions to this debate, please check the *Connotations* website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debanastasaki01613.htm>>.

of those writers' engagement with form and meaning, a very welcome contribution.<sup>3</sup> In her response, Claire Raymond states:

Anastasaki refreshingly is concerned not with the apparent effects of the *revenant*, her/his role as disruptor of boundaries, but rather with the internal grief and psychic dislocation that the *revenant* bears because of his/her position as always out of bounds. In a nicely original move, Anastasaki considers the fragmentation and fracture *within* the *revenant*. (257)

Dispensing with Anastasaki's analysis of Gautier for now, I want to suggest that there is still, within her analysis of the *revenant* and fragmentation, a significant danger of "biographism." This danger appears most starkly in what Anastasaki does with the figure of reanimation; a figure which dictates her selection for discussion of three of Mary Shelley's short stories: "Valerius: The Reanimated Roman," "Roger Dodsworth: The Reanimated Englishman," and "The Mortal Immortal."<sup>4</sup> Early on in her paper, Anastasaki gives a paragraph breakdown of the tragic deaths which haunted Mary Shelley's life, from birth onwards, before stating: "It is not surprising then that from her first literary attempt, *Frankenstein* (1818), the theme of reanimation is to be found at the heart of her work" (28). Anastasaki remains committed to something more than a "biographist" approach to this thematics. She writes, responding to comments by Charlotte Sussman on the short stories: "Personal experience might well have been a source of inspiration in the depiction of the self-awareness of these characters, but I am arguing that what these stories are all about is, on the contrary, *internal discontinuity* as a perception of the self" (34). However, later on in the essay we find Anastasaki arguing that, "[f]or Shelley, the search for wholeness is a strictly personal matter" (40).

There is clearly, as Anastasaki has shown, a recurrent thematics of reanimation within Mary Shelley's work. We need to be a little careful, however. Are we always sure that what looks like reanimation is indeed reanimation? Is *Frankenstein's* creature reanimated? or is it created, the reanimated parts of dead humans and dead animals ultimately producing something with authentic and singular life? Is the process of reanimation that Roger Dodsworth goes through, fro-

zen and then thawed back to life hundreds of years later, the same process that Valerius more mysteriously goes through? Anastasaki recognises at times that we are not given the exact specifics of Valerius's reanimation. Given the title it might appear curious to ask the question, but still I intend to ask it: is Valerius in fact reanimated at all? As Anastasaki writes: "Apart from the title, only a series of paradoxical phrases indicate Valerius's unnatural situation" (28). The care I am suggesting here ultimately impinges on the questions of "biographism" and of political meaning with which I began. It is perhaps not reanimation that we should be primarily concerned with in trying to understand the ultimate meaning of a text such as "Valerius: The Reanimated Englishman," the text I intend to focus on here. What is ultimately at stake in such a story is something we might more accurately style reversibility, a trope, and perhaps more than a trope, which can reconnect such a short story, on the periphery of the redrawn map of Mary Shelley's oeuvre, to one of the now established canonical novels, *The Last Man*. Beyond that, reversibility might help us in a more global understanding of the nature of politics, philosophy, aesthetics and biography in both Mary Shelley and P. B. Shelley's lives and work.

I will begin by quoting a greater portion of the passage from Anastasaki to which I have just referred. It contains most of the issues I wish to illuminate.

Apart from the title, only a series of paradoxical phrases indicate Valerius's unnatural situation. Phrases like "my sensations of my revival" (332), "when I lived before" (333), "since my return to earth" (337), or "before I again die" (339) make explicit his revival, but without giving the slightest hint concerning the way it came about. This silencing is supported by the fragmentary form of the tale. The first part is narrated by an external third person narrator, and the second by a character in the story, Isabel Harley—the woman who helps Valerius to cope with his new situation. The first part also incorporates the narration of Valerius himself, so that we have three different points of view concerning the reanimated character: Valerius is thus viewed by the external narrator (frame narrative), through his own narration (first fragment), and through another character's narration (second fragment). (28)

I will return to the questions of narrative structure and fragmentation later on. To begin our reading of those apparently enigmatic silences in “Valerius” I will remind readers of the story’s initial location. The third-person narrator referred to by Anastasaki gives us two figures landing in “the little bay formed by the extreme point of Cape Miseno and the promontory of Bauli.” The narrator makes it very clear why they have arrived at this spot: “They sought the Elysian fields, and, winding among the poplars and mulberry trees festooned by the grapes which hung in rich and ripe clusters, they seated themselves under the shade of the tombs beside the Mare Morto” (*Collected Tales* 332). As Charles E. Robinson notes, dating the composition of this story is not clear (*Collected Tales* 397). What can be said is that the entire opening scene is a trial run or rerun of the opening of Mary Shelley’s 1826 novel, *The Last Man*, in which a narrative voice describes how she and her now dead companion visited Naples in 1818 and on the “8<sup>th</sup> of December of that year [...] crossed the Bay, to visit the antiquities which are scattered on the shores of Baiæ” (5). The narrator goes on: “We visited the so called Elysian Fields and Avernus; and wandered through various ruined temples, baths, and classic spots; at length we entered the gloomy cavern of the Cumæan Sibyl” (5).<sup>5</sup> It is here that the two travelling companions will find the Sibylline leaves within which the female traveller will eventually decipher the story of the end of the human race and the fate of the last man.

The opening setting for “Valerius” is, thus, crucial, and provides all the clues we need to unlock what appears to Anastasaki such an enigmatic form of reanimation. As Valerius states of the Elysian Fields to his companion:

This is the spot which was chosen by our antient and venerable religion, as that which best represented the idea oracles had given or diviners received of the seats of the happy after death. These are the tombs of Romans. This place is much changed by the sacrilegious hand of man since those times, but still it bears the name of the Elysian fields. Avernus is but a short distance from us, and this sea which we perceive is the blue Mediterranean, unchanged while all else bears the marks of servitude and degradation. (*Collected Tales* 332-33)

Valerius's rhetoric of natural permanence and cultural-historical degradation will be important in the latter stages of this analysis. What is crucial here is Mary Shelley's interest in the idea of the Elysian Fields. Glossing the mythological reference for her readers, Jane Blumberg writes: "The Elysian Fields were, in classical myth, that region of the Underworld reserved for the just and those favoured by the gods. Lake Avernus, perfectly circular, was believed by the Romans to be one of the portals to the Underworld" (*The Last Man* 4: 5). Whether Mary Shelley saw the Elysian Fields as a last resting place for the great and the good is questionable, however. Certainly her text, *The Fields of Fancy*, first version of what was to become her unpublished novella, *Mathilda*, gives us an account of the Elysian Fields in which a long process of mourning and philosophical enlightenment leads to a transition to a spiritually more advanced realm. As the figure of Fantasia explains to the mourning figure who she repeatedly carries to the Elysian Fields and then back to earth:

When a soul longing for knowledge & pining at its narrow conceptions escapes from your earth many spirits wait to receive it and to open its eyes to the mysteries of / the universe—many centuries are often consumed in these travels and they at last retire here to digest their knowledge & to become still wiser by thought and imagination working upon memory—When the fitting period is accomplished they leave this garden to inhabit another world fitted for the reception of beings almost infinitely wise—but what this world is neither can you conceive or I teach you [...] (*Novels and Selected Works* 2: 353)

When we remember all these contexts it becomes clear that Valerius has returned to earth from the Elysian Fields. This is the meaning of such apparently enigmatic statements as: "when I lived before" (333), "since my return to earth" (337), and "before I again die" (339). Valerius is not reanimated so much as reborn into the world of the living. He appears to me to have returned to the earth in order to gain or perhaps test some form of knowledge not yet completely achieved or assimilated. If read in the mythologically rich manner we have been reading the story, the story appears to provoke this question within its readers: what lesson has Valerius still to learn?



One thing that Valerius is quite explicit about is his “bitter disdain” for what he calls, in the first instance, “Italians” (*Collected Tales* 333). In examining this aspect of the story, Anastasaki focuses on Valerius’s alienation from the modern world within which he finds himself. She states: “His suffering is clearly the direct consequence of his experiencing a lack of familiarity and—most importantly—continuity” (30). It is not sufficient, however, to figure a singular referent (ancient Rome) as the cause of this lack of continuity in Valerius’s relation to the world. What is not registered in Anastasaki’s reading, but which is crucial for any real understanding of the political implications of the story, is that “Rome” is for Valerius itself a divided and contested referent. He makes this very clear early on in his narration. He states: “when the republic died, every antient Roman family became by degrees extinct and [...] their followers might usurp the name, but were not and are not Romans” (*Collected Tales* 333). Valerius’s discontinuity is not simply in finding himself in the modern world of “Italians,” it is even more deeply contained in the fact that the ancient, ruined Rome he is now guided round bespeaks in part an Imperialism which for him is a betrayal of the Republican values to which he still holds. It is Imperial Rome as much as Catholic Rome that alienates Valerius, the Republican *revenant*.

The bewildering historical discontinuities experienced by Valerius are symbolically captured for him within the Coliseum, at once the great symbol of Imperialism and yet also of the aesthetic and civic dream of Roman perfectibilism. Deciding never to quit its walls, Valerius achieves a kind of panoramic vision of Rome:

From its height, I beheld Rome sleeping under the cold rays of the moon: the dome of St. Peter’s and the various other domes and spires which make a second city, the habitations of gods above the habitations of men; the arch of Constantine at my feet; the Tiber and the great change in the situation of the city of modern times; all caught my attention, but they only awakened a vague and transitory interest. The Coliseum was to me henceforth the world, my eternal habitation [...]. In those hallowed precincts, I shall pour forth, before I die, my last awakening call to Romans and to Liberty [...]. If Rome be dead, I fly from her remains, loathsome as those of human life. It is

in the Coliseum alone that I recognise the grandeur of my country—that is the only worthy asylum for an antient Roman. (*Collected Tales* 336)

Describing his time, the first century BC aftermath of Sulla's dictatorship and the rise of Julius Caesar, he speaks of how he believed "the sacred flame" of Republican Liberty was reigniting in "the souls of Camillus and Fabricius," along with "Cicero, Cato, and Lucullus." He adds, with huge irony given historical hindsight: "the younger men, the sons of my friends, Brutus, Cassius, were rising with the promise of equal virtue," before concluding:

When I died, I was possessed by the strong persuasion that, since philosophy and letters were now joined to a virtue unparalleled upon earth, Rome was approaching that perfection from which there was no fall; and that, although men still feared, it was a wholesome fear which awoke them to action and the better secured the triumph of Good. (*Collected Tales* 336)

What history has subsequently shown Valerius has robbed him of this hope in perfectibility, and left him mourning a Roman Republican spirit which seems irreparably locked in the past. He agrees to go to England with Lord Harley in order to assess "if, after the great fluctuation in human affairs, man is nearer perfection than in my days" (*Collected Tales* 339), however, everything Valerius says seems to imply that he has lost faith in that possibility. Isabel Harley, the woman in whom he finds his one consolation, has said to him: "You shall teach me to know all that was great and worthy in your days, and I will teach you the manners and customs of ours" (*Collected Tales* 338). The last we see of Valerius, however, is on the night before he is to depart Rome and Italy for England. The narrator's description appears to leave the issue of his melancholy over the lost Roman ideal very much open to question and unavailable for any serious resolution:

The brilliant spectacle of sunset and the soft light of the moon invited to reverie and forbade words to disturb the magic of the scene. The old Roman perhaps thought of the days he had formerly spent at Baiae, when the eternal sun had set as it now did, and he lived in other days with other men. (*Collected Tales* 339)

The question of whether Valerius can ever learn to identify with the modern world he now finds himself in is connected very clearly in the story with the question of whether he can ever come to believe that the possibility of social and cultural “perfection” is still open, still alive. Valerius’s discontinuity with the modern world is a psychological problem Shelley adroitly attaches to the political and philosophical question of the fate and thus the future of Republicanism.<sup>6</sup> The question is not resolved, since it is designed to resound within Shelley’s readers. The passage I have just quoted must, therefore, have been the authentic ending of the text. The fragment which follows in Robinson’s edition should not, therefore, be considered as a continuation of the story but rather as an unassimilated fragment from it.

There are very similar, structurally related moments in the last chapter of *The Last Man*, moments of vision, within and around the Coliseum, which can help us understand better the not inconsiderable historical and politico-philosophical complexities being staged in “Valerius: the Reanimated Roman.” Alone in Rome and on the earth, Lionel Verney, sits in the Forum, by the Coliseum, and describes a moment of imaginative repopulation:

I strove, I resolved, to force myself to see the Plebeian multitude and lofty Patrician forms congregated around; and, as the Diorama of ages passed across my subdued fancy, they were replaced by the modern Roman; the Pope, in his white stole, distributing benedictions to the kneeling worshippers; the friar in his cowl; the dark-eyed girl, veiled by her mezzera [...]. (*The Last Man* 358)

The repopulating, diorama of a vision can only last so long, however, and Verney then describes how the scene collapses before the stark, depopulated reality before him:

I roused myself—I cast off my waking dreams; and I, who just now could almost hear the shouts of the Roman throng, and was hustled by countless multitudes, now beheld the desert ruins of Rome sleeping / under its own blue sky; the shadows lay tranquilly on the ground; sheep were grazing untended on the Palatine, and a buffalo stalked down the Sacred Way that led to the Capitol. I was alone in the Forum; alone in Rome; alone in the world. (359)

The scene ends, significantly, with what is perhaps the most important of the chapter's many pyramid images:

The generations I had conjured up to my fancy, contrasted more strongly with the end of all—the single point in which, as a pyramid, the mighty fabric of society had ended, while I, on the giddy height, saw vacant space around me. (359)

As I have argued elsewhere, the pyramid is a perfect symbol for the tragic historical narrative presented by Lionel Verney, a narrative which begins with a populated world and ends with the last man, the single point of an extinguished human race.<sup>7</sup> Standing on the top of the pyramid of human history, however, Verney, as its narrator, can see both its end and its beginning, its base and its apex. The pyramid image here, as throughout the novel, is in fact not one of tragic one-way entropic annihilation, but rather one of reversibility. Just as Verney in his imagination can repopulate the Forum and the Coliseum, so his narrative has demonstrated the reversible power contained in all writing and all narrative.

It is my contention, presented in the spirit of an addition to Anastasaki's reading of "Valerius," that the lesson Mary Shelley's reanimated Roman must learn is that the spirit of Republican Rome can be reanimated, that an apparent historical decline of that spirit can be reversed. In a much larger work than this I might argue that Rome itself came to represent the possibility of historical and imaginative reversibility for both Mary and Percy Shelley. The proof of this interpretive argument, if we can call it that, lies in the fragment which accompanies the manuscript of "Valerius," not as Anastasaki suggests in any intended way, but simply as an adjacent, related, yet to be incorporated text. This fragment text gives us the perspective of Isabell Harley, Valerius's would-be teacher. Isabel's lesson is overwhelmingly that of historical and political reversibility.

Isabell Harley's fragment text (*Collected Tales* 339-44) returns us to the moment in which Valerius gives up the Coliseum. She talks about the need to reconnect him in some way to the world around him and

her attempts to produce this. She gets straight down to the point, in fact, directly addressing Valerius's regret that Empire replaced Republican Rome: "You were happy in dying before the fall of your country and in not witnessing its degradation under the Emperors" (*Collected Tales* 340). She argues that looking at the ruins of Imperial Rome she can still discover within them the "effects [...] of republican virtue and power" (340):

When I visit the Coliseum, I do not think of Vespasian who built it or of the blood of gladiators and beasts which contaminated it, but I worship the spirit of antient Rome and of those noble heroes, who delivered their country from barbarians and who have enlightened the whole world by their miraculous virtue. I have heard you express a dislike of viewing the works of the oppressors of Rome, but visit them with me in this spirit, and you will find them strike you with that awe and reverence which power, acquired and accompanied by vice, can never give. (340)

For Isabell, Rome's Imperial ruins are reversible, the viewer has the choice to see in them either the terrors and the violence of the Empire or the resilient spirit of the Republic. The decisive power is in the mind of the modern viewer.

Isabell takes Valerius to a vantage-point from which they can view Rome and all he can see is destruction (*Collected Tales* 341). Isabell's response is again to mix destruction with immortal beauty, decay with the persistence of Republican spirit. She says: "It seems to me that if I were overtaken by the greatest misfortunes, I should be half consoled by the recollection of having dwelt in Rome" (*Collected Tales* 342). She takes him to the Pantheon at night, describing it as a temple "to all the gods" built shortly after his death. Valerius is inspired by the beauty and wholeness of the temple, but this positive response is shattered on the sight of a Christian cross:

The cross told him of change so great, so intolerable, that that one circumstance destroyed all that had arisen of love and pleasure in his heart. I tried in vain to bring him back to the deep feeling of beauty and of sacred awe with which he had been lately inspired. The spell was snapped. The moon-enlightened dome, the glittering pavement, the dim rows of lovely columns,

the deep sky had lost to him their holiness. He hastened to quit the temple.  
(*Collected Tales* 343)

Valerius is someone who cannot resist the idea of history as a destructive force eradicating all value; for him, everything of worth in the past is dead to the present.

Isabell takes Valerius to the Baths of Caracalla and to the Protestant Cemetery, which is described in terms which, if the story was composed in 1819, anticipate the poetic description of the same spot in P. B. Shelley's *Adonais* (*Collected Tales* 343). It is here, "at the foot of the tomb of Cestius, that lovely spot where death appears to enjoy sunshine and the blue depth of the deep sky from which it is every where else shut out," that Isabell describes Valerius as a ghost or *revenant*. Valerius belongs to the dead, he cannot find a connection to the modern world, Isabell's lesson of reversibility, of the persistence of hope in the face of historical destruction, is something he cannot assimilate:

Did Valerius sympathize with me? Alas! no. There was a melancholy tint cast over all his thoughts; there was a sadness of demeanour, which the sun of Rome and the verses of Virgil could not dissipate. He felt deeply, but little joy mingled with his sentiments. With my other feelings towards him, I had joined to them an inexplicable one that my companion was not a being of the earth. I often paused anxiously to know whether he respired the air, as I did, or if his form cast a shadow at his feet. His semblance was that of life, yet he belonged to the dead. (*Collected Tales* 343)

Reversibility, a vision of history which sees the possibility for rebirth alongside that of decay and destruction, and which retains a hope in a Republicanism which may seem dead and gone to the unimaginative eye, is unsuccessfully offered to Valerius, but clearly can still be recognised and adopted by the reader. There is a clear political and historical point to this short story, one which links it to a number of Mary Shelley's most important texts, including her 1823 novel concerning the fate of Florentine Republicanism, *Valperga*. Mary Shelley's short stories can, when read with care, appear closer to the tradition of the Godwinian novel than has until recently been suspected. Mary

Shelley's own struggle to achieve such a positive vision of history can perhaps be registered in everything she wrote from 1819 onwards.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>See Graham Allen, "Beyond Biographism" and *Mary Shelley*.

<sup>2</sup>For a recent attempt to honour such complexities see Julia A. Carlson's *England's First Family of Writers*.

<sup>3</sup>There are significant ways in which Anastasaki's approach could be related to the ground-breaking work of Tilottama Rajan in texts such as *The Supplement of Reading* and "Mary Shelley's *Mathilda*."

<sup>4</sup>These stories are contained within Charles E. Robinson (ed.), *Mary Shelley: Collected Tales and Stories*: 332-44, 43-50, 219-30.

<sup>5</sup>The Shelleys had actually visited the Bay of Baiæ (nowadays the Bay of Naples) and Avernus on December 8, 1818.

<sup>6</sup>For Mary Shelley's Republicanism see Betty T. Bennett, "The Political Philosophy of Mary Shelley's Historical Novels" and *Mary Shelley: An Introduction*; Michael Rossington, "Future Uncertain."

<sup>7</sup>See Allen, *Mary Shelley* 90-116.

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## A Letter in Response to Leona Toker\*

The argument of Toker's essay mainly focuses, in different ways, on patterns of decline that either fulfill themselves or are reversed. I think all readers of *Our Mutual Friend* would agree that this is a major theme of the novel. Thus a negative figure like Rogue Riderhood starts out bad and gets worse, whereas a relatively positive character like Eugene Wrayburn starts out neutral, begins to decline, and then gets better. I think Toker is wise to use the theme of recycling as one rendering of what takes place in the novel, though I think something more might be said about the motives for recycling. A person like Harmon senior might establish a business of recycling to amass wealth, just as Gaffer Hexam recycles corpses for a much more modest income. Jenny Wren, too, recycles for money, but her practice also has an element of craft, even art, to it. But the chief kind of recycling in the novel is of characters, and this is what Toker wishes to emphasize. However, her connecting all kinds of recycling in the novel, all modes of recovering potential waste, serves to demonstrate, I think unquestionably, how complex and intricate Dickens's design for this novel was. More and more critics are coming to admire this feature of the novel, and thereby giving the lie to Henry James's uncharacteristically unperceptive assessment of it.

The section on Betty Higden and her possible original in Mayhew is instructive of more than Toker says, though what she says is very helpful in understanding Dickens's approach to fiction and also some of his methods. For example, it could be said that he is recycling Mayhew. But what I really have in mind is how Dickens can convey to a knowing audience that he is including human and animal waste in the general term "dust," without having to say it. He signals other

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\*Reference: Leona Toker, "Decadence and Renewal in Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend*," *Connotations* 16.1-3 (2006/2007): 47-59.

For the original article as well as all contributions to this debate, please check the *Connotations* website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debtoker01613.htm>>.

reminders to his readership, what was on the streets of London to be picked up. The episode between Podsnap and the foreign gentleman is instructive in this regard. Podsnap refers to the marks of prosperity in the London streets, and the foreign gentleman thinks he is referring to horse droppings. It is a sly and forceful way for Dickens to show up Podsnapian pretensions and bolster his motifs as well. Another sign is when Sloppy throws Wegg into the dust cart, creating a splash. Dust does not splash.

One feature of this essay that disturbs me is its title. The word “decadence” seems to me inappropriate, and I believe it is used just once to describe Eugene Wrayburn. Through much of the rest of the essay Toker uses the much more suitable “degenerate,” though that might be too strong a word as well. A case might be made for the word “decadence,” but I think then another theme and pattern in *Our Mutual Friend* would have to be explored. It has to do with dependency. Mortimer Lightwood and Eugene Wrayburn are both dependent upon the good will of their fathers; they are entrapped and suspended by their gentility. Twemlow is in a similar circumstance, being dependent on the aristocratic relative who sustains him. There are many more instances in varied degrees and kinds—including Riah’s dependency on Fledgeby and the Harmon children’s dependency upon their father. Much of the action, as Toker suggests, has to do with escaping that dependency. Harmon Jr. does this by falling in love with the supposedly hateful woman his father wanted to force him to marry, and thus marrying her by his own willed act. Eugene frees himself from the trap of ‘respectability’ by marrying Lizzie. In a way this dependency implies a decadence associated with idleness and even purposelessness. Such dependency, one way or another, must be overcome.

Toker’s essay is a good contribution to the growing respect *Our Mutual Friend* is commanding, mostly, as I said earlier, because it appreciates the art that went into the novel.

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## Reanimation, Regeneration, Re-evaluation: Rereading *Our Mutual Friend*\*

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Leona Toker's essay "Decadence and Renewal in Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend*," published in a section under the somewhat ghoulish heading "Restored from Death," takes up the Jamesian disdain for Dickens's last novel as a product of an exhausted mine (though James seems to refer to a permanent exhaustion of *mind*), and suggests that the plot reveals an underlying trend of degeneration. This in a novel that has been taken as an exemplary tale of moral regeneration, beginning with John Harmon's rise from the dead in the river, a baptismal resurrection which slips out of one mystery that is never solved—the identity of the body fished out of the river,—into another—John Harmon's identity,—which becomes only too transparent, however much the author is at pains to conceal the secret. But not only James is dissatisfied with this "large loose baggy monster" (to borrow a phrase from the Preface to *The Tragic Muse* [*The Portable Henry James* 477]), and the feeble attempt at a Christian eschatology does not wash with many postmodern readers. As Toker points out, it is not John Harmon who changes his identity—he has been simply masquerading as someone else in order to submit Bella to the gold dust test (or, all that glitters is not love). Rather, Toker argues, it is Eugene Wrayburn who rises, like Lazarus, from his death-bed, transformed morally into a better person, worthy of marrying Lizzie Hexam.

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\*Reference: Leona Toker, "Decadence and Renewal in Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend*," *Connotations* 16.1-3 (2006/2007): 47-59.

For the original article as well as all contributions to this debate, please check the *Connotations* website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debtoker01613.htm>>.

Toker is not alone in shifting the weight of the plot to Eugene as an agent of regeneration. In her study of the “bioeconomics” of *Our Mutual Friend*, Catherine Gallagher has drawn attention to Eugene’s “suspended animation,” which, like John Harmon’s temporary “death,” involves being dumped, or “garbaged,” in the river, then restored to life which “allows the liberation of value” (109). Gallagher, too, prioritizes Eugene’s role in the parallel love plot, as he must be pulled from the river by a savior-lover, then “wound in cloth and placed in sepulchral darkness” (109). It is this return from death, this rescue from the body’s mere commodity value, which makes possible the “regenerative inversion” of the novel’s ghoulish opening scene (109), for Lizzie can now give value to the body rather than feeding off a cadaver that is her “meat and drink” (OMF 1.1: 15). This inversion puts Eugene in debt to Lizzie, rather than the other way round (as might have been expected in such a cross-class liaison), a debt he could have paid only in actually dying; in other words, as in Ruskin’s *Unto This Last*, “illness unto death brings wealth” (Gallagher 110).

I would argue that Ruskin’s *Unto This Last*, which Gallagher is reading as an interpretive key to Dickens’s novel, can give us the formulation which is missing from both new historicist and structuralist readings of *Our Mutual Friend*. In his unpopular series of essays, first published in *The Cornhill Magazine* in 1860, a few years before Dickens wrote his novel, Ruskin insisted on Christian principles of benevolence in response to the cruelty of Political Economy, in which wealth was power and price was detached from value. In adopting the utilitarian analogy of physiological circulation, Ruskin was arguing that Political Economy encouraged unequal distribution of wealth at the expense of the poor, whereas the health of the nation depended on an equal flow throughout the body: “There is one quickness of the current which comes of cheerful emotion or wholesome exercise; and another which comes of shame or of fever. There is a flush of the body which is full of warmth and life; and another which will pass into putrefaction” (*Unto This Last* 183). *Our Mutual Friend* similarly reconstitutes the organic body through its revaluation of society’s waste,

the outcasts of the city, at the expense of the idle rich. Redemption effects a *personal* transfiguration, not necessarily a metaphysical global transformation. It can only be sought in the fallen city, in a transformation of the experience of suffering and death into salvation within the city. This sounds somewhat like the Christian parable of the seed which must first die, though without the dark Dostoyevskyan mysticism of descent into sin and expiation from crime as in *Crime and Punishment* (conceived in 1865, the year of publication of Dickens's novel, but first published only in 1866). The vision is radical not in the narrow political sense, but in its Carlylean rejection of the utilitarian model of the diseased body of the nation and in the argument for reformation of the nation into an organic body that ideally responds to all its parts with mutual benevolence.

Toker would doubtlessly not disagree with such a view of Dickens's post-Romantic humanism, which is rendered in her view not so much in a desentimentalized mode as in overdetermined poetic justice. The reference to Romans 6:3-4 may be ironic when Gaffer Hexam is said to be "baptized unto Death" (OMF 1.14: 175) and his emergence from the filthy water of the Thames is not exactly an awakening into eternal life, yet the Christian rhetoric is unmistakable, if playful (Smith 163-64). Rogue Riderhood is also reanimated but achieves no resurrection, perhaps because he does not deserve one as an out-and-out villain, and other characters also get their just deserts. Renewal is both literal, in the recycling of waste in the Dust Heaps (not to be confused with the human waste collected from houses by the Night-Soil Men), and metaphorical, in the spiritual renewal through love of Bella, in one pair of lovers, and Eugene, in the other pair. The mutual influence of Henry Mayhew and Dickens has been recycled by critics a number of times (for example, Nelson; Dunn), but it should be noticed that Mayhew had an ethnographic, as well as commercial, interest in showing the usefulness of London's "wild tribes," its street and river people, while Dickens was concerned with a larger discourse about the decay of the city, which hinged on the literal as well as metaphorical recycling of waste. Metz does not think the dust mounds will ever

get carted away and sees no end to the entropy in which the characters are trapped, yet the novel does not end on a note of depression or resignation, but with vindication of Eugene's moral conversion and love over society gossips and *parvenus*, and it points to moral salvation in the salvage of the city's refuse (incidentally, Victorian readers would not have been too prudish to explore the sewers in *London Labour and London Poor* and would have got Dickens's crude joke at Mr. Podsnap's expense about the marks of the British constitution found in the horse dung on London's streets). However, the conclusion which Toker apparently reaches is quite the contrary, namely that *Our Mutual Friend* is a dark novel of deterioration, degeneration and decay, which is one reason why it had such a powerful effect upon T. S. Eliot when he was writing *The Waste Land*. Apart from reclaiming the marginalized laborers and other social outcasts, Toker concludes, *Our Mutual Friend* makes no space for the head-on confrontation with social problems and the flow of real life we find in *Nicholas Nickleby*, *David Copperfield*, or even *Bleak House*. In the end, John Harmon is triumphant, comes into money, and retreats into bourgeois success. We are left with teasing intellectual puzzles, with aesthetic effects felt more in meaning than in a powerful experience of the real.

It is, indeed, a novel suffering from an epidemic of deaths. It will be remembered that Ruskin (in "Fiction, Fair and Foul," 1880) blamed the mortality rate in *Bleak House* on the author's diseased city mind and his eagerness to cater for unhealthy urban tastes. On the other hand, the insistence on the certainty of death and the meting out of reward and punishment within the novelistic universe point to a belief in an otherworldly accountability that lends unseen meaning to the city's financial and moral economy. Dickens, declared Ruskin in *Modern Painters*, was one of those popular authors who had little patience for religious form, but pleaded for "simple truth and benevolence" (*Modern Painters* 259); if this is dressed up as the duty to do good which privileges the poor and meek, it is no less subversive of the dead Mammon-worship of the necropolis of ashes and dust.

I would suggest that the inversion in the novel of the hierarchy of social and economic value determined by class and gender achieves a carnivalesque effect of exposing the uselessness of the wasteful upper classes and the *nouveaux riches*, on the one hand, and the moral dignity as well as economic usefulness of London's diligent outcasts, on the other. The reversal of savagery and civilization is confirmed by the anatomist who, like Mr. Venus, scalps and scrapes the civilized body and finds it artificial. Mrs. Podsnap is described as an extinct animal whose bone structure would be a fine specimen for Professor Owen (OMF 1.2). Sir Richard Owen (1804-92) was the comparative anatomist and paleontologist famous for his articulation of an extinct giant ostrich from New Zealand. Owen's disagreement with Darwin over his theory of evolution and unwillingness to accept the doctrine of the descent of man from apes drew him into bitter disputes and public controversy. Dickens had known Owen, head of the Natural History Section at the British Museum and formerly professor of comparative anatomy and physiology at the Royal College of Surgeons, since the 1840s. The articulation by Venus of specimens is analytical as well as verbal, but applied to contemporary, non-extinct species in an effort to make coherent the whole body of the city (cf. Metz 63-64). Dickens's own satirical conclusion is that humans were not progressing in their natural evolution to some higher level of existence but regressing to a primeval swamp. It was Owen who coined the term dinosaur, and the sight of London's intellectual elite dining inside a dinosaur skeleton at the Crystal Palace during the 1851 Great Exhibition must have seemed an eloquent statement of irony about science and progress. Dickens seems to suggest in *Bleak House* and in *Our Mutual Friend* that modern London is submerged in a primeval "Dismal Swamp" (the title of the chapter describing the greedy mass descent on the newly rich Boffins). The imaginary Megalosaurus waddling up Holborn Hill in *Bleak House* neatly reverses the progressive timescale of Victorian ideology and natural history, and the departure from social Darwinism is met again in "On an Amateur Beat," when the Uncommercial Traveller points to the mud-prints that will show future paleontologists "the

public savagery of neglected children in the streets of [the] capital" (*Uncommercial Traveller* 347).<sup>1</sup>

The decay of the "Great Wen" was commonly acknowledged, not least in Carlyle's and Ruskin's resistance to the triumphalist confidence in progress and social amelioration at mid-century. The question is how is the city to be regenerated? Here, I would like to introduce Lewis Mumford's application of "Abbau" as a process of destruction necessary to urban development. As Lynda Nead has shown, at the time *Our Mutual Friend* was being written, London was being demolished, excavated, and dug up, as the Victoria Embankment and the first underground railway were being constructed, exposing the underside of the city and disrupting urban space. "Abbau" is the process of demolition, erosion, destruction, and loss of meaning of and in the city, and thus well describes the upheaval of the city in a chaotic and constant rebuilding, revealing London to be a sprawling metropolis with various Georgian and Regency accretions, not a planned architectural whole. The rebuilding, or "improvements," dictated by the construction of railways or road-widening were often destructive, sometimes displacing lower-class populations. In Paris, where Haussman's plans were somewhat more violent transformations of social and political space, to read the city was also to read its illegibility— "délire" in Flaubert's definition of reading the city in a delirium (qtd. in Hamon 2). The modern city was not a thing of beauty or a coherent whole, but divorced from the meaningful cultural forms of living handed down through the ages. Whether meaning or value could be adduced from the city experience did not, ultimately, depend on the mere aesthetic effect of the attraction of repulsion, but on whether in the higgledy-piggledy result of Abbau a redeeming vision of the city could be sustained. Like the chaotic upheaval of the uprooting of Stagg's Gardens resulting from the building of the railway in *Dombey and Son*, the stop-go "checks and balances" of Victorian progress is reflected in the unplanned flux of new suburban expansion described in *Our Mutual Friend*:



a toy neighbourhood taken in blocks out of a box by a child of particularly incoherent mind, and set up anyhow; here, one side of a new street; there, a large solitary public-house facing nowhere; here, another unfinished street already in ruins; there, a church; here, an immense new warehouse; there, a dilapidated old country villa; then, a medley of black ditch, sparkling cucumber-frame, rank field, richly cultivated kitchen-garden, brick viaduct, arch-spanned canal, and disorder of frowsiness and fog. As if the child had given the table a kick and gone to sleep. (2.1: 219)

Yet the view of “such a black shrill city [...] such a gritty city; such a hopeless city, with no rent in the leaden canopy of its sky” (OMF 1.12: 147), is that of the cynical Wildean wits Lightwood and Wrayburn, those two legal dust contractors (in Boffin’s joking expression), and the larger vision of the novel reveals a moral renewal of *vision*. The weak apocalypse implicit in Dickens’s ambivalent glimpses of a New Jerusalem, which Karl Ashley Smith perceives in the renovation of human relations in *Bleak House*, *Little Dorrit*, and *Great Expectations*, (Smith 217-18; cf. Welsh), is never fully developed in *Our Mutual Friend*, yet Jenny Wren’s other-worldly vision of neo-Wordsworthian innocence on Riah’s rooftop suggests a spirituality beyond the city’s corrupting commodity culture and serves warning on those, like Fascination Fledgeby, who are blind to the moral consequences of their actions.

“[...] And you see the clouds rushing on above the narrow streets, not minding them, and you see the golden arrows pointing at the mountains in the sky from which the wind comes, and you feel as if you were dead.” (OMF 2.5: 279)

Jenny calls the Good Samaritan Riah to come back up and be dead in his garden on the rooftops, and he sees her “looking down out of a Glory of her long bright radiant hair, and musically repeating to him, like a vision: ‘Come up and be dead! Come up and be dead!’” (OMF 2.5: 280). This rooftop vision of the heavenly city, of the peaceful tranquility of eternity, admittedly, merely hints in its scriptural references (John 3; Revelation 11, 12) at the possibility of a spiritual transcendence. Nevertheless, the vision offers the sole alternative to the dead life of the city.

Major improvements were under way at the close of Dickens's life, chief among them Joseph Bazalgette's monumental sewage construction which modernized the city by constructing a *system* of waste disposal and treatment, replacing the poorly regulated medieval sewers and cleaning up the Thames (see Halliday; Williams 70-73). But the city in *Our Mutual Friend* has not changed physically. The only perceptible transformation of its deadening money-economy appears to lie in the minimalist possibility of conceptualizing moral agency in the prison wasteland of Harmon's house and the muddy, polluted river, or the littered Sahara of suburbia, through which Wilfer makes his way home. The putative pastoral in the arbor atop Boffin's dust mound is pleasant but facetious. Eugene, it seems to me, is an ambivalent Abel assailed by a seething Cain (Bradley Headstone) associated with the dead and mechanical universe of utilitarianism (like Teufelsdröckh in *Sartor Resartus*, cf. Qualls 214), and too hesitant to be sure of mending himself or the world. Indeed, no one character, not even the prophetic Riah or the genial Boffin, seems to carry the weight of a redeeming role. It is, nevertheless, in the city's quasi-apocalyptic self-destruction ("Abbau") that Dickens seeks moral redemption and social renewal.

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#### NOTE

<sup>1</sup>In *Hard Times* each of the little Gradgrinds has "dissected the Great Bear like a Professor Owen" (1.3: 9)—an example of how Science has banished nursery rhymes and the Fancy of childhood. See "Owen's Museum," *All the Year Round*, 27 Sept. 1862, among other popular presentations of Owen's ideas in Dickens's journal. See also Sage 219-20. For the Darwinian context of *Our Mutual Friend* see Morris 180-82; Fulweiler believes *Our Mutual Friend* follows the pattern of the "mutual relations" of species in Darwin's *The Origin of Species* (1859), but far from applauding the success of natural selection, Dickens opposes both Malthusian and Darwinian theories of evolution to project a moral community of individuals. Yet Darwin was equally reading Dickens's anatomy of the bleak competitive chaos of Victorian society at the mercy of rapacious beasts of prey (55-56).

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## Lowell's Tropes of Falling, Rising, Standing: A Response to Frank J. Kearful\*

HENRY HART

Frank Kearful has written an insightful essay on some of Lowell's fundamental preoccupations in *Lord Weary's Castle*. I was impressed by the critic's investigation of Lowell's poetics—of his tropes, metrical patterns, rhymes, and allusions. I was also impressed by the way he explained Lowell's idiosyncratic Christianity. Lowell's religious beliefs were always eccentric (he once called himself a "Christian atheist" [Mariani 359]), and Kearful helps us understand how he expressed those beliefs in one of his most overtly religious books. Since the critical consensus has been that Lowell's dense, forbidding style in *Lord Weary's Castle* was a mistake, and that the freer, more accessible, more overtly autobiographical style of *Life Studies* was a correction, it's noble of Kearful to pay tribute to the book that launched Lowell's career. In my opinion, *Lord Weary's Castle* is Lowell's most consistently accomplished book. All his other books, including *Land of Unlikeness*, which was published in a limited edition shortly before *Lord Weary's Castle*, contain masterful poems, but no book is as consistently brilliant as *Lord Weary's Castle*.

As a response to Kearful's essay, I'd like to make a number of comments that point to ways his discussions might be expanded. Since Lowell studied under and was deeply influenced by the Southern Agrarians John Crowe Ransom and Allen Tate, it would be interesting to explore how Lowell's obsession with 'standing' and taking ideo-

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\*Reference: Frank J. Kearful, "'Stand and live': Tropes of Falling, Rising, Standing in Robert Lowell's *Lord Weary's Castle*," *Connotations* 17.1 (2007/2008): 29-60.

For the original article as well as all contributions to this debate, please check the *Connotations* website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debkearful01701.htm>>.

logical 'stands' was guided by that famous Agrarian manifesto *I'll Take My Stand* (1930), which contained contributions from Ransom and Tate. Lowell in *Lord Weary's Castle* (and in his other books) wrestled with the proper stands that he and other citizens should take toward various religious, political, aesthetic, and personal issues. He often asked himself what his proper stance should be toward America's Puritan heritage, toward World War II and other wars, toward formal poetry, toward his family, toward his marriages, and then delineated his complicated stances in his poems. Torn by different impulses, he found it nearly impossible to take a firm, unambiguous stand on anything. His tempestuous mind was destined to fluctuate dialectically between opposed factions. As his friend Robert Frost would say, his poems were "momentary stay[s] against confusion" (Parini 324). They were orderly—and sometimes disorderly—expressions of the disorder that he found raging inside and outside himself. His bipolar disorder, which was cyclic in nature, determined that his life would be a series of manic highs and depressive lows, and that his stands would only be momentary still-points in an ongoing cycle.

Lowell's complex stances are evident in "The Exile's Return," which Kearful helpfully illuminates at the beginning of his essay. As in many of his other poems about World War II, Lowell takes an ambivalent stand vis-à-vis his country's effort to defeat Nazi Germany. He tends to envision enemies as one, and he does so here. War corrupts victor and victim, winner and loser, he implies. "[T]orn-up tilestones crown the victor" (3, l. 9), he writes, and they crown the victim as well. As Kearful points out, Lowell felt like an enemy and exile in his own country after taking a stand against the U.S. government's policy of indiscriminate bombing of German cities. He served time in jail, as his poem "Memories of West Street and Lepke" in *Life Studies* attests, for making his "manic statement" (79, l. 15) and "telling off" (l. 16) President Roosevelt. But it's also important to recognize that in his saner moments before publishing his "manic statement" and refusing to fight, Lowell tried to enlist numerous times.

Lowell's ambivalence toward the war effort resembled Thomas Mann's, which Kearful explains in his analysis of the poem's many allusions to the German author's novella *Tonio Kröger*. Lowell was also of two minds about the peace and restoration efforts in Germany that followed the defeat of Hitler's Nazis. In his discussion of the "lily-stands" (3, l. 21) that "Burgeon the risen Rhineland" (l. 22) and the "rough / Cathedral [that] lifts its eye" (ll. 22-23) at the end of the poem, Kearful is right to underscore the lilies' Christian associations with fertility and resurrection, and to connect the cathedral with Yeats's prophecy in "The Second Coming" that Christianity in the new millennium will be born again as an apocalyptic beast. "Burgeon" means "to bud or sprout" (*OED* "burgeon" *v.* 1. *intr.*) and "to shoot out, put forth as buds" (*v.* 2. *trans.*), and this sprouting and shooting out would seem wholly auspicious after the collapse of Germany if it weren't for Lowell's tendency to view rising as simply a stage in a cycle that leads ineluctably to falling. When Lowell describes "the unseasoned liberators roll[ing] / Into the Market Square" (3, ll. 19-20), he is both celebrating the Allied liberators who find new life flourishing and grimly intimating that the lilies of peace produce the seeds of future wars. Everything in Lowell's poetry, whether good or bad, rolls with the seasons. In Lowell's double perspective, "lily-stands" could also refer to market stands—like hot-dog stands—that turn religious symbols (the lilies) into profitable commodities. According to Lowell, his Agrarian mentors, and their sometime champion Ezra Pound, the roots of war are entangled in capitalist commerce. Surveying the ruins of one war with a cold, prophetic eye, Lowell sees signs of hopeful restoration as well as signs that the old commercial, militaristic culture has not ended, that it is simply beginning a new revolution on the historical cycle. His reference to Dante's *Inferno* at the end of the poem confirms his view that hell and heaven, like death and new life, are merely stages in a perpetual dialectic. "Much difficult journeying lies ahead" (35), as Kearful asserts.

In many of his early and late poems, Lowell inveighed against the capitalist's unbridled lust for money and the many evils it caused. He

criticized capitalism from a Christian point of view, and he also criticized Christianity for condoning and sanctioning capitalism. So Kearful is astute to emphasize in his analysis of the poem "Mother and Son" that commerce and Christianity have often been incestuous bedfellows: "The dangling of the golden watch-chain on the Holy Book symbolizes emblematically the liaison of Calvinism and commerce that fostered the rise of the same New England mercantile class whose destruction the son fantasized in 'Rebellion'" (39). Lowell's judgmental perspective is Catholic in the sense that it is universal. He finds Calvinism and commerce flourishing in ruined Germany as well as prosperous America, and he judges both countries harshly. He places traditional enemies in the scales and finds that their vices are about equal.

Kearful investigates Lowell's references to Judgment Day in the third section of his essay. His close reading of "The Dead in Europe" shows how Lowell invokes Christian expectations of redemption and salvation only to deny or parody them. Once again, Lowell judges victors and victims to be more alike than unlike. The horrific realities of war, he contends, degrade and dehumanize all sides. In the midst of extreme savagery, Christian calls for peace and order are largely futile. They "proved [in]sufficient in the most recent European war to preserve the unity of Christian Europe, much less the lives of those who 'fell down'" and are "'married / Under the rubble'" (45), Kearful declares. The marriage Lowell depicts is a grotesque facsimile of the apocalyptic marriage that St. John envisioned in the Book of Revelation, which Kearful quotes: "And I saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband" (Rev 21:2; Kearful 47). Although Kearful notes that this "mystic bridal theme takes on personalized form" (47) in Lowell's poem "Where the Rainbow Ends," he might expand on this by saying something about Lowell's tormented marriage to Jean Stafford. Lowell dedicated *Lord Weary's Castle* to Stafford, and in a number of the poems he refers to his and Stafford's marital agony.

During his manic periods, Lowell liked to play the role of Jehovah at the Last Judgment, just as he liked to play the roles of all patriarchal strongmen—from Hitler to Napoleon to Caligula. In his poems, however, he tended to highlight the painful consequences of his manic pursuits and otherworldly ideals. If he entertained the possibility of a mystic marriage as an orthodox Christian might, he typically juxtaposed the apocalyptic ideal against the painful realities of his own marriage. The zealous pursuit of a marriage between heaven and earth usually leads to historical tragedies, he implies, just as his own marriages inevitably succumbed to divorces, separations, and chronic anguish.

So where does Lowell's rainbow—symbol of God's promise not to destroy humanity after the flood—end? Lowell ends his most ambitious poem in *Lord Weary's Castle*, "The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket," which is also about World War II and his New England heritage, with the ambiguous line: "The Lord survives the rainbow of His will" (14, l. VII.17). In the Darwinian world of wars and struggles for survival, according to Lowell, God survives as an enduring symbol of power and mystery. He also survives his will or covenant—his promise not to destroy the world again—and oversees history's innumerable wars. Kearful is right to stress the auspicious end of "Where the Rainbow Ends" by noting: "the olive branch symbolizes a peace to be struck, in a newly found spirit of wisdom, between the poet and the Boston / New England culture he had excoriated throughout *Lord Weary's Castle*" (50). The last sentence of the poem is: "Stand and live, / The dove has brought an olive branch to eat" (69, ll. 29-30). If this is Eucharistic and desirable, it is also slightly repugnant. Who, after all, would want to eat an olive branch? Olives are obviously more palatable than the branches that produce them. The olive branch might represent peace, but from Lowell's typological perspective the branch also evokes the Tree of Knowledge and the "tree" or cross on which Christ was crucified. The fall and the crucifixion initiated redemptions and resurrections, but even as Lowell accentuates the latter he grimly bears witness to the former. These Christian tropes and their secular



versions in Lowell's later poetry, as Kearful argues, "affirm capacities of human endurance" (51). They affirm the capacity (or at least the struggle) to cope with the cyclical nature of life, which in Lowell's case was made more difficult by the cyclical nature of his manic-depression. When Kearful points out that Lowell had the last sentence of "Where the Rainbow Ends" chiseled on his father's gravestone (51), however, it is hard to read this directive as anything but wishful-thinking and ironic. Lowell, who generally despised his father, knew very well that as a corpse in a coffin his father could neither stand, live, nor eat.

At the end of his essay Kearful acknowledges that Lowell's Catholicism waned after the publication of *Lord Weary's Castle*. It might be more accurate to say that Lowell's Christianity, which was always highly personal and idiosyncratic, became less overt and more secularized. As it became less of an obsession, his poems became less packed with Christian symbols and references to Christian scriptures and rituals. But he constantly addressed Christian issues in his later poetry, usually in a sardonic, subversive way. With this in mind, I'm skeptical of Kearful's claim that in the *Life Studies* poem "Skunk Hour" Lowell "records no quasi-mystical experience" (51), and that in other poems he entirely repudiates mystical or other aspects of Christianity. "Skunk Hour," as Kearful probably knows, alludes to St. John of the Cross's famous mystical treatise *The Dark Night*. As in so many of his earlier and later poems, Lowell writes a kind of parody of the mystic's archetypal journey through a crucifying, purgatorial 'dark night of the soul' toward divine love and transcendental union—or communion—with God. In fact, in "Skunk Hour" Lowell composes a kind of minimalist *Waste Land* that, like Eliot's poem, records an excruciating journey that ends with oblique references to mystical transcendence. *The Waste Land's* final words—"Shantih shantih shantih"—refer to the sense of transcendental peace that mystics experience during union with the divine. In the more overtly Christian poetry that Eliot published after *The Waste Land*, he often made direct allusions to the Christian mystics who provided a way to escape or heal

his marital woes. Likewise, Lowell transcends his various romantic troubles during his "[o]ne dark night" (84, l. 25) when he stands "on top" (l. 43) of his back steps and witnesses what he considers to be a heroic skunk thriving in a waste land.

Just as Eliot's persona suffers from a troubled marriage and is on a quest for a Holy Grail—for a sacred union or communion to replace the profane and agonizing union with his wife—Lowell searches for grail-like signs of divine love and mystical union on a local Golgotha near his vacation home in Maine. Unfortunately, on "the hill's skull" (84, l. 26; Golgotha derives from an Aramaic word meaning "place of skull"), he finds only profane "love-cars" (l. 27) that remind him of his problematic marriage. The lovers on the funereal hill have sex in their cars and listen to popular songs on the radio about "careless Love" (l. 32) that will "Make you kill yourself and your sweetheart too" (cf. "Careless Love"). Although Kearful contends that "Lowell no longer proclaims 'I breathe the ether of my marriage feast'" (Kearful 51), as he does in "Where the Rainbow Ends," Lowell *does* breathe a kind of repellent "ether" at a waste-land version of the mystical marriage feast. This is the "ether" (the gas sprayed or that can be sprayed) by the skunk who "jabs her wedge-head in a cup / of sour cream" (84, ll. 46-47). Coming after the early stanzas that dramatize a sterile society in which people are isolated, dead, and unmarried (things are so bad in the Maine town that the destitute gay decorator would "rather marry" [83, l. 24] than keep working at his impecunious job), the "mother skunk with her column of kittens" (84, l. 45) appears to be the only hero in a landscape populated by dysfunctional humans. The mother skunk represents the questor who has found a grail of fertile sexuality and sustaining food in the human waste land. She has taken a strong stand and "will not scare" (l. 48). She may be a humorous parody of the Christian questor who searches for the grail that Christ used at the Last Supper and that initiated the ritual of Eucharist, but to Lowell's disillusioned psyche she still represents an ideal of tenacity and productivity.

Lowell's comment in the last stanza of "Skunk Hour"—"I stand on top / of our back steps and breathe the rich air" (ll. 43-44)—is as ironic as many of his other comments in the poem. He may be standing, but he has fallen a long way if he can only find examples of Christian heroism, the Holy Grail, and mystical union in a skunk swilling sour cream from a cup discarded in the garbage. Some of his other major poems produce their dramatic and often sardonic effects by juxtaposing political and religious ideals against the repugnant realities from which they rise and to which they fall. As Kearful asserts, Lowell praises the capacity to stand in the middle of this cycle of rising and falling. He struggles to take a stand for his principles at the "still point of the turning world" (9, l. II.16), as Eliot would say in *Four Quartets*. But, as Kearful makes abundantly clear, Lowell repeatedly failed to maintain his stance, his balance, and repeatedly fell. Luckily, he was able to recuperate long enough from his manic ascents and depressive falls to write enduring poems about the turning world to which he was, for better or worse, inextricably wedded.

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## Truths of Storytelling: A Response to Burkhard Niederhoff\*

JANICE FIAMENGO

Burkhard Niederhoff has put his finger on one of the most interesting differences between Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* and *Alias Grace*. In *Surfacing*, the narrator's quest to survive as an emotionally responsive and responsible adult involves uncovering the truth—or at least *a* truth—about herself and her past; in *Alias Grace*, evading the truth may be necessary to the main character's psychological survival. In Niederhoff's concluding words, both novels are about a woman attempting to “abandon her role as victim,” but in the latter work, “[t]he struggle for survival and against victimisation no longer involves the recognition of truth” (87). One might go further to suggest that *Alias Grace* represents truth as inaccessible or perhaps even irrelevant. At Niederhoff's implied invitation, I want to consider the different sorts of truth—or refusals of truth—the characters choose, and what such narrative choices suggest about the fictional worlds their author has created.

The differing resolutions and emphases of the novels may be due in large part to a difference of genre. *Surfacing*, for all its debts to the murder mystery and ghost story, is essentially a quest romance, in which the woman hero undergoes a physical and spiritual ordeal in order to gain insight into herself and her world. The novel's various motifs of journeying—to the North, into childhood memories, and into madness—lead us to understand the narrator's search for her

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\*Reference: Burkhard Niederhoff, “The Return of the Dead in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* and *Alias Grace*,” *Connotations* 16.1-3 (2006/2007): 60-91.

For the original article as well as all contributions to this debate, please check the *Connotations* website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debniederhoff01613.htm>>.

father as a journey into her own “home ground, foreign territory” (12), the rocky terrain of self. The journey involves a painful but potentially restorative movement from denial to self-knowledge. As many critics have noted, the dive into the lake in search of the rock paintings her father was mapping is symbolically a dive into her unconscious, the place of repressed knowledge, as well as a baptismal death in preparation for rebirth. Experiencing “gratitude” (155) and “feeling” (156) immediately after the dive, she becomes convinced that “everything is waiting to become alive” (170), and her encounters with the ghosts of her parents and dead child equip her to face the future. Niederhoff points out that although the novel’s conclusion is open-ended, “some sort of change, some sort of movement from death to life, has certainly occurred” (74).

Significantly, the narrator’s struggle to survive, “to refuse to be a victim” (206), involves not resistance to external injustice, though such injustice is acknowledged (“the Americans” do “exist” and “must be dealt with” [203]), but recognition of her own failures of responsibility and self-understanding: “I have to recant, give up the old belief that I am powerless and because of it nothing I can do will ever hurt anyone” (206). In other words, the narrator must come to see that she has preferred victimhood—preferred to believe herself “classified as wounded” (94)—because such a belief has been easier than accepting her personal culpability for various failures and acts of violence. These include her lies, passivity, and abandonment of her parents, but especially the abortion she blamed on her ex-lover and on the world at large. Niederhoff’s reference to her “irrational but all too understandable fear that her unborn child was conscious of what she did to it” (66) perhaps too quickly dismisses the moral implications that the novel squarely addresses, for it is not the possible consciousness of the unborn child that has haunted the narrator (though such a concern would not be irrational), but the moral meaning of her choice to destroy human life. “Whatever it is,” she thinks after the dive, “part of myself or a separate creature, I killed it” (153). Facing and accepting

her guilt, and recognizing the humanity of those she has accused of betraying her, are central to her reclaiming of choice and will.

In contrast, the main character in *Alias Grace* is a shadowy figure, a postmodern autobiographer who hides as much as she reveals about herself and may or may not know the truth about the murders for which she has been imprisoned. She is almost certainly fabricating a usable past for Dr. Simon Jordan, whom she both mistrusts and wants to please. Heidi Darroch has suggested that Jordan himself “unwittingly condition[s] Grace’s narrative” (117) through his responses of interest, boredom, or excitement, and that their interactions thus provide a glimpse of the complexities of modern trauma therapy. On such a reading, Grace’s narrative can be judged as neither true nor false but instead is a reflection of both characters’ desires: Dr. Jordan’s for medical authority, Grace’s for pardon, for a personal story, and for a listener.

To aid his “pragmatic” (77) focus on how characters survive their pasts, Niederhoff accepts the hypnosis scene “at face value” (76) as evidence that Grace has had to split herself into two selves, the second unknown to the first, to survive her traumatic experiences, but I am not sure that the pragmatic aspects of her story can be thus separated from the novel’s interpretative challenges. The ambiguities of the hypnotism scene, especially given what we know about Dr. DuPont’s previous connection with Grace and his abilities as a hypnotist and ventriloquist, are inextricable from the narrative playfulness and skepticism that characterize the novel as a whole. Such playfulness makes it difficult to analyze the effects of Grace’s “knowing or not knowing the truth” (77). Her real memories and self-knowledge may be, as Sharon R. Wilson suggests, to some extent “beside the point” (133) in a historical murder mystery constructed to thwart readerly certainty. The climactic hypnotism scene is satisfying not so much because it reveals the truth of the murders (in fact, it offers very partial answers) but because it provides a resolution to the mystery of Grace’s past that supports a variety of conflicting interpretations. On

the level of plot, there is no better example of Atwood's ability to incite and then frustrate readerly curiosity.

Niederhoff argues that, if Grace were to find out the truth revealed in the hypnosis scene, "her mental balance would be in jeopardy" (85) and that therefore "not knowing the truth" (87) is her only hope for survival. But just as we do not know the truth of her past, we also do not know that her mental balance is *not* in jeopardy at the novel's end. Her dreams and hallucinations of "huge dark-red flowers" (5) are linked to images of Nancy's murder, seeming to indicate that Grace is haunted by blood. Her eerily calm belief, expressed in her letter to Dr. Jordan, that either a tumour or a fetus is growing within her suggests her sense of her body as under occupation by another. She reports to Dr. Jordan that she is relatively content in her marriage to James Walsh, but the assessment is undermined by details of the sadomasochistic eroticism that characterizes the relationship; the Tree of Paradise quilt linking Mary, Nancy, and Grace seems to point to a permanent fixation on the women's bloody deaths—though critics have also read it as symbolizing female solidarity or reconciliation.<sup>1</sup> In a novel built on puzzles and surprises, we would not be particularly surprised if a novelistic coda were to reveal Grace's murder of Walsh, or her own suicide, so perilous seems her escape. Unlike in *Surfacing*, where the narrator has moved forward at least a "scrupulously earned inch" (Struthers 66), no emotional or psychological development can be observed in Grace, and it is difficult to say whether or how she has achieved more than "[b]are [s]urvival" (*Survival* 41).

We are back to the matter of genre. Despite its interest in the procedures and theories associated with nineteenth-century psychoanalysis, and despite its formal structure as a confessional narrative, *Alias Grace* is not seriously interested in character, emphasizing instead the bewildering proliferation of identities evident in the accounts of Grace's crime, a proliferation that leads her, innocently or slyly, to wonder "how can I be all of these different things at once?" (23). Niederhoff comments on Grace that, while "no angel, [...] she comes across as a remarkably honest, sane and considerate human being"

(76), but the very thinness of this description suggests how little the reader is in a position to know her, how she eludes us as a character, just as she slips away from Dr. Jordan's attempt to uncover her memories. We cannot imagine from Grace the *Surfacing* narrator's confession of her sense of "sickening complicity, sticky as glue, [...] as though I had been there and watched without saying No or doing anything to stop it" (140-41). Such a confession is, in fact, about the best that Grace *could* say for herself, given her silence about McDermott's stated intention to murder Nancy Montgomery. Grace does not express guilt or self-reproach, or even much regret; and her most characteristic emotion is a kind of suppressed pleasure in Dr. Jordan's visits. Overall, her lack of curiosity or anxiety about her past, while necessary for the narrative mystery to be maintained, makes it difficult for the reader to respond to her as a fully realized character.

*Alias Grace* is a historical novel that stresses, in postmodern style, the mystery of past events. In a lecture at the University of Ottawa in 1996, Atwood noted of her historical research that "There is—as I increasingly came to discover—no more reason to trust something written down on paper then than there is now" (*In Search* 32), and she claimed to have been naïve in once believing that "'non-fiction' meant 'true'" (30)—with the implication that she has abandoned such a belief. With numerous nods in the direction of historiographic metafiction, *Alias Grace* conducts a dazzling experiment in narrative reconstruction, choosing a mysterious murder case in which an abundance of newspaper reports and first-person accounts swirl around a blank center rich in storytelling possibilities; it is precisely the withholding of Grace's inner self, her constant depiction of her life as a narrative made by others according to their desires (cf. *Alias* 27) that makes possible the sleight-of-hand Atwood handles so superbly, in which every historical document is exposed as arbitrary or partial, and the first-person narrative purporting to solve the mystery is riddled with gaps, ambiguities, and inconclusive references to "what has been written down" (22). And for all its undoubted accomplishments and narrative heft (it is a longer novel than *Surfacing*), it seems a slighter



artistic achievement, perhaps precisely because of its orientation to the truths of history. In the pages that follow, I will attempt to defend this judgement.

As a novel about a woman's search for truth, *Surfacing* supports an abundance of diverse, even contradictory, interpretations while never seeming simply evasive. Many scholars, recognizing the quest archetype that structures the narrative, have sought to explain precisely what truth the narrator has found by her journey's end—whether of human frailty (Campbell), female power (Grace), animal nature (Baer), or shamanic vision (Ross). Such critics tend to see the narrator as having gained an understanding of herself and her society that may be sufficient—and is certainly necessary—to change her life for the better. Other critics find the ending's emphasis on mortality (Schaeffer), cultural fragmentation (Guédon), and irony (Lecker) far less hopeful. Susan Fromberg Schaeffer, for example, argues that the truth confronted by the narrator is the “unacceptable fact” (319) of mortality and the related fact that human beings are killers only imperfectly redeemed by love. Such an understanding leaves the narrator wiser but no better equipped than before to live in the modern world. Debates about the novel's meaning not only indicate the many interpretations it can sustain but also suggest its broadly religious dimension: its interest in whether and how truth can be found in a culture that “refuse[s] to worship” and “consumes but does not give thanks” (*Surfacing* 150).

In *Alias Grace* too, divergent readings are certainly possible—are of the essence—but in their mutual exclusivity, they offer merely a number of possible solutions to the novel's narrative puzzle. Grace may be a schizophrenic victim unaware of her alternate personality, and therefore “neither conscious at the time of the murder [...] nor responsible for her actions therein” (*Alias* 433), or a deceptive sociopath who is “devoid of moral faculties” (435). Or she may be a girl who has struggled to survive against the odds, using the resources available—violence, sexuality, story-telling—to keep herself from harm. She cannot be all three. Potential evidence for the various interpretations

is supplied but never confirmed, and Grace's words about herself and the murders are maddeningly inconclusive, providing sources of readerly pleasure that do not, however, help us with the larger questions about historical knowledge or moral judgement raised by the novel. These larger questions are, as I discuss below, already decided—and reductively so—from the first pages.

In pursuing its large questions, *Surfacing* is a counter-intuitive novel unafraid to challenge contemporary orthodoxies. Although generations of feminist readers have insisted that it is not an anti-abortion novel (with some going so far as to dismiss the abortion as “real or imagined or simply a lie” [Rigney 161]), it is a novel in which a woman's decision to kill her unborn child is presented as both a sign of her emotional immaturity and a cause of lasting psychological turmoil. At a time of flourishing nationalism and anti-Americanism—Al Purdy's insouciant *The New Romans: Candid Canadian Opinions of the U.S.* was published just a few years earlier—the novel declares Canada and the United States far more alike than different: cultures of technology and death that “had turned against the gods” (165) in valuing only “the conquest of human and non-human nature” (Grant 57). And at a time when the feminist movement was asserting the centrality of self-determination and sexual liberation for women, the novel suggests that such freedom, symbolized most memorably by the image of genitals “detached like two kitchen appliances and copulat[ing] in mid-air” (*Surfacing* 162), carried with it new sources of alienation and unhappiness, particularly for women. Concerned less with male chauvinism or American imperialism than with the universal problem of “original sin” (Gibson 13),<sup>2</sup> the novel insists that neither reason nor any of the available routes to secular virtue (organic farming, avant-garde filmmaking, free love) will be adequate counters to human depravity, which the narrator comes to suspect is “in us too, [...] innate” (142). On a number of levels, then, the novel articulates unpalatable truths.

In contrast, *Alias Grace* takes up a range of fairly uncontroversial positions. Its focus on the suffering of the poor, its attack on the male

medical establishment—especially the attempt to control women's bodies and desires—and its sympathetic though uncommitted interest in repressed memory syndrome<sup>3</sup> all fit comfortably into both feminist-academic and popular conceptions. Even the novel's declared skepticism about knowing the past, amidst a plethora of material detail and vivid scenes, coexists not uncomfortably (if illogically) with a commitment to certain ideological truths. Atwood's feminist-influenced postmodernism tends to reserve its scorn for the 'master' narratives of history (elite men's accounts, medical or state documents), while affirming as true those stories and perspectives it finds more congenial.

In particular, Grace's first-person story of survival (as distinct from her narrative for Dr. Jordan) is rhetorically shielded from the critical scrutiny to which many of the other narratives are exposed. "People dressed in a certain kind of clothing are never wrong," she observes of the black-coated doctors and psychiatrists who examined her in the Asylum (32). The comment reveals her contempt for their power, which she perceives to be based on status rather than ability, and readers are encouraged to conclude that she has been treated in a disrespectful, probably abusive, manner by such men. To further puncture the moral and scientific authority of the male medical profession, Grace adds irreverently: "Also they never fart" (32). Whether or not such comments have any historical basis in the records of impoverished immigrant women in Upper Canada (which seems unlikely), the ribald and iconoclastic voice, not unlike Atwood's own in her poetry, carries a ring of truth.

In other words, while readers know that Atwood is writing fiction, we are encouraged to believe that she reveals an essential historical reality, a truth deeper than fact: the ever-present threat of sexual violence against which the lower-class woman fought for her survival. Nothing in the novel mitigates or complicates the portrait. The predatory behaviour of Grace's doctors is paralleled in the verbal harassment Grace endures in her walks from the Penitentiary to the Governor's House with two prison keepers who taunt her sexually. She

parries their insults, having become accustomed, through her brutal father and exploitative employers, to men's ways. When Dr. Jordan begins his visits, she knows he must want something from her, and indeed he is little different from the other men she has learned to mistrust: while priding himself on his dedication to the science of mental disorder, he becomes erotically attracted to Grace, fantasizing about her and condemning himself with puerile self-justifications: "He means her well, he tells himself. He thinks of it as a rescue, surely he does" (322). Male violence frames the novel's window onto the past.

Largely unquestioned are the assumptions and approved narratives of Atwood's own historical moment: that memories of trauma are likely to be repressed or forgotten (despite significant evidence to the contrary<sup>4</sup>); that sexual morality is a cultural construct perpetuated only for repressive ends (Grace's first observation in the novel—of ladies' wire crinolines, which are "like birdcages" [22]—satirizes the cultural prohibition on the display of women's legs [cf. 22]); that freedom involves self-empowerment through resistance to social roles. Other potential narratives of the past drop away: the religious faith that propelled the Reverend Verringer and others to campaign for Grace's pardon receives no serious attention, portrayed merely as a mask for social climbing or sexual prurience. The institutions established by helping organizations for unwed mothers and abandoned children, which might have provided an alternative to abortion or starvation for Mary, are not depicted. No serious attempt is made to portray the cultural, political, spiritual, and religious currents that caused people to gather in darkened rooms to commune with the dead, to commit their lives to the study of psychiatric disorders, or to campaign for prison reform.

Is it unfair to make such a criticism? Atwood has frankly declared that "*Alias Grace*, although set in the mid-nineteenth century, is, of course, a very contemporary book" (*In Search* 36-37), and it is especially contemporary, even predictable, in its focus on the voice of a marginalized woman, her knowledge, her resistance: "There is a good

deal that can be seen slantwise, especially by the ladies" (229), Grace relates, in a narrative allusion to Emily Dickinson.<sup>5</sup> Grace's comment highlights, in a manner now compellingly familiar, or tiresome, the feminist perspective on women's response to Victorian strictures: "They can also see through veils, and window curtains, and over the tops of fans; and it is a good thing they can see in this way, or they would never see much of anything" (229). Where scholars have debated the novel's representations, the debate is about the extent to which Atwood validates the woman's story. Herb Wyile, for example, has commended the novel for extending agency to Grace "through her skillful, compelling, and ultimately ambiguous narrative" (80); Renée Hulan finds that in emphasizing the powerlessness of women of her class, it does not adequately recognize their struggle (452-53). But no one has questioned the novel's depiction of pervasive male violence as one of the few objective facts of the past, in relation to which the killing of Thomas Kinnear may be seen as a legitimate act of social protest: "So that's one less of them" (*Alias* 64).<sup>6</sup>

While seeming to assert the provisionality and "pluralism" (Wilson 133) of historical truth, then, the novel is certain of at least one thing. Its position on history parallels Grace's statement about the Bible. She thinks, with prescient skepticism, that the Bible "*may* have been thought out by God [emphasis mine] but [...] was written down by men. And like everything men write down, such as the newspapers, they got the main story right but some of the details wrong" (459). Like much else in the novel, the statement withholds as much as it reveals, causing readers to wonder which part of the "main story" the newspapers got right, yet few readers will doubt that the novel's "main story" is its "tale of patriarchal abuse and upper-class privilege" (Wyile 74). Ironically, then, the novel *is* about the past and its truths.

Atwood wrote in the "Author's Afterword" to *Alias Grace* that "the written accounts [of the murders] are so contradictory that few facts emerge as unequivocally 'known'" (467). Such a mystery is ideal for a novelist, leaving her "free to invent" from the "mere hints and out-

right gaps in the records" (467). But Atwood has done more than this, for where the facts of the past do not fit her picture, she goes beyond playing with possibilities to invent history itself. When Dr. Jordan muses about the reasons why women become prostitutes, he contrasts his more humane understanding with the censorious determinism of contemporary social theory, which holds that "perverse lusts and [...] neurasthenic longings" drive "degenerate" women into the trade (365). Dr. Jordan's own view, based on interactions with prostitutes, is that "prostitutes are motivated less by depravity than by poverty" (365). The unwary reader will likely accept Atwood's portrayal as true: that condemnation of prostitutes as depraved degenerates was widespread and uncontested in the Victorian period.

As scholars of the period have shown, however, Dr. Jordan's progressive view was far from unique or even new. Victorian attitudes to prostitution ranged across a wide spectrum, and harsh stigmatization was certainly not absent, but the majority of commentators were sympathetic to women who sold their bodies out of economic need. In 1850, the commentator W. R. Greg published a review article on "Prostitution" in the *Westminster Review* that decisively rejected the notion that prostitutes were motivated by sexual desire; Greg asserted that poverty was "the prime determining cause" (Anderson 44). As Michael Mason notes in his comprehensive analysis of Victorian sexual attitudes, a majority of reformers of the 1840s—whether religious or secular—saw prostitution as primarily an economic issue (98) and employed a "rhetoric of non-condemnation" (99) to describe the women they sought to assist. Atwood's historical reconstruction thus depends upon an ahistorical—and comfortable—conception of the perfidies of the past, giving the lie to her claim that "when there was a solid fact, I could not alter it" (*In Search* 35). It is a minor slip, but it perhaps suggests the extent to which Atwood had pre-determined her historical account. Such is the power of our ideas about the past—in this case of the smug indifference of male religious and civic leaders—that they become for us as immutable as truth. *Alias Grace* suggests that correct belief is more important than historical truth. "The past

belongs to us," Atwood concluded her 1996 lecture, "because we are the ones who need it" (*In Search* 39).

*Surfacing* is concerned throughout with the distinction between truth and lies of various sorts, whether pernicious or merely comfortable. "If you tell your children that God doesn't exist they will be forced to believe you are the god," observes the narrator (112). The father's crusading rationalism has been its own kind of lie, damaging his daughter; his gift to her near the novel's end is the revelation that truth is to be found only "at the end, after the failure of logic" (156), and he dies seeking it. David is particularly repulsive and possibly unredeemable because his many clichés and slogans cover over the core "where he was true" (163). Through such references, the novel insists that the truth be pursued: the narrator will search for a form of survival that need not involve delusions of innocence.

In *Alias Grace*, story-telling itself seems to become the means to survival, independent of the truth about self or world. Mary Whitney's advice to Grace stands as the novel's final word on lying: "as Mary Whitney used to say, a little white lie such as the angels tell is a small price to pay for peace and quiet" (458). And Atwood's own words about Grace suggest that her situation authorizes a strategic rather than absolute fidelity to truthful words: Grace "is a storyteller, with strong motives to narrate, but also strong motives to withhold; the only power left to her as a convicted and imprisoned criminal comes from a blend of these two motives" (*In Search* 36). Thus *Alias Grace* accepts, as *Surfacing* adamantly did not, that the only morality is self-survival, a defensive posture based on apprehension of one's own vulnerability and others' culpability. In *Surfacing*, such self-protective fantasy is what the narrator must escape to become a full human being; in *Alias Grace*, a self-affirming story is all that can be hoped. The diminishment in Atwood's moral vision is striking.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>For Jennifer Murray, the quilt is a metaphor for Grace's inability to find new ways of being and her unconscious, paralyzing incorporation into herself of others' identities (79-81). Gillian Siddall sees the quilt pattern as an "assertion of solidarity" that "highlights the point that the primary issue the novel addresses is not who committed the murders but the restrictive ways in which women's identities were constructed in Canada at the time" (99).

<sup>2</sup>Atwood mentioned in an interview that she was concerned with "original sin" in *Surfacing*, claiming that it was "too complicated to talk about" (Gibson 13).

<sup>3</sup>For Heidi Darroch, Atwood's decision to leave open the question of the truth of Grace's repressed memories "leads to ideological incoherence, particularly in light of the ferocity of contemporary debates surrounding the recall and narration of past acts of violence" (118). It is perhaps more accurate to say that Atwood's novel is uncommitted rather than incoherent on the question of whether memories can be repressed and recovered.

<sup>4</sup>Clinical evidence suggests that it is far more likely for the trauma sufferer to be unable to forget the trauma than to be unable to remember it. The objective reality of repressed memory is still debated though largely discredited. See Michael D. Yapko, *Suggestions of Abuse* (1994).

<sup>5</sup>Dickinson's poem begins "Tell all the truth but tell it slant—" (1).

<sup>6</sup>One version of this reading can be found in Coral Ann Howells' "Margaret Atwood: *Alias Grace*" (2004), in which Howells reads the neuro-hypnotism scene as staging a "reinterpretation" of Grace's crime as "neither sexual jealousy nor revenge, but a working-class woman's social anger and indignation at always being victimized." She suggest that we may read Atwood's voice behind the other possible voices of this scene: "the author speaking out for these marginalized women without a voice" (35).

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## A Response to "The Return of the Dead in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* and *Alias Grace*"\*

ELEONORA RAO

An arbitrary choice then, a definitive moment: October 23, 1990. It's a bright clear day, unseasonably warm. It's a Tuesday [...]. The sun moves into Scorpio, Tony has lunch at the Toxique with her two friends Roz and Charis, a slight breeze blows in over Lake Ontario, and Zenia returns from the dead (RB 4).

This quote is from Margaret Atwood's 1993 novel *The Robber Bride* in which there is a character, Zenia, that mysteriously comes back from the world of the dead to that of the living. Burkhard Niederhoff makes very interesting and appropriate references to various returns from the dead in Atwood's narrative prose, including *The Tent*. Regarding her poetry, he notes a stubborn refusal "to be buried" in *The Animals in that Country* (1968) as well as Moodie's last meditations from underground, in *The Journals of Susanna Moodie's* final poem (1970).

The starting point of his discussion are three texts by Atwood, one work of fiction, namely *Surfacing* (1972), and two books of criticism, *Survival*, published in the same significant year, and a much later text, *Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing* (2002). Niederhoff proposes a daring pair: *Surfacing* and *Alias Grace* (1996). Two works which have hardly ever been discussed together. The two novels belong in fact to very different periods within the Atwood canon, besides the span of more than twenty years that separates them. There

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\*Reference: Burkhard Niederhoff, "The Return of the Dead in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* and *Alias Grace*," *Connotations* 16.1-3 (2006/2007): 60-91.

For the original article as well as all contributions to this debate, please check the *Connotations* website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debniederhoff01613.htm>>.

are, however, interesting similarities as well as crucial differences between them that Niederhoff quite accurately points out.

Given the prominence of the supernatural and ghostly presences in Niederhoff's essay, it is important to focus for a moment on the novel I quoted above that, strangely enough, is not mentioned, namely *The Robber Bride* (1993). In this novel, Zenia's return from the underworld is a pregnant part of the plot. She suddenly bursts on the scene into the streets of Toronto while the women whose lives she tried to destroy—Roz, Tony and Charis—are having their usual monthly lunch at the Toxique in downtown Toronto.

In *Survival* Atwood has noted with dismay that women in Canadian literature have generally been limited to the role of ice women, earth mothers, or whores—all of whom have natural, rather than supernatural, powers (cf. *Survival* 199-206). Canadians, in general have been denied supernatural representation. In "Canadian Monsters: Some Aspects of the Supernatural in Canadian Fiction" (1977), included in her collection of essays, *Second Words*, Atwood observes that "magic and monsters don't usually get associated with Canadian literature [...]. Supernaturalism is not typical of Canadian prose fiction; the mainstream [...] has been solidly social-realistic. When people in Canadian fiction die, which they do fairly often, they usually stay buried" (230). In addition, Canada has traditionally been portrayed as "a dull place, devoid of romantic interest and rhetorical excess, with not enough blood spilled on the soil to make it fertile, and above all, ghostless" (231).

Donna Potts has in various ways underlined that, in *The Robber Bride*, "[t]hroughout the text, Atwood's many references to witches, vampires, monsters, and ghosts also affirm the presence of the supernatural in Canada" (Potts 283). If we consider this in the light of a Canadian literary tradition that Atwood herself tried to define, the ghostly, flickering presence of Zenia acquires further significance. As early as in *Survival* Atwood had repeatedly emphasized the urgency "to explore the possibilities" of a given tradition or pattern (174): "A

tradition doesn't necessarily exist to bury you: it can also be used as material for new departures" (246).

The wicked and 'monstrous' Zenia returns unannounced into the world of the living, much to the bewilderment of the three protagonists. It is only at the very end of the novel that she definitively dies, this time with her ashes dispersed by Tony, Charis and Roz over Lake Ontario. Then again the figure of Zenia herself could be a trick of the imagination, a ghost, a spirit: "The story of Zenia is insubstantial, ownerless, a rumor only [...]. Even the name Zenia may not exist, as Tony knows from looking" (RB 457). As Coral Howells has remarked, Zenia could be seen as the Undead, if possible Dracula's daughter, "operating on the border between the real and the supernatural," a shape shifter very difficult to interpret, "maybe nothing but a simulacrum or a magic mirror" ("Despite the Propaganda" 259).

Zenia, however, could also be seen as the Other Woman in the sense that she stands for the otherness that Tony, Roz and Charis are not able to acknowledge, but that nonetheless happens to be needed for their self-definition. When confronted with Zenia, their own life is sooner or later significantly diminished, as colonial subjects (Zenia apparently has European roots) and as women, incapable to keep their men safe from harm:

Tony's own little history has dwindled considerably. Beside Zenia's, it seems no more than an incident, minor, grey, suburban; a sedate parochial anecdote; a footnote. Whereas Zenia's life sparkles—no, it glares, in the lurid although uncertain light cast by large and portentous world events. (RB 165)

Seemingly Zenia has a plethora of identities, and throughout the novel it will be unattainable to attribute a set identity to her. As the military historian Tony realizes, she knows very little about Zenia: "so much has been erased [...] that Tony isn't sure any longer which of Zenia's accounts of herself was true" (RB 3). Similarly, it is almost impossible to determine what eventually happens to Zenia. "At the end of the novel, all three women reject her and she commits suicide. Or was she murdered? And will she stay dead? We do not really know, for there are [...] limits to the truth-telling of any autobiograph-

ical account" ("Despite the Propaganda" 148). There are limits indeed also to the 'truths' of history: so much depends on who does the chronicle. Here the historian Tony, who is well aware that "[h]istory is a construct" (RB 4) reflects on her own power and authority to make Zenia history:

So now Zenia is History. No [...]. She will only be history if Tony chooses to shape her into history. At the moment she is formless, a broken mosaic; the fragments of her are in Tony's hands, because she is dead, and all of the dead are in the hands of the living. (RB 457)

The dead return in other forms, she thinks, because we will them to. (RB 464)

As in *Surfacing* and *Alias Grace*, trauma is deeply at work in *The Robber Bride*, since the three protagonists have had to negotiate or suppress traumatic memories of childhood; they have all at a certain point in their lives reinvented themselves, even with new names (Rao, "Home and Nation"). It is Zenia who forces them to confront their dead or repressed selves. As Howells notes: "We may ask: Are they negotiating with the dead (as Zenia is supposed to be) or are they negotiating with ghostly selves who may turn out not to be dead at all?" ("Despite the Propaganda" 260).

Identity here is neither whole nor consistent; it is ungraspable and elusive. The most one can expect from identity in these texts is a negotiation, more or less acceptable, with alterity. As Howells has commented with reference to *Cat's Eye* (1988)—but it could also be said of other of Atwood's novels (cf. Rao, "Margaret Atwood's *Lady Oracle*" 1994)—cross-generic narration goes hand in hand with splintered, multiple "transitional" (CE 5) identities: "There is no unified textual identity" for the protagonist Elaine, "nor does this novel itself have a unified generic identity" (Howells, "Transgressing Genre" 147; Rao *Strategies for Identity*).

It is well known that in Atwood's texts genre limits collapse, and as a result the novels constantly play with generic boundaries and conventions: dystopia, Künstlerroman, fictional autobiography, gothic romance, historical novel and so on. Niederhoff's reading highlights a

generic trait common to both *Surfacing* and *Alias Grace*, namely the detective novel—or rather a postmodern re-appropriation of its generic rules. The construction of genre, however, parallels the construction of gender in Atwood. A very recent study by Reingard Nischik focuses precisely on how “genre and gender [...] intertwine in a combination of complicity and critique” in Atwood’s oeuvre, where, to put it simply, there is a “foregrounding of gender in a specific generic format” (Nischik 4-5; see also Rao “Margaret Atwood’s *Lady Oracle*”; *Strategies for Identity*). This topic, however, goes beyond the scope of Niederhoff’s excellent article.

Among the crucial issues in Niederhoff’s reading are the questions of knowledge and rationality. Niederhoff locates *Surfacing* within the culture of Enlightenment in that here Atwood gives a salvific role to knowledge; he attributes, and rightly so, great importance to the beneficial role that the process of self-knowledge and self-discovery have in the novel (81). Certainly for the narrator there is a kind of restoration from death, a sort of rebirth, as Niederhoff underscores (73-74); at the same time though, the ending is ‘open’ as it is often the case in Atwood, and many questions are left unanswered.

What makes *Surfacing* very different from the later novel *Alias Grace* is precisely the role and importance attributed to ‘truth’ and knowledge. This is a very relevant point in Niederhoff’s argument that highlights the distance between these two novels. There is a consistent body of criticism that reads *Alias Grace* as a “historiographic metafiction,” following Linda Hutcheon’s renowned definition (*The Canadian Postmodern; A Poetics of Postmodernism*). According to this critical view the novel provides numerous versions of the past; these are arranged in a paratactic mode, so that the text does not privilege any of them. As Niederhoff interestingly puts it, the “focus of these readings is epistemological; they argue that *Alias Grace* is about the impossibility of knowing the truth” (77). On the other hand, the reading he proposes emphasizes, and convincingly so, “the effects that knowing or not knowing the truth has on people’s lives” (77).

Shortly after the publication of this historical novel Atwood gave a lecture in Ottawa in which she contextualized her interest in Grace Mark's case and in enigmas within the Canadian literary tradition. Atwood is very attentive to the role of history in relation to the present, in a very postmodern fashion. In her talk "In Search of *Alias Grace*: On Writing Canadian Historical Fiction" (1998) she stresses that history matters a great deal to the contemporary writer: "The past belongs to us, because we are the ones who need it. [...] Whatever we write will be contemporary" (229; 210). Here Atwood approaches again the lack of a Canadian literary tradition; this time, though, the emphasis is on the lack of history, of "the absence of anything you could dignify by the name of history—by which was meant interesting and copious bloodshed on our own turf" (217). History in Canada "either didn't exist [...] or if ours it was boring," as in Earle Birney's renowned poem that concludes: "It's only by the lack of ghosts we're haunted" (217). Nonetheless it is not only lack that Atwood looks into; she is also evidently interested in the (false) innocence of English Canadian colonial past and in the challenge of inheritance, in a manner similar to what Joy Kogawa did for the twentieth century in her novel *Obasan* (1983). Atwood digs into the past to find that it is not at all innocent. As she explains: "The lure of the Canadian past, for the writers of my generation, has been partly the lure of the unmentionable—the mysterious, the buried, the forgotten, the discarded, the taboo" ("In Search of" 218). Of course she is not alone in this enterprise, as many other contemporary writers have been concerned in what could be called the "re-visioning" of Canadian history and character in the attempt to reveal to Canadians a different, new, more accurate version of the Canadian collective past.

In the novel *Grace Marks*, when in prison, relates her story to a young American doctor, Simon Jordan, who is keen on contemporary theories about mental disorders. He tries with all his might to bring back Grace's memories of the day of the killing, in the hope of healing Grace's supposedly disturbed psyche, which has suffered from deep trauma and loss of memory, and thus reveal her innocence or guilt.



He struggles to decipher what Grace is “truly” saying or not saying, while, on the other hand, Grace attempts to understand what he wants to hear, and at the same time she tries to decide what she herself does or does not wish to reveal. Dr Jordan obsessively pursues his prying into the truth: “I approach her mind as if it is a locked box, to which I must find the right key; but so far, I must admit, I have not got very far with it” (132). He never will in fact, as Grace very skillfully puts on a show, a shadow self, a double, and her story-telling characteristically does not unveil neither herself nor the events of that crucial day. She reiterates this in her mind more than once: “There are some things that should be forgotten by everyone, and never spoken of again” (26). “So I stopped telling them anything” (32); and again, during a session with Dr Jordan: “Now it is his turn to know nothing” (40). One could say in fact that Grace’s ‘tale’ “serves less as a confession and more as a way of keeping secrets” (Howells, “Despite the Propaganda” 265) as Niederhoff has shown with plenty of textual references.

What does not emerge fully in Niederhoff’s essay, perhaps because it is not the focus of his argument, are the negative aspects of Dr Jordan, his obsession for Grace and the fact that his interest in her is not solely medical. In the “closeness of the sewing room” with Grace Dr Jordan can smell her skin: “He tries to pay no attention, but her scent is a distracting undercurrent. She smells like smoke; smoke, and laundry soap, [...] and she smells of the skin itself, with its undertone of dampness, fullness, ripeness [...]. He wonders how often the female prisoners are allowed to bathe. [...] He is in the presence of a female animal” (AG 90). Dr Jordan is hardly aware that Grace has turned out to be the object of his fantasies: “He senses an answering alertness along his own skin, a sensation as of bristles lifting” (90). He is attracted by her to the point of having a sordid relationship with his landlady, who becomes Grace’s surrogate. Should the reader prove some sympathy towards him the text reminds us that “he has opened up women’s bodies, and peered inside [...] he is one of the dark trio—the doctor, the judge, the executioner” (82).

Grace finds herself with a plethora of identities attributed to her, Scheherazade being one of them. The focus on fiction-making in *Alias Grace* is paramount, as it is made clear in the "Author's Afterword" and elsewhere: "In my fiction, Grace [...]—whatever else she is—is a story-teller" ("In Search of" 227). This is further underscored by the fact that Grace herself highlights her story-telling skills as she begins by saying "This is what I told Dr Jordan."

Niederhoff has elsewhere noted that Grace metamorphoses not only in the press but also in the eyes of Dr Jordan: from a "nun in a cloister, a maiden in a towered dungeon" (AG 54) to an altogether "different woman—straighter, taller, more self possessed" (59). He thus underscores Grace's duplicity or rather the very many versions of Grace which to a great extent echo contemporary notions of femininity (cf. Niederhoff, "How to Do Things with History"). Grace was at the same time an unwilling victim, a temptress, the real murderer, a female fiend, a slut. To quote Howells again: "Grace is victim and suffering saint, she is whore, madwoman, murderess, Dr Jordan's muse, and Scheherazade. With so many aliases, who is the true Grace Marks? Indeed the title signals a disturbing absence of the original behind the name" ("Transgressing Genre" 152). To be sure, what is behind a name? Or, more precisely, what is hiding behind the mask that time and again Grace puts on for Dr Jordan? "I look at him stupidly. I have a good stupid look which I have practiced" (AG 38).

Here it is not the disguise, the veil that masks a truth, a false veil or lack of it, which is to have a crucial role. The value rests in the veil itself or in the mask that has nothing behind or in front of it, a veil strained across nothing. Grace's 'veil' seemingly unveiled suggests no presentation. As Atwood has pointed out in the "Author's Afterword": "The true character of the historical Grace Marks remains an enigma" (463).

Identity here pertains to the realm of fiction and of imagination. Identities are constructed and are always fictive. In addition, one could say that not only is identity a construction and a fiction: it is represented as nothing more than a fictive entity or an illusion with

no substance behind it. In the final analysis identities are aliases, fictions (cf. Wilson 134; Derrida).

Niederhoff maintains, and rightly so, that *Alias Grace* stands against psychoanalysis or rather against Freud's notion that to reach the truth inside the subject will heal the neurosis. Within this theoretical framework, self-knowledge is still attainable and it is, albeit moderately I think, of some benefit in *Surfacing*. In *Alias Grace* quite the opposite works: truth and/or self-knowledge are of no consequence if not utterly inadequate, even dangerous. As Foucault reminds us, "truth is no longer able to save the subject."<sup>1</sup>

The mystery, the inscrutability of Grace cannot in any way be solved or revealed to us. It would be very naïve indeed to want it disclosed, as Atwood's lyric persona reminds us in her 1981 poetry collection, *True Stories*:

Don't ask for the true story;  
Why do you need it?  
It's not what I set out with  
Or what I carry. [...]

The true story is vicious  
and multiple and untrue

after all. Why do you  
need it? Don't ever

ask for the true story. (9-11)

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## NOTE

<sup>1</sup>My translation of “la vérité n’est pas capable de sauver le sujet” (Foucault 20).

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## Should We Believe Her? Margaret Atwood and Uncertainty: A Response to Burkhard Niederhoff\*

MARGARET ROGERSON

Burkhard Niederhoff's analysis of Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* (1972) and *Alias Grace* (1996) speaks cogently of the Canadian author's fondness for ghosts, her interest in the notion of survival, and her approaches to memory and the kinds of 'truth' that memory affords. In what follows here I consider these issues in relation to the technique of 'uncertainty' that features in Atwood's work. Although I agree with much of what Niederhoff has to say about the two texts, I contest his acceptance of the "hypnosis scene" in *Alias Grace* "at face value" (76), and embellish my own 1998 argument for an "elusive narrative" (14) in this novel and in Atwood's work more generally. I question Niederhoff's assertion that "not knowing the truth [...] makes Grace free" (87). Could it be, rather, a determination not to reveal the truth that secures her release from prison, or is there, ultimately, no way of making a definitive statement on the matter? Taking words that Atwood has used in her evaluation of Grace as storyteller—"would we [...] believe her?"<sup>1</sup>—I rephrase the question to ask if we should believe Atwood, and conclude that we should not, nor would this "trickster creator"<sup>2</sup> expect us to.

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\*Reference: Burkhard Niederhoff, "The Return of the Dead in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* and *Alias Grace*," *Connotations* 16.1-3 (2006/2007): 60-91.

For the original article as well as all contributions to this debate, please check the *Connotations* website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debniederhoff01613.htm>>.

## Ghosts and uncertainty

Atwood has expressed admiration for “ghost stor[ies]” by other writers, praising Toni Morrison (and Emily Brontë) for “magnificent practicality” in the conjuring of the spirits of the dead (*Curious Pursuits* 80). In *Beloved*, Atwood asserts, Morrison’s “main characters [...] believe in ghosts, so it’s merely natural for [...] one to be there” (80):

In this book, the other world exists and magic works, and the prose is up to it. If you believe page one—and Ms Morrison’s verbal authority compels belief—you’re hooked on the rest of the book. (84)

Ghostly presences of various kinds thread their way through Atwood’s writing, but whether or not any of the other “characters” believe in them is debatable. In *Surfacing* the unnamed narrator is visited by her dead parents in different forms at different times, thus posing, as Niederhoff has noted particularly in relation to the father, “interpretive problems” (69). Does the “other world” have a place in this novel as Atwood claims it does for Morrison’s *Beloved*? Do the parents actually inhabit such a world or are we to read them as existing only in the mind of the narrator? Or are these “trickster” familiars that defy categorization by either the narrator or the reader of the novel alike? Perhaps it is this lack of certainty that keeps our attention.

Atwood’s ghosts can be narrators themselves, like the speaker of the poem “This Is a Photograph of Me” (1966). This narrator claims to be “in the lake, in the centre / of the picture, just under the surface” and that “if you look long enough, / eventually / you will be able to see me” (*Circle Game* 3). As readers we are challenged to accept that we can both hear the voice of the drowned speaker and see a physical form under the water in the grainy photograph evoked by the text. But there are many uncertainties: the print is “smeared” and its lines are “blurred”; there is something that might be “like a branch,” but perhaps is not one; and if we accept that it is a branch it could be either “balsam or spruce.” The slope of the bank “ought to be [...] gentle,” implying that it is not; and even though the speaker states

firmly that "I am in the lake," it is still "difficult to say where [...] or how large or small I am." To what extent can we be certain of the 'ghost' speaker or of our own status as observers as we rise to the challenge of examining the photograph? Only one thing is certain here and that is that we cannot take the photograph "at face value," it is much more complex than that.<sup>3</sup>

The ghosts that figure in *Alias Grace* are of a different order again, and while Atwood's "verbal authority," like Morrison's, "compels" us to believe page one of the first chapter of this novel, where Grace sees peonies growing "[o]ut of the gravel" (5) of the prison yard, we are taken in the direction of uncertainty from the next page, when an apparently down-to-earth Grace realises that these particular peonies are blooming in the wrong season and that they are, disturbingly, "made of cloth" (6). The ghost of Nancy Montgomery kneels and smiles, and the yard becomes a cellar from which Grace cannot escape. We might want to believe, initially, that the ghost of Nancy is real because Grace might "believe" in her. Or is this an illusion brought on by the hardships of prison life acting upon her guilty (or innocent) memories to present distortions of the past? But can we be certain of any of these possibilities or, indeed, of any others that we might invent? Grace announces that she has told us what she "told Dr. Jordan, when we came to that part of the story" (6). Is it just a "story" and possibly fabricated? Is it a confession? Is it evidence of her innocence or guilt, or could it be used as a defence on the grounds that she was a person of 'unsound mind'? Regardless of any conjectures we have at this point of the novel, we are, as Atwood says of Morrison's readers, "hooked on the rest of the book" by the tantalising uncertainties that the first two pages have proposed.

When she reflected on her "Search for *Alias Grace*," Atwood remarked on the necessity of "ghosts" for the construction of a sense of a Canadian past (217). Quoting "Earle Birney's famous poem that concludes, 'It's only by the lack of ghosts we're haunted,'" she laments the "anaemic view" of the past "handed" to young Canadians of her generation, commenting that had she known then that "our



dull Prime Minister, Mackenzie King, had *believed* that the spirit of his mother was inhabiting his dog, which he always consulted on public policy" (218; my emphasis), her enthusiasm for Canadian history would have increased considerably. In *Alias Grace* we encounter a spirit world that is by no means as cut and dried as Mackenzie King's because we are not sure who, if anyone, believes in it. In the incident that Niederhoff reads "at face value," Grace undergoes a "neurohypnotic sleep" (396) and a voice that appears to be coming from her, but is a "new, thin voice," declares that the "kerchief killed" Nancy Montgomery and that "[h]ands held it" (401)—but it does not say whose hands. The implication is that the spirit of Mary Whitney, Grace's friend, who died early from a botched abortion, "borrowed" (402) Grace's body, her "fleshy garment" (403), for the occasion and did the deed. The voice claims that the speaker is not Grace:

I am not Grace! Grace knew nothing about it! (401)

It also denies being James McDermott, Grace's supposed accomplice and lover, or Nancy Montgomery, the victim (402), but we might well hesitate to believe that Grace is an alias of Mary at this point:

"I am not Grace," says the voice, *more tentatively*. (403; my emphasis)

The 'spirit' voice is *tentative*, and the reader's conclusions could well be equally uncertain; Atwood's "verbal authority" makes it so.

### Survival and Atwood's sense of closure

Atwood's focus on the topic of survival can be seen to be increasing with her two most recent novels, both exercises in speculative fiction that tackle the question of the viability of humankind, *Oryx and Crake* (2003) and *The Year of the Flood* (2009). Sharon Wilson has suggested that Atwood exhibits a growing pessimism (187), although even this is problematic if we accept Earl G. Ingersoll's contention that "the ending of *Oryx and Crake* may be contaminated with a[n] [...] 'optimism'

for which readers may have difficulty finding any firm basis" (173). Both novels are open-ended, but at the same time invite readers to be puzzled at the moment of closure, as Ursula Le Guin has indicated in her review of *The Year of the Flood*:

I found the final sentences [...] unexpected, not the seemingly inevitable brutal end or dying fall, nor yet a deus-ex-machina salvation, but a surprise, a mystery.

This "mystery" ending is typical of Atwood, and readers are left with an impossible choice between despair and hope, neither of which might be completely appropriate, although survival is, almost by definition, uncertain, and so puzzlement might be the only closure possible.

It is not only the survival of humankind that comes to Atwood's attention, other species come in for consideration too, as in her 'flash fiction' tale "Thylacine Ragout" (2004; first printed in *Bottle* 31-34, reprinted in *The Tent* 73-75). Atwood dates the beginning of her work on *Oryx and Crake* to her visit to Australia in 2001 ("Perfect Storms"), and it is possible that the idea for "Thylacine Ragout" was also suggested at that time. The thylacine is the Tasmanian tiger, a carnivorous marsupial that joined the ranks of the extinct when the last known representative of its kind died in 1936. The genetic engineering of such creatures as the 'liobams' (lion+lamb) in *The Year of the Flood* or the 'rakunks' (raccoon+skunk) of *Oryx and Crake* has nothing on the thylacine of Atwood's "Ragout." Since 1999 there has been talk of cloning a thylacine from specimens preserved in the Australian Museum in Sydney. This controversial project was abandoned by the Museum in 2005, although its first champion, Professor Mike Archer, former Director of the Museum and now Dean of Science at the University of New South Wales, still lists it on his website as an "unusual project" in which he is involved.<sup>4</sup> Despite opposition—and sometimes derision—the idea of being able to reverse the process of extinction is an exciting one.

In Atwood's cynical take on the cloning project it actually works, and an animal that equates to "our idea" of a thylacine (32) is pro-

duced, only to be stolen by a “bent scientist” and sold to a “very rich person with refined tastes,” who eats it “in the form of a ragout” (34). This unexpectedly horrific outcome of an apparently successful project is indeed pessimistic. But do all readers want to accept what this entails: the end of human decency, the end of hope? Does Atwood deliberately provoke conjectures about alternative, more positive endings? Is this what Atwood’s challenge is to her readers: to tempt them with the anticipation of happy endings only to subvert them with her “verbal authority?”

#### Memory/Truth and Atwood’s sense of closure

Niederhoff states that the unnamed narrator in *Surfacing* has “characteristically distorted memories that both conceal and reveal the truth” (66), and that many of her memories are “fabrications” that, nonetheless, tell us something that is “only too true” (67). He thus acknowledges the place of uncertainty and, indeed, contradiction, in Atwood’s narrative practice. But even as he affirms that the end of this novel, “like many another ending in Atwood, remains open” (74),<sup>5</sup> he, like many another reader of Atwood, affords the novel a form of closure—and certainty—himself, when he claims that there is a “child to be conceived,” that the narrator’s parents have “return[ed] from the underworld,” and that the narrator herself has experienced a “restoration from death” (74). If this is, indeed, the form of the ‘truth’ that the narrator or the narrative is suggesting to us, should we, given the experience of reading this novel and Atwood’s work more broadly, believe it? If we find the unnamed narrator of *Surfacing* tricky on other occasions, why should we put any store in those certainties she might suggest to us at the end or feel that we can be confident in satisfactorily unravelling the left-over contradictions and ambiguities for ourselves?

In his reading of *Alias Grace* Niederhoff claims that “the novel is about the effects that knowing or not knowing the truth has on peo-

ple's lives" (77), that Grace has a "preference for not knowing" (84), and that "not knowing the truth makes [her] free" (87). Atwood's Grace Marks, he suggests, was technically guilty of the murder of Nancy Montgomery, although she was completely unaware of the fact and therefore worthy of her freedom after almost thirty years of imprisonment. This conclusion derives from his literal interpretation of the hypnosis experiment already mentioned above. The experiment is conducted by Dr. Jerome DuPont, alias Jeremiah the Peddler, alias "Signor Geraldo Ponti" (425), alias Mr. Gerald Bridges (456). Dr. DuPont's collection of aliases might be sufficient to make acceptance of the kind of truth that he is peddling problematic, and, indeed, the dubious demeanour of the eye-witnesses as they wait for the hypnosis session to begin might not convince us of their unambiguousness, thus rendering them no more trustworthy than "Dr. DuPont" himself:

Mrs Quennell [...] anticipates wonders, but will evidently not be surprised by them [...]. The Governor's wife wears an expression of yearning piety, tempered with resignation [...]. Reverend Verringer manages to look both benign and disapproving; there's a glinting around his eyes as if he's wearing spectacles, although he is not. Lydia [...] [is] nervously twisting her handkerchief; but when her eyes meet Simon's, she smiles [...]. Simon [...] senses that his face is set in a sceptical and not very pleasant sneer; but that's a false face. (395)

Are any of these observers to be trusted? And can we conclude that Grace Marks really does not know the truth? Or is her eventual release into the community contingent on an accumulation of uncertainties like those occasioned through the experience of the hypnosis scene that leaves Simon Jordan, her attending doctor, unable to "state anything with certainty and still tell the truth, because the truth eludes him" (407)?

Finally, Reverend Verringer writes to gain the support of Dr. Bannerling for release of the prisoner on the grounds that she does not know the truth about the crimes in which she was involved. He bases the appeal on his interpretation of the hypnosis session that revealed, in his opinion, that Grace was the victim of "a distinct secondary

personality [...] acting without the knowledge of the first” and that she had no memory of the murder of Nancy Montgomery, nor was she “responsible for her actions therein” (433). If Reverend Verringer believes in what he saw in the library of Mrs. Quennell’s house, Dr. Bannerling most certainly does not, describing the event as “puerile antics” (434), “a solemn-sounding blind, behind which men of questionable antecedents and salacious natures might obtain power over young women of the same” (435). Which of them should the reader believe?

Grace Marks almost gives us an answer herself when she writes to Jeremiah the Peddler in his guise as the travelling showman, “Signor Geraldo Ponti, Master of Neuro-Hypnotism, Ventriloquist, and Mind-Reader Extraordinaire” (425-28). She says that she would very much like to see him again but does not want to give him away as “they would think you had tricked them, as what is done on a stage is not as acceptable, as the very same thing done in a library” (425). Typically, we are left with questions rather than answers. Who is Grace trying to protect, herself or Jeremiah? Was the hypnosis experiment a trick? I do not argue against Niederhoff by protesting categorically that Grace Marks does indeed know the truth; what I do want to stress is that we just do not know whether she knows it, whether she once knew it and has now forgotten it, or whether it has always been blocked from her memory—and that this is as it should be, at least in Atwood’s terms.

Atwood herself points out that memories are not to be trusted: Susanna Moodie, who had personal contact with the historical Grace Marks, set out to write the story of the convicted woman “from memory” of her conversations with her, but, says Atwood laconically in her “Search for *Alias Grace*,” “her memory was no better than most” (226). The potency of memories of matters past is strongly expressed across the range of Atwood’s writing, from her full length novels to *Payback*, her recent discussion of debt in which she points out that if you destroy the “written record [...] a form of memory” you can erase the debt itself: “If you can’t prove it, I don’t owe it” (141-42). Without reliable memory there is uncertainty, and with uncertainty you can

escape from your responsibilities, financial and otherwise. Has Grace deliberately erased the memory and therefore the basis of proof?

Niederhoff has, rightly, characterised both *Surfacing* and *Alias Grace* as “detective novels” (75), but he is not entirely correct in identifying the “detective” as the unnamed narrator in the earlier novel and as the doctor, Simon Jordan, in the later one. Although both of these figures have some of the characteristics of a detective, the real detective is the reader, who stands outside the work itself looking for clues in the complex web of detail and trying to distinguish truth from lies.

### Atwood on storytelling—the “trickster creator”

When Atwood wrote *Alias Grace*, she informs us, ‘Grace’ herself became “a story-teller, with strong motives to narrate, but also strong motives to withhold,” and her story is dependent on “what she remembers; or is it what she *says* she remembers, which can be quite a different thing” (227; my emphasis):

In a Victorian novel, Grace would say, “Now it all comes back to me”; but as *Alias Grace* is not a Victorian novel, she does not say that, and if she did, would we—any longer—believe her? [...] I have to conclude that, although there undoubtedly was a truth—somebody did kill Nancy Montgomery—truth is sometimes unknowable, at least by us. (228)

After the hypnosis experiment, Grace Marks continues as the main storyteller. Her auditor within the narrative is her husband, Jamie Walsh, whose youthful testimony had “turned the minds of judge and jury so much against [her]” (451). “Mr. Walsh,” as Grace likes to call him, is now “of the opposite persuasion” and is “overcome with guilt” (451). Guilt—his and/or hers—brings them together as man and wife, and they sleep together under the patchwork ‘Log Cabin’ quilt, symbolic of heath and home. But the “quilt in the best room is a Wheel of Mystery” (454), and the mystery of the Montgomery/Kinnear murders remains unsolved. Jamie Walsh likes to hear “stories of torment and misery” (457) from his wife’s colourful past:

He listens [...] like a child listening to a fairy tale [...]. If I put in the chilblains and the shivering at night under the thin blanket [...] he is in raptures; and if I add the improper behaviour of Dr. Bannerling towards me [...] he is almost in ecstasies; but his favourite part of the story is when poor James McDermott was hauling me all around the house [...] looking for a bed fit for his wicked purposes, with Nancy and Mr. Kinnear lying dead in the cellar, and me almost out of my wits with terror; and he blames himself that he wasn't there to rescue me. (456-57)

The need to listen and to be blamed is part of his sexual ritual, and he begs to be forgiven as he undoes Grace's nightgown; but, tantalisingly, she does not "feel quite right about it, forgiving him like that, because [she is] aware that in doing so [she is] telling a lie":

Though I suppose it isn't the first lie I've told; but as Mary Whitney used to say, a little white lie such as the angels tell is a small price to pay for peace and quiet. (458)

Is the narrative full of lies? As Atwood puts it in her "Author's Afterword," the "true character of the historical Grace Marks remains an enigma" (465). The novelist's technique of uncertainty ensures that the same can be said of the fictional Grace.

Atwood has provided academic readers with a useful commentary on writing, her own and that of others, in three major critical works: *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (1972), *Strange Things: The Malevolent North in Canadian Literature* (1995), and *Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing* (2002). We can also look elsewhere for less formal discussion of the writing process wherein she reveals herself as a "trickster creator." In her recent collection of short fiction, *The Tent* (2006), she not only engages with the issue of survival,<sup>6</sup> but also comments on storytelling in "Horatio's Version" (115-20), a retelling of the familiar story of Hamlet, and "Three Novels I Won't Write Soon" (85-92).

"Three Novels" takes us, supposedly, inside the head of a writer. This blatant discussion of the creative process almost dares us to link what is being said here with Atwood's own work. In the first novel that is not to be written (soon), "Worm Zero," the proposition is that

all worms of every kind, including earthworms, inexplicably die, thus leading to famine. This is a form of speculative fiction and might suggest the possibility of Atwoodian self-analysis. But this is countered by seemingly heavy-handed elements of chick-lit of the kind that her readers know this writer does not indulge in—or does she? The central characters, Chris and Amanda, “who’ve had great sex in Chapter One, or possibly Chapter Two” but now can’t “renovate their kitchen and install a new round eco-friendly refrigerator” (86) are envisaged as taking two different approaches to the impending doom. Amanda, the optimist, tries to grow food at their summer cottage and takes solace in the cliché that “[a]t least we’re together” (87). Chris is less hopeful and the fictional writer then wonders if he should yell “Where are you, fucking worms, when we need you most?”—or perhaps these should be Amanda’s lines to “show that her character has developed” (88). But whoever utters “this cathartic, revealing, and somehow inspiriting yell,” it marks the moment at which a worm appears “copulating with itself”:

It would sound a note of plangent hope. I always like to end on those. (88)

Is this a way of daring Atwood fans to identify a comment on her own writing? Is she just teasing, playing the “trickster creator”? Does her speculative fiction offer anything like “plangent hope,” or is she just playing games with us? Are we doomed to be wrong no matter what decision we make?

The adventures of Chris and Amanda continue in “Sponge Death,” where the writer would like the heroic Chris “to defeat the monstrous bath accessory and save the day [...] for humanity” (89), but cannot in all conscience let that happen until convinced “that the human spirit has the wherewithal to go head to headless against this malevolent wad of cellulose” (88-89). This is another version of the writer as morally bound to believe that what is written is possible. Is this what Atwood herself believes—or not?

“Beetleplunge,” the third iteration, takes several directions. In one version of the story “Chris and Amanda will end up [...] in each



other's arms, exactly where we want them to be" (92), a perfect Mills and Boon ending, but not what we would expect of Atwood. But she goes on to change the title of the unwritten novel to "Brutal Purge," which is too brutal for the likes of Chris and Amanda "and if they stray into it by accident they won't come out of it alive" (92).

Atwood does indeed appear to be commenting on the process of writing a novel. But we wonder if she is talking about her own writing or if she is simply casting scorn on that of others. As in *Surfacing* and *Alias Grace*, Atwood is a "trickster creator," who, using the technique of uncertainty, challenges readers to come to conclusions but also problematizes whatever they invent. It remains difficult to take what she tells us as storyteller "at face value," but that is part of her appeal.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>In *Search of Alias Grace* 228. Atwood spoke of the experience of writing this novel in the Charles R. Bronfman Lecture in Canadian Studies series at the University of Ottawa in 1996. The lecture has been reprinted in various places, including *The American Historical Review*, 103.5 (1998): 1503-16, and Atwood's *Curious Pursuits* 209-29.

<sup>2</sup>Sharon Wilson (186-87) uses this term to refer specifically to Grace Marks and to other Atwood narrators more generally.

<sup>3</sup>Branko Gorjup reads this poem as "a portrait of the artist as landscape" 134.

<sup>4</sup><<http://www.science.unsw.edu.au/marcher-profile>>, accessed on 27 Aug. 2010. For a somewhat negative discussion of the cloning project see Allen Greer, "Cloning the Thylacine: Not Quite a Showpiece of Australian Science," *Quadrant* 53.7-8 (2009): 28-39.

<sup>5</sup>Open-endedness in Atwood is a frequent source of interest to literary scholars. Wilson, for example, refers to this feature in *Surfacing* 177, 180.

<sup>6</sup>See especially "Thylacine Ragout" and "The Animals Reject Their Names and Things Return to their Origins" (77-84).

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# The Psychoanalytic Theme in Margaret Atwood's Fiction: A Response to Burkhard Niederhoff<sup>\*1</sup>

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I

In Margaret Atwood's 2003 dystopian novel, *Oryx and Crake*, the protagonist and narrator Jimmy—later known as Snowman—persistently presses the beautiful and enigmatic Oryx for details of her exotically traumatic past; “Tell me just one thing” (114), he pleads. Born into geographically un-located third world poverty and sold into child slavery—working first as a beggar, then filmed for paedophilic pornography—before entering North America as a state-sanctioned sex worker, Oryx's history is a litany of degradation and abuses. For Jimmy, this necessarily equates to trauma; Oryx has suffered, in Ian Hacking's term, a “spiritual lesion, a wound to the soul” (Hacking 4).<sup>2</sup> Faced with her determined refusal to recover and examine further memories of her exploited childhood, Jimmy reads Oryx's reluctance as an admission of unacknowledged horror and shame; “He thought he understood her vagueness, her evasiveness. ‘It's alright,’ he told her, stroking her hair. ‘None of it was your fault’”; but Oryx deflects his sympathy with the maddeningly ingenuous response: “None of what, Jimmy?” (114). Oryx refuses Jimmy's invitation to speak her trauma, to enact “a recovery of lost memories of pain” (Hacking 3), and thereby achieve self-knowledge and self-acceptance. Discussing the novel's interrogation of Crake's “purportedly therapeutic scientific

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<sup>\*</sup>Reference: Burkhard Niederhoff, “The Return of the Dead in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* and *Alias Grace*,” *Connotations* 16.1-3 (2006/2007): 60-91.

For the original article as well as all contributions to this debate, please check the *Connotations* website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debniederhoff01613.htm>>.

project" (Dunning 87), Stephen Dunning suggests that, through her silence, Oryx "both secures herself against penetrating intellectual curiosity and becomes the site of perpetual mystery" (96). Despite her silent resistance, however, Jimmy simply amalgamates her reticence within a psychoanalytic narrative of repression and denial: "Where was her rage," he ponders; "how far down was it buried, what did he have to do to dig it up?" (142).

In his insistence that Oryx should react 'appropriately'—with anger, hatred and distress—to her childhood trauma, and in his assumption that talking about the past will bring her greater clarity (and that such insight would be *ipso facto* beneficial), Jimmy casts himself in the role of psychoanalyst and saviour. He invites Oryx to enter into the "talking cure" (Freud, "Psychoanalysis" 184)—to undergo what Sigmund Freud once referred to as a "cleansing of the soul" ("Psychoanalysis" 184)—and be healed. In his pursuit of her unconscious self, vague recollections become dreamlike "memory symbols" ("Psychoanalysis" 187) with revelatory potential; chasing incidental details that resist signification, Jimmy fantasises about psychoanalytic breakthroughs: "there it would be, the red parrot, the code, the password, and then many things would become clear" (138). It is certainly a curative procedure that Jimmy himself would like to engage in. The last man standing in a post-apocalyptic world, Jimmy longs for a sympathetic ear into which he might unburden his heavy soul, and he cries out in his desolation: "Just someone, anyone, listen to me please!" (45). Atwood, however, proves sceptical of the psychoanalytic—specifically, Freudian—method. As auditor-analyst, Jimmy, who first encounters Oryx as "just another little girl on a porno site" (90), is inextricably entangled in a web of voyeurism, vicarious thrills, and pleasurable indignation. And as implied western readers of this exotically oriental misery memoir, we too are painfully, irresistibly, implicated in Jimmy's desire to plumb ever greater depths of poverty and sexual degradation. The truth, it seems, does not always set us free, and revelations of past traumas are not always productive and therapeutic. This anxiety around the efficacy of psychoanalytic practice—as

Niederhoff valuably demonstrates in his article on Atwood—is a concern that the writer repeatedly returns to in her fiction.

## II

In “The Return of the Dead,” Niederhoff compares Atwood’s 1972 novel *Surfacing* to the 1996 novel, *Alias Grace*. The former, which Niederhoff rightly notes has attained the status of a classic work of contemporary fiction, commences with its unnamed narrator heading up into northern Quebec in search of her missing father. As she becomes increasingly immersed in the emotional implications of this quest, the text gradually exposes an unstable narrative voice. In a crucial moment of uncanny encounter, the narrator dives into the lake in pursuit of her father’s last movements and discovers an amorphous “dead thing” (136) floating in the water; the drowned corpse is presumably her father’s, but to the traumatised narrator it becomes the foetus she unwillingly aborted. The encounter prompts a rush of submerged memories, seemingly reinforcing Freud’s assertion that: “*hysterical patients suffer from reminiscences. Their symptoms are the remnants and the memory symbols of certain (traumatic) experiences*” (“Psychoanalysis” 187). Her reaction exposes the repressed knowledge of repugnant acts: “I couldn’t accept it, that mutilation, ruin I’d made, I needed a different version” (137). No longer free to reside in the “paper house” (138) of false memory, the narrator belatedly acknowledges her pain and loss—“I’m crying finally, it’s the first time” (166)—and is subsequently able to contemplate a return to society and selfhood.

*Surfacing* is, clearly, a text of its time; influenced by rising second-wave feminism and sympathetic to the concerns of ecofeminism and environmentalism, it also reflects the contemporary interest in the kind of national thematic criticism that Atwood exemplifies in her critical text of the same year, *Survival*. In contrast, *Alias Grace* is a product of the mid-1990s. Intricately plotted and self-consciously

inconclusive, it takes much from postmodern literary practise and is a forerunner of the current preoccupation with neo-Victorian fiction. Like *Surfacing*, it is, as Niederhoff notes, characterised by themes of memory and recollection; by what Atwood describes as: "the lure of the unmentionable—the mysterious, the buried, the forgotten, the discarded, the taboo" ("In Search of *Alias Grace*" 1509). Based on a notorious Canadian murder case of 1843, the young protagonist Grace Marks is accused of conspiring with a fellow servant in the bloody murders of her master and his housekeeper-mistress. Grace claims total amnesia of the events, and the prison Governor's sympathetic wife encourages her to be hypnotised by Simon Jordan, a young doctor and pre-Freudian psychoanalyst. Rather than revealing the desired truth, these sessions introduce various possible explanations, including: Grace's spiritual possession by her former fellow servant Mary; a deliberate and cunning deception perpetrated by Grace and, possibly, an accomplice; or a modern medical diagnosis of multiple personality disorder. As Coral Ann Howells notes: "The fascination of a character like Grace is intimately bound up with nineteenth-century anxieties about women and their true nature: are they angels in the house or are they lying devils, and which is Grace?" (*Contemporary Canadian Women's Fiction* 30). As characters and readers attempt to diagnose Grace's condition, ultimately the veracity of each of the novel's competing accounts remains a conundrum that the determinedly post-modern text refuses to unravel.

Examining these two quite different novels, published almost twenty-five years apart, Niederhoff suggests that both exemplify a central theme in Atwood's work: the return from death and/or the underworld. Accordingly, a key informing image in *Surfacing* is a description of the narrator's mother resuscitating the narrator's drowning brother; while in *Alias Grace*, the dead return in the form of Mary's ghost, haunting and manipulating an unwitting Grace. In fact, while the significance of this theme can be logically traced through Niederhoff's discussion—the survival of death; the return from the dead; the laying to rest of ghosts; the confrontation of repressed

memories—its initial invocation falls away over the course of the article and is tellingly absent from the conclusion. Instead, the article's primary and more rewarding concern is with Atwood's evolving engagement with psychoanalytic practice. To this end, Niederhoff suggests that the two novels resemble each other in a "surprising number of ways" (75): both are detective novels concluding on a moment of anagnorisis or dramatic revelation; both contain emotionally damaged narrators; and in both, repressed trauma affects the memory. While noting these similarities, however, Niederhoff argues that "there is also a crucial difference in the way the two novels represent a secret or repressed knowledge that is associated with the return of the dead" (62). Following a detailed explication of the texts' overlapping themes, he then offers the article's central statement: "While *Surfacing* is about the necessity of surfacing, of emerging into the full light of knowledge, Grace must remain below the surface to survive. Ignorance means life to her" (86). With this observation, Niederhoff suggests a paradigm shift in Atwood's thinking about memory and psychoanalysis. This idea is valuable and demands further consideration.

Niederhoff argues that "[i]n her early works, Atwood fully endorses the principle of *sapere aude* [Kant's "dare to know"], echoing the revolutionary and optimistic *Zeitgeist* of the late 60s and early 70s" (81). This Enlightenment faith in knowledge, he suggests, underpins *Surfacing's* conclusion, in which the narrator's recovery of her repressed memories (analogous to a period of psychoanalysis) is painful but necessary, eventually restoring her to a more fully integrated selfhood. By the mid-1990s and the publication of *Alias Grace*, this epistemological faith is lost, and Atwood's characters instead voice significant concerns around the value of knowledge. For Niederhoff, psychoanalysis, with its foundational belief that 'the truth will set you free,' "provides a general model for interpreting the development of the narrator in *Surfacing*, [but] is not an adequate model for understanding *Alias Grace*" (86). Consequently, although the later novel contains myriad allusions to psychoanalysis, and to the Freudian

method in particular,<sup>3</sup> "*Alias Grace* is not a psychoanalytic novel but rather an attack on psychoanalysis" (86). This shift, suggests Niederhoff, is part of a broader cultural scepticism around the psychoanalytic project, fuelled in part by feminist critiques; it finds expression in *Alias Grace* in Atwood's conclusion that 'the truth' (Niederhoff accepts the spiritual possession theory) not only fails to relieve and cure, but is positively dangerous. Realisation that she has committed murder under the influence of Mary's spirit would both equate to a compromising confession and jeopardise Grace's mental health. Niederhoff charts a clear trajectory from an early Atwood, advocating "belief in the liberating power of true knowledge," to a later, more sceptical Atwood, for whom "[t]he struggle for survival and against victimisation no longer involves the recognition of truth" (87). This conclusion, however, is interpolated from just two texts; it is useful therefore to test this evolutionary hypothesis against one of the interim novels.

Indeed, as a writer who "problematizes the idea of authenticity and unitary identity" (Palumbo 74), and for whom "duplicity—deceit and doubleness" (Grace 55) are central concerns, the agnate notions of revealed and concealed truth are a recurring and shifting theme in Atwood's work, encompassing the political, the moral, and the psychoanalytic.<sup>4</sup> To focus on the latter: in addition to *Surfacing* and *Alias Grace*, *Cat's Eye* (1988), like *Oryx and Crake*, provides another instance of repressed childhood trauma being dealt with in a very particular manner.

### III

*Cat's Eye*, like *Surfacing*, commences with a return. Protagonist Elaine—an artist, like the narrator of *Surfacing*—is similarly revisiting the location of her childhood after many years of absence. "I'm having a retrospective, my first" (15), explains Elaine, signalling the novel's subsequent association of art with the unconscious processes of memory.<sup>5</sup> Unlike the earlier novel however, Elaine's moment of anagnori-



sis occurs, in chronological terms, before the narrative begins. Through an accumulation of retrospective episodes, it is revealed that Elaine suffered a traumatic period of childhood bullying by the charismatic Cordelia and her toadying subordinates, Carol and Grace. The persecution culminates in a near-death experience, when Elaine is forced by Cordelia, functioning as Elaine's death drive,<sup>6</sup> to enter a forbidden ravine: "It's as if she's driven by the urge to see how far she can go. She's backing me towards an edge, like the edge of a cliff: one step back, another step, and I'll be over and falling" (154). The ravine, site of unspeakable sex and death,<sup>7</sup> functions as a scar on the respectable suburban landscape, symbolising the troubling repressed that always threatens to rupture the surface of the conscious mind. Entering its darkness, Elaine falls into a frozen stream and almost succumbs to the desire for annihilation, to "the instinct to return to the inanimate" (Freud, *Pleasure Principle* 38), imagining herself as "a dead person, peaceful and clear" (188). Saved by a vision of the Virgin Mary—a recurring trope in the novel—the encounter in the ravine marks for Elaine a decisive moment of physical and psychological separation from Cordelia. When she re-encounters her tormentor in adolescence, all negative feelings about the past have been entirely repressed: "I can't remember ever hating Cordelia" (359), she thinks.

In adulthood, however, Elaine experiences inexplicable periods of depression and anxiety, climaxing in a half-hearted suicide attempt urged on by a disembodied voice, which she fails to identify as Cordelia's, whispering: "*Do it. Come on. Do it*" (373). This incident unconsciously re-enacts the childhood trauma in the ravine, and Atwood's text closely accords with Freud's description of neurotic patients' attempts to repress an "incompatible wish":

They have, indeed, driven it out of consciousness and out of memory, and apparently saved themselves a great amount of psychic pain, *but in the unconscious the suppressed wish still exists*, only waiting for its chance to become active [...]. ("Psychoanalysis" 195-96)

Only years later does Elaine attain knowledge of her past. Sorting through the material debris of her childhood, she engages in a meta-

phorically therapeutic process, excavating "down through the layers, unearthing discoveries" (397). As Freud notes, explaining the process of psychoanalysing a neurotic patient: "It was quite impossible to reach the first and often most essential trauma directly, without first clearing away those coming later" ("Psychoanalysis" 185). In the same manner, Elaine eventually attains her "essential trauma"; recovering a cat's eye marble—totemic emblem of the past: "I look into it, and see my life entire" (398).

Elaine's return to Toronto, which initiates the narrative of *Cat's Eye*, occurs after this moment of revelation. What becomes apparent, however, is that revelation alone is not enough to furnish Freud's "cathartic treatment" ("Psychoanalysis" 188). Instead, the visit to the city of her youth performs as an extended period of 'working through' past trauma. This process is disturbing and distressing; walking in Toronto, Elaine experiences a visceral reaction to the familiar streets: "I can feel my throat tightening, a pain along the jawline. I've started to chew my fingers again. There's blood, a taste I remember" (9). The city becomes a manifestation of her unconscious; a repository of memory. She states at one point: "In my dreams of this city I am always lost" (14). This recalls Freud's lecture on the origins of psychoanalysis, in which he likens "memory symbols" to "[t]he memorials and monuments with which we adorn our great cities" ("Psychoanalysis" 187). Monuments to (memories of) the traumatic past are natural and healthy, but Freud instead imagines a Londoner "who today stood sadly before the monument to the [thirteenth century] funeral of Queen Eleanor, instead of going about his business"; neurotics, he suggests, are like this man: "not only in that they remember the painful experiences of the distant past, but because they are still strongly affected by them" ("Psychoanalysis" 187). Elaine is similarly in thrall to the past, invested in its perpetual significance. Tracing the shifting topography of the city, she encounters its alterations with something close to panic; seeing that her old school—site of so much suffering—has been demolished, she states: "I feel hit, in the pit of the stomach [...] bewildered, as if something has been cut out of my

brain" (399-400). Finally, recognising that she is still trapped within the past, she realises that she needs help: "Get me out of this Cordelia," she pleads, "I'm locked in. I don't want to be nine years old for ever" (400).

The revelation of repressed truths proves necessary—indeed urgent—for Elaine; but it also requires an extended process of examination and acceptance that mimics a period of psychoanalytic therapy. Eventually, catharsis is achieved with the retrospective exhibition of Elaine's art, which functions in the novel as a repository of repressed trauma. Howells notes: "While Elaine's discursive narrative remains incomplete, her paintings offer a different figuration, acting as a kind of corrective to the distortions and suppressions of memory" (*Margaret Atwood* 114), and Laurie Vickroy suggests that Elaine's "artistic expression reveals trauma but also provides evidence and structure with which to work through it" (129). The traumatic experience is revealed through the compulsive repetitive representation of Grace's mother, who Elaine unconsciously charges with colluding in the young girls' bullying. When she suddenly begins to paint intimate and grotesque portraits of the older woman, Elaine describes the process in notably unconscious, dreamlike terms: "I paint Mrs Smeath. She floats up without warning [...]. One picture of Mrs Smeath leads to another" (338). Still sustaining at this time the repression of her past, Elaine can only muse: "It's still a mystery to me, why I hate her so much" (352). Art expresses Elaine's unconscious trauma, but it also marks her moment of recovery. The final section of the novel is entitled "Unified Field Theory," and as she surveys her paintings, hung by the gallery in chronological order and presided over by a portrait of Elaine's adopted patron saint, "the Virgin of Lost Things" (408), she is finally able to make the connections and trace the links that have so long been obscured by her partial recall. Significantly, it is this act of exposition that defuses Mrs Smeath's symbolic power, revealing instead her "defeated eyes, uncertain and melancholy" (405). Reviewing her past, manifest in her art, Elaine suddenly imagines the whole collection going up in flames, and experiences the

thought, "not as a fear but as a temptation" (409). Indeed, to discard the past *is* tempting, even freeing, but for Atwood, as for Freud, it must first be recovered before it can be relinquished.

#### IV

*Cat's Eye* was published sixteen years after *Surfacing* and eight years before *Alias Grace*, and it marks a very apparent sympathy with Freudian notions of trauma, repression and recovery.<sup>8</sup> This can be compared to Atwood's subsequent novel, *The Robber Bride* (1993), in which Charis, one of three main protagonists being tormented by the villainous Zenia, is also dealing with past trauma. Like *Cat's Eye*, *The Robber Bride* employs a present day narrative interspersed with narrative sequences from the past. One such retrospective episode reveals Charis's secret history of sexual abuse at the hands of her uncle and guardian. Charis—or Karen, as she then was—reacts to the abuse by entering into a dissociative state<sup>9</sup>: "Charis watches in amazement as the man grunts, as the small child wriggles and flails as if hooked through the neck" (262). This process becomes a conscious survival tactic: "As soon as Uncle Vern touches her she splits in two [...] and stays with the cooler part, the clearer part of herself. She has a name for this part now: she is Charis" (263-64). With adolescence the abuse stops and her uncle "hopes she's forgotten it all," but "[s]he remembers everything, or rather Karen does" (264). As a dependent teenager, Charis's memories resist her uncle's desire to negate the past; as an adult escaping her uncle's house, she instead undergoes a wilful process of repression: "*Karen* was a leather bag [...]. Charis collected everything she didn't want and shoved it into this name, this leather bag, and tied it shut. [...] she walked to the shore of Lake Ontario and sank the leather bag into the water" (265).

For Freud, the unconscious is 'created' by the need to repress something: "repression is not a defensive mechanism which is present from the very beginning," he explains: "it cannot arise until a sharp cleav-

age has occurred between conscious and unconscious mental activity" ("Repression" 569). The problem—which Michael Billig suggests Freud never resolved—is that repression cannot, by its nature, occur consciously, or knowingly. In effect, "[i]f we have secrets from ourselves, then not only must we forget the secrets, but we must also forget that we have forgotten them" (Billig 13). In *The Robber Bride*, however, Atwood envisions Charis's act of 'forgetting' as a deliberate decision to suppress (rather than repress) the unwanted past. Unlike Elaine in *Cat's Eye* and the narrator in *Surfacing*, Charis chooses to forget. This forgetting is similar in many ways to repression, and Charis experiences the same irrepressible return; in a time of great stress prompted by Zenia's manipulations, Charis's defences falter: "Karen is coming back, Charis can't keep her away any more" (266). Karen becomes Charis's alter, harbinger of Mary in *Alias Grace*; she is a Jungian "'shadow' or dark side of one's nature" (Bontatibus 359); and she echoes the return of Freud's repressed. She brings disruption and distress, but also occasionally necessary anger and unaccustomed potency.<sup>10</sup> In Charis, Atwood mimics a Freudian case-study of repression and return, but envisions the act of forgetting as a conscious tactic for survival rather than a passive symptom of neurosis. Niederhoff writes: "While *Surfacing* is about the necessity of surfacing, of emerging into the full light of knowledge, Grace must remain below the surface to survive" (86). *The Robber Bride* instead enacts a third possibility: Karen/Knowledge "come[s] to the surface" (266) despite Charis's conscious efforts to keep her submerged. In this novel, rather than choosing between knowing and not knowing, Charis is always cognisant of the truth, but equally asserts her authority over it. In *Alias Grace*, Atwood affords her protagonist an agency similar to Charis's: that is, Grace both knows and chooses not to know.

Indeed, it is arguably the figure of the psychoanalyst who comes under attack in Atwood's novels, rather than the process of recovering repressed truths. In *Surfacing*, *Cat's Eye* and *The Robber Bride*, each of Atwood's traumatised protagonists achieves some kind of emotional equilibrium, and does so alone: The narrator in *Surfacing* undertakes a

therapeutic retreat into nature; Elaine utilises art as a powerful means of expression; and Charis finds comfort in meditation and spiritualism. In contrast, Oryx and Grace, the two protagonists who most determinedly withhold their secrets, are also the two who are most persistently pressed into revelation by others. Both Jimmy in *Oryx and Crake* and Simon in *Alias Grace* seek to uncover their analysand's secrets in a manner that is frequently problematic. Just as Jimmy's unspoken desires colour his wish to know Oryx's past, so Simon experiences a powerful counter-transference during his sessions with Grace:

*Murderess, murderess*, he whispers to himself. It has an allure, a scent almost. Hothouse gardenias. Lurid, but also furtive. He imagines himself breathing it as he draws Grace towards him, pressing his mouth against her. *Murderess*. He applies it to her throat like a brand. (389)<sup>11</sup>

Niederhoff's reference to feminist critiques of psychoanalysis is pertinent here. Simon exemplifies a masculinist psychotherapy, in which the active (male) physician works to open the "locked box" (132) of his passive (female) patient's unconscious; analysing Grace, he thinks to himself: "He's got the hook in her mouth, but can he pull her out?" (322). Responding to inequitable relations, Grace asserts what small power she has, thinking to herself: "I have little enough of my own, no belongings, no possessions, no privacy to speak of, and I need to keep something for myself" (101).

In his article, Niederhoff discusses Atwood's evolving response to the biblical dictum "the truth shall make you free" (80-81), but *Alias Grace* also implicitly alludes to another line of Scripture: "Physician, heal thyself" (Luke 4:23). This directive applies to the increasingly emotionally entangled Simon as he fails to sustain professional distance; it also applies to the amateur analyst Jimmy, who revels in Oryx's miserable past while repressing his own childhood trauma of maternal abandonment, declaring: "I am not my childhood" (68). In *Alias Grace*, the reader's desire to know what *really* happened becomes conflated with Simon's attempts to unlock Grace's memory. In the same way, Jimmy's plaintive probing—"Just tell me [...]. I need you

to" (92)—resonates uncomfortably with the reader's desire to comprehend the enigmatic Oryx. Discussing the 2000 novel *The Blind Assassin*, Atwood describes the narrator Iris's dislike of confessional talk shows: "it's entertainment for other people, people watching it. What are they left with at the end? They're empty. They've spilled all the beans" (Solomon 233). A similar suspicion of the efficacy of revelation informs *Alias Grace* and *Oryx and Crake*. Both Grace and Oryx ultimately retain their secrets, but rather than indicating a lost faith in "the liberating power of true knowledge" (Niederhoff 87), these novels might be better read as resisting the psychoanalytic impulse to reveal and expose, asserting instead the protagonist's agency and ownership of the truth.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>I would like to thank the Institute of Advanced Study at the University of Durham for its generous support while this article was being written.

<sup>2</sup>As Niederhoff notes, Atwood cites Hacking's *Rewriting the Soul* in the "Acknowledgements" of *Alias Grace*.

<sup>3</sup>Niederhoff notes, for example, that the maid at Dr. Jordan's lodgings is called Dora, clearly recalling Freud's famous case study.

<sup>4</sup>In *Bodily Harm* (1981) and *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), for example, the act of seeking and asserting the truth—whether as a political journalist or as a political prisoner—is fundamentally bound up with liberty and justice. These novels make explicitly political statements about individual resistance to governmental concealment and distortion of the truth; in both, the revelation of truth is a morally urgent process. (See Tolan for further discussion.)

<sup>5</sup>For further discussion of this, see Vickroy.

<sup>6</sup>Freud discusses the death drive in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, in which he argues that "the aim of all life is death" (38).

<sup>7</sup>The ravine is filled with "deadly nightshade," "empty liquor bottles," and used condoms—"Even finding such a thing is dirty" (74-75)—and a girl is raped and murdered there: "It's as if this girl has done something shameful, herself, by being murdered" (241).

<sup>8</sup>Freud summarises the underlying principle of psychoanalysis, which largely coincides with the perspective of *Cat's Eye*: "If this repressed material is once more made part of the conscious mental functions—a process which supposes the overcoming of significant resistance—the psychic conflict which then arises, the same which the patient wishes to avoid, is made capable of a happier termination, under the guidance of the physician, than is offered by repression" ("Psychoanalysis" 196).

<sup>9</sup>See Hacking for an extended discussion of the developing clinical history of Multiple Personality Disorder and its relation to child abuse and dissociation. Hacking describes and questions the assumption, developed in the 1970s and 1980s, that "[a] child copes [with overwhelming trauma] by heightening the separation between behavioural states 'in order to compartmentalize overwhelming affects and memories generated by the trauma.' Children may in a sense deliberately enter into dissociative states" (88).

<sup>10</sup>On the night that Karen 'returns,' Charis conceives her daughter; later she muses: "She has always known who the father was, of course. There weren't any other choices. But the mother? Was it herself and Karen, sharing their body?" (266).

<sup>11</sup>Freud explains that 'transference' occurs when "a woman patient shows by unmistakable indications, or openly declares, that she has fallen in love [...] with the doctor who is analysing her" ("Observations" 378), and he warns against the possibility of 'counter-transference,' whereby similarly misplaced feelings are experienced by the analyst.

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## A Response to Burkhard Niederhoff's "The Return of the Dead in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* and *Alias Grace*"\*<sup>1</sup>

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Atwood's non-fiction work, *Negotiating with the Dead* (2002), underlines many of the concerns of her fiction. Her chapter's hypothesis is that "not just some, but *all* writing of the narrative kind, and perhaps all writing, is motivated, deep down, by a fear of and a fascination with mortality—by a desire to make the risky trip to the Underworld, and to bring something or someone back from the dead" (156). Atwood's characters are shown to be on such a trip; like many of us, they search the past and the dead for answers that will heal the wounds of life and fill the black holes of their identities in both present and future. Generally in Atwood's texts, encountering or speaking to the dead, the presumed dead, or a supposed revenant involves a mythic journey and descent to the Underworld (cf. Thompson folk motif F81). In Atwood's novels we see the unnamed narrator of *Surfacing* seeking her parents and her lost identity by symbolically transforming into an animal and diving into the past. In Burkhard Niederhoff's reading, Grace in *Alias Grace* searches for the dead Mary's part of herself (cf. Niederhoff 78) and for the meaning of the red peonies that are stained with blood. Toni and her friends in *The Robber Bride* quest for the supposed revenant Zenia and the Zenia parts of themselves, and Iris of *The Blind Assassin* struggles to release herself from the finished Laura plot. Even Offred of *The Handmaid's Tale*, Jimmy of *Oryx and Crake*, and Toby and Ren of *The Year of the*

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\*Reference: Burkhard Niederhoff, "The Return of the Dead in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* and *Alias Grace*," *Connotations* 16.1-3 (2006/2007): 60-91.

For the original article as well as all contributions to this debate, please check the *Connotations* website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debniederhoff01613.htm>>.

*Flood* continuously search the past and 'talk' to their presumed dead, hoping to understand the dystopian present. Atwood's poetry and neglected short fiction similarly explore this and related themes and motifs: the quest, the journey to and from the Underworld, the descent into darkness and the past, struggle for survival, civilization vs. wilderness, the encounter with mythological or folkloric entities, desire for transformation, the destruction and reconstruction of the self, and the recurrence of images of the moon, pieces, and magic. In keeping with Atwood's ironic and parodic postmodernist stance (Wilson, *Myths* 4-6), the journey in her short fiction is not simply a traditional mythic one, but displays both traditional and parodic mythic elements. Although our readings of the texts and of the roles of knowledge, parody, and postmodernism in Atwood differ,<sup>2</sup> Niederhoff focuses on the role of traditional myth in Atwood's works:

[O]ne of Atwood's central concerns is [...] restoration from death [...]. Admittedly, to survive does not literally mean to be restored from death, but it means to be restored from a near-death experience or from a situation which can be metaphorically described as death-in-life. (60)

Niederhoff agrees that the narrator of *Surfacing*, Grace of *Alias Grace*, and characters in the short stories "Death By Landscape" (*Wilderness Tips*), "The Entities" (*Moral Disorder*), "Nightingale" (*The Tent*), and many of Atwood's other characters are obsessed with ghosts and people returning from the underworld (61).

Although few critics discuss "Isis in Darkness" from Atwood's short fiction collection *Wilderness Tips* (1991), this short story again presents a character obsessed with a dead person. Richard's quest to uncover some meaning in the fragments of Selena's life is both traditional and ironic. Although she barely mentions "Isis in Darkness," Pamela Bromberg's "'Back from the Dead': Journeys to the Underworld in *Wilderness Tips*" argues that "*Wilderness Tips* is a collection of descent stories" and that, except for "'Hack Wednesday,' [...] the protagonist journeys into the past, [...] bringing them back to fleeting life through memory and storytelling, life that must always be 'lost again' when

the story ends." In "Isis in Darkness," however, she suggests that the protagonist is able to leave the past behind by becoming its archeologist (257-59). Arnold Davidson also sees patterns of interconnection in the stories of *Wilderness Tips* but reads them differently. The stories are about civilization versus wilderness, and many present "countering versions of the narratives they purport to relate[, illustrating] decentering and ironic postmodernism" characteristic of both feminist and Canadian fiction (185). Like "Death By Landscape," "Isis in Darkness" uses metafictional mirroring to link pulp romance to writing; Davidson suggests that Richard is engaging in sentimental romance rather than genuine writing. In other words, his writing about Selena resembles the "True Trash" of this volume's first story (Davidson 185). Carol Beran sees all these stories as about a stranger in an enclosed world, challenging readers to transform themselves into creative non-victims. Examining gender and power politics, Beran states: "Here, the man seems to have the power to create meaning" (77); yet Beran finds Richard ineffective in trying to construct Selena from his note cards. Few critics note that Classical, First People's, and Canadian myths, such as the frozen north, bushing, and Canadian or Toronto provinciality, are also evident in these stories. In addition to mythic patterns, *Wilderness Tips* embeds fairy-tale intertexts including "The Frog King," "Fitcher's Bird," "The Girl Without Hands," and "The Red Shoes" and folklore motifs such as a magic ball of hair and magic hairball used for bewitching, magic results produced by wishing, resuscitation by wishing, mutilation by punishment, and self-mutilation (Wilson, *Margaret Atwood's Fairy-Tale* 378n27). Like Atwood's other works, *Wilderness Tips* has more toads than princes and some parodic Sleeping Beauties and Rapunzels. It presents characters who are missing parts of themselves, who want to be transformed and rescued by others, and who make others into godmothers or Supermen.

In "Isis in Darkness," the unreliable narrator, Richard, sees Selena as a muse, an Isis, "The Egyptian Queen of Heaven and Earth" that is the subject of her poems and later, of the story he begins to write about

her. Both characters are on quests: he for her and, in his eyes, she for him: he expects her to emerge from an underground tunnel to the Mount Pleasant Cemetery and his epic situation. Even Mary Jo, the woman Richard later marries, is on a quest for herself. He thinks that Selena is simultaneously gathering pieces of the murdered and dismembered body of her lover, whom he ironically hopes to become, of her own body, and of the physical universe. As a parodic Osiris, the great cult god of Egypt who ruled over crops and later death and resurrection, Richard is symbolically in pieces and attempting to become whole through words.

In this story, Richard, whose "head is on the block" in his university job (82), presents Selena as the mythic Creator Goddess who could transform him and his dismembered world. Identified with Athena and Demeter, Isis is represented with a solar disk and cow's horns and is an earth and fertility goddess, the faithful wife of her brother and husband Osiris, and a personification of the throne. Her scarab earrings suggest resurrection (cf. Leach and Fried 976), but ironically not for either herself or Richard. In some versions of the myth, it is Isis whose head is cut off by her son Horus (also decapitated) and replaced with a cow's head by Thoth (Leach and Fried 529). Although Selena changes her name from overly prosaic Marjorie, a name Richard struggles to forget, her new name associates her with Selene, the ancient Greek moon goddess (Diana) that sleeps beside Endymion and whom he loves in his eternal sleep. Keats's "Endymion" is about the poet pursuing ideal perfection through his senses (Harvey 271). Selene is also the daughter or sister of Helios, the sun god, and Selene is the place where souls of the dead go (Leach and Fried 980). Thus, Selena represents this story's quest for the dead. To Richard, however, she also represents transformation, identity, and words.

It is Richard who projects various mythologies onto Selena to dichotomize her and Mary Jo, the cataloguing librarian he marries. In Richard's dichotomy, Mary Jo represents Toronto with its "white-bread ghetto," "cage-like desks," (60) and "pressure-cooked and strangled" (62) aspiring poets wanting to escape the "lumpen bour-

geoisie and the shackles of respectable wage-earning" (62) in the "academic salt mines" (67). Mary Jo is normal, "corned beef, cottage cheese, cod-liver oil, [...] milk" (70). With her he is comfortable being numb. Selena represents sometimes ludicrously naive imagination: creation myths about white-hot hatching eggs, arrival by Chinese golden birds, the mythic sleep-walker, *Aida* annihilation in a dark crypt, dragonfly costumes created from table cloths, and Richard's free verse anti-sonnets. She represents the group's confusion of sex and violence with art, loss, and all that is not Toronto even though she, too, feels trapped there. Nevertheless, she also represents the "real poem," which drops Richard through space and peels him open.

Even while Selena is still alive, Richard takes a mythic ferry to what he thinks of as an Underworld. They have lemonade communion with their peanut butter and jelly sandwiches while he fantasizes about burning "in divine conflagration" (72). But Selena warns him that "the light only shines for some, [...]. And even for them it's not all the time" (73). For years he works on an esoteric thesis and articles, reads dead poets, does not write poetry, and, even though he recognizes that his own poetry was no good, dreams of Selena as a goddess who represents "something of his own that he had lost" (74).

When Richard sees Selena for the next to the last time, she appears to be battered, and what she really seeks might be only a safe place to spend the night, which he and Mary Jo deny. On the last time, he hardly recognizes her; she has become "a short, thickish woman in a black trenchcoat" (80). Her face is blank, he has called her the wrong name, and she says she hates poetry: "It's just this. This is all there is. This stupid city." "We just changed, that's all, [...]. We got older" (81).

Although Richard no longer sees himself as capable of playing "a blue-eyed god with burning wings" (82) in the main story and remembers that Mary Jo sees him as slug-colored, he finally makes a realization somewhat similar to that of Toni in *The Robber Bride* and of other Atwood writer creators: he could be an archeologist; he could shape the past and determine meaning. But can he do so on note cards? Not for the first time, Atwood appears to be parodying her

own work. Is he still what one reader of his book *Spiritual Carnality* described as “*fatuously romantic*” (80; emphasis in original)? In this anti-tale as in other works,<sup>3</sup> Atwood’s text moves from amputation, including loss of senses and identity, to metamorphosis (Wilson, *Atwood’s Fairy-Tales, passim*), but the transformation Richard seeks starts aging and becomes decay. Even though Selena is dead, ironically Richard feels that now he will exist for her and that he will be created by her. Although this Isis is shattered, he will be “groping for the shape of the past” (83) and play a reversed gendered Isis by striving to put her pieces back together in the darkness. No matter how many times he shuffles his filing cards and begins again, however, he remains in the dark, fitting pieces together.

#### “The Bog Man” and “Death By Landscape”

Both “The Bog Man” and “Death By Landscape,” also from *Wilderness Tips*, feature mythological quests for someone dead and in the past who presumably could offer meaning. Like “Isis in Darkness,” both have self-conscious, unreliable centers of consciousness intent on discovering and telling a story, and both use subtle parody of the story-telling process. Interestingly, the stories are placed one after the other in the volume, following “Isis in Darkness.” In “The Bog Man,” Orkney crop circles, standing-stone ring sites, and the bog are the sacred sites. The mythological person is the bog man, and a blood-thirsty nature goddess such as Nerthus is responsible for his demise. In “Death By Landscape,” the mythological figures are Manitou, the name of the camp where Lois and her US friend, Lucy, go, and the Canadian wilderness itself, which apparently kills Lucy, whom Lois searches for in art—both the Group of Seven paintings in her apartment and the story she struggles to tell.

“The Bog Man” was originally a part of Atwood’s projected novel, “Destroying Angels,” that she worked on before starting *The Handmaid’s Tale* (Margaret Atwood Papers Box 106). By the second sentence

of her story, Julie in "The Bog Man" is already revising and contradicting herself about her breakup with the married Connor in the bog rather than the swamp, a word she prefers. Although she revises to say that the break-up was in a pub, we discover later that they actually break up at a Toronto phone booth. As one editor suggested, these changes indicate that one theme in the story is revision.<sup>4</sup> Although Connor is this story's literal archeologist, the narrator Julie appears to be on the same kind of quest. The story continually shifts focus, from Connor, to the well-preserved bog man, to Julie's naivety as she attempts to throw off socialized baggage and molding (e.g. "female domestic virtues") over the twenty-five or so years from the bog man episode. At the beginning, Julie, who fancies herself a pirate, wears rebellious black. She needs to worship someone, so she mythologizes, seeing Connor as a saint in a medieval painting surrounded by "a total-body halo" (89). Choosing self-sacrifice, she asks only that Connor continue to be superhuman. To her, even his wife becomes a monster with four heads and sixteen arms and legs. Connor thinks that the stone circles were sites of blood sacrifice, and Julie identifies with such "authentic" rituals probably performed by her Scottish ancestors. Crossing on a ferry to the bog, Connor shifts to study the Bog Man, whose skin and hair were preserved by the bog water so that he looks alive. After a procession for Nerthus or Terra Mater, a northern Teutonic fertility goddess, the goddess's slaves were drowned in the sacred lake (Leach and Fried 788). His feet were accidentally cut off when he was dug out. But the red-haired Connor (also extremely interested in self-sacrifice) cannot compare to the two-thousand-year-old, red-haired bog man, who was apparently strangled as a sacrifice to the Great Goddess. Recognizing that she finally prefers the Bog Man to Connor or the Norwegian scientist, Julie dreams of him climbing into her window, "a shape of baffled longing" (101). Eventually, when Julie becomes aware that she no longer wants Connor and that she has apparently transformed him into a shorter and saggier man, she sees him as an "ogre" and misses her "mistaken adoration" (105).



Thus, in one sense, Julie's story becomes a comic commentary on her own stupidity. In another, however, since Connor becomes "flatter and more leathery" and more dead, the "story is now like an artifact from a vanished civilization, the customs of which have become obscure" (106), so she appears to be another archeologist investigating the past. Conner is now an ironic Bog Man, who had been described as leathery and whose face was somewhat sunken in, and all that is left of Julie's days of piracy are starfish earrings. She is no goddess, and the magic of the Bog Man seems distant and lost in the past. She continuously reinvents the past, but again, the promised transformation is aging and death. If Connor is more dead in recent versions of Julie's story, she "is almost old" (106).

In "Death By Landscape," Lois is also caught in a continuous retelling and reinvention of the story of her friend's disappearance. She, too, is a kind of archeologist digging up the past. Mythically, again Lois seems to dive back to when she was 13 at Camp Manitou, hoping this time to see more than she did before, to find meaning in clues and in the story itself. The name "Manitou," important in Algonquian and other first people's languages and cultures, generally suggests supernatural power of particular beings who could be culture heroes, a house or heaven after death, gentle or evil, and who might live below or above earth (Leach and Fried 674). Thus, the name of the camp contributes to the mystery surrounding Lucy's disappearance, which seems supernatural since we cannot know whether she had an accident, committed suicide, chose to leave, encountered malice, or transformed into a tree. It also highlights the camp's theft and perversion of First People's culture and the irony of Lois's collusion with Cappie's "Indian" face paint and made-up language. Read as a ghost story, "Death By Landscape" could suggest that the landscape and its earlier inhabitants and deities eradicate a non-Canadian tourist and take back their own. Read in the tradition of Atwood's *Survival* (1972) and Canada's many "survival" stories in which people do not survive, such as Grove's "Snow," Roberts's "Strayed," Ross's "The Painted Door," and Joyce Marshall's "The Old Woman" (see Weaver). It can

also suggest the land's revenge on the careless and unaware. After all, the title of the story is "Death By Landscape." Even the name of the place where Lucy disappears, Lookout Point, conveys not only that it has a view but that one should look out or be careful. These campers, who have as mascot a moulting moose head named Monty Manitou, are ignorant and lack reverence for Nature, the land, and people who have lived there. But "landscape" does not equate to "land." Although Lois had initially referred to her paintings as landscapes, she later explains that they are not landscapes "[b]ecause there aren't any landscapes up there, not in the old, tidy European sense" (128). Whereas she had referred to the "background" of loon sounds before Lucy disappeared, the paintings have an infinite regress of foreground (121). Thus, it appears that Lucy substitutes human construction (both the paintings and her anthropomorphism of Nature) for "reality," much as, on close inspection, the unaccredited Wilderness cover for the first Doubleday edition appears to be a photograph of embroidered fabric rather than trees.<sup>5</sup>

Of the three narrators we have been examining, Lois especially seems to be living what Burkhard Niederhoff calls "death-in-life" (60). She can hardly remember what her husband looked like or the births of her two children, and even after he dies and her children are grown up, she feels as if someone is looking out of her wilderness paintings, she is living two lives, and she is listening for another voice (128). She thinks these paintings depict a "tangle, a receding maze, in which you can become lost almost as soon as you step off the path. There are no backgrounds [...] only a great deal of foreground that goes back and back, endlessly, involving you in its twists and turns of tree and branch and rock" (128-29).

Ironically, by the end Lois is one of the few Atwood narrators who apparently manages to bring the person she is obsessed with back from the dead: because Lucy could not be found in the outside world, in which Lois has little interest anyway, Lois finds her in her apartment, "in the holes that open inwards on the wall, not like windows but like doors. She is here. She is entirely alive" (129). So, in her eyes,

her quest for the dead and the past is successful. To her readers, however, she herself seems to disappear, into the maze of trees in her apartment, so that, in a way, she and her "twin" Lucy change places and reverse the myth: if Lucy is alive only in a simulation of the wilderness within the city, Lois vanishes through a door that is no exit and which seems to offer death rather than treasure.

In the *Wilderness Tips* stories we have examined, the three narrators' mythological quests have questionable results. Richard, Julie, and Lois all persevere in their quests and, to varying degrees, gain some self-insight. They are not heroic, however, and seem self-sacrificial. Richard's archeological role is mainly passive: "he will be created by her [Selena]"; he has a calling but he thinks of it as a "fate." His vision is still weak (82). Lois sacrifices herself to her quest for a person to whom she feels inferior. Hardly leaving her apartment, certainly never to visit the wilderness, she finally vanishes into her story of the past. Julie, however, recognizes that she has been "seen" enough in her relationship with Connor and that she has been self-deceived. Her story becomes less a mystery story about men and more and more about herself rather than the "dead" past she has been seeking. It is still, however, herself in the past, and she needs to re-create story and self again and again. Because "Isis in Darkness," "The Bog Man," and "Death By Landscape" all to some extent parody mythological quests, they are anti-myths and anti-tales. Nevertheless, all three possess a depth and resonance that connect to and remythify the stories' mythological patterns.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>This is the revised version of a paper presented at the International Short Story Conference, York University, June 16-19, 2010.

<sup>2</sup>Niederhoff continually refers to the unreliable narrator's fetus as a child in *Surfacing*, and he assumes that Grace has split or multiple personalities when she

pretends to be hypnotized by her peddler friend, Jerome DuPont, who poses as a psychiatrist (see Wilson, "Quilting"). The theme of the search for the dead should also be explored in Atwood's little discussed short fiction.

<sup>3</sup>An anti-tale is a parody of a "straight" or traditional tale.

<sup>4</sup>In correspondence with Atwood concerning publication of "The Bog Man" in *Playboy*, Alice Turner refers to this theme when advising that the frame of the story is too long so that the reader is "bonked on the head" with details, such as Julie's "pirate" characteristics, which Atwood says she would "fight to retain" (Atwood Papers, Correspondence with *Playboy*, *Wilderness Tips* Box 109).

<sup>5</sup>The jacket design is by Whitney Cookman. The 1991 McClelland and Stewart edition, however, features a painting by Frida Kahlo of a deer with Kahlo's face who has been hit with arrows. The forest does have background.

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## Surfacing from Six Feet Under: A Response to Burkhard Niederhoff\*

LORRAINE YORK

Early in his paper on the return of the dead in two novels by Margaret Atwood, Burkhard Niederhoff wisely steers clear of the old Canadian national thematic chestnut, survival. "Whether survival really constitutes the central theme of Canadian literature," he writes, "is a question that need not detain us here" (60). What he redirects our attention to, instead, is the way in which one type of survival—or, more specifically, persistence—recurs in Atwood's fictional, poetic, and non-fictional oeuvre: the return of the dead from the underworld. The two novels that Niederhoff carefully examines, *Surfacing* and *Alias Grace*, date from 1972 and 1996 respectively, but the fascination with voyages from Hades persists in Atwood's thought, as witnessed in her 2000 Empson Lectures at Cambridge, published in 2002 as *Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing*. The title neatly encapsulates Atwood's thesis: that writing is a species of unworldly congress with the departed; a means of making the irretrievable potentially retrievable through the invigoration of texts by readers. Niederhoff goes further, though, than a simple tracing of this motif through two works by Atwood: in my response to his further analysis, I will, first of all, think about the application of his interpretation to other works, ponder his major insights, and suggest an additional critical framework, that of the postcolonial gothic, through which we might understand the implications of these ghostly encounters. Travellers from the under-

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For the original article as well as all contributions to this debate, please check the *Connotations* website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debniederhoff01613.htm>>.

world may bring us the sort of difficult knowledge that embraces possibility as well as trauma and loss, and so the ghostly recall of the past does not need to leave us, Orpheus-like, grieving over the loss of Eurydice. Such forms of difficult knowledge may be housed not only in the psyche but in national acts of recalling, such as the Canadian government's June 2008 apology to First Nations for the treatment of children in residential schools; though survival may not be the litmus test of literary Canadianness, its difficult lessons are intertwined with our acts of collective historical recall.

First of all, the sign of a convincing reading of selected texts by one author is its capacity to illuminate others. And this is certainly the case with Niederhoff's reading of the Atwoodian revenants of *Surfacing* and *Alias Grace*. Both of these novels are resolutely serious in tone, notwithstanding the eruption, from time to time, of Atwood's characteristically wry epigrammatic wit. But what if we apply this study to a comic novel such as *Lady Oracle*? The analysis holds, and it has the potential to deepen our reading of Atwood's comedy. As Niederhoff recalls, the peddler Jeremiah in *Alias Grace* tells Grace that she is "one of us," "presumably implying that she has a special telepathic gift," and later he suggests "that she join him, earning a living as a traveling clairvoyant and communicating hidden knowledge to their clients" (Niederhoff 84-85). In the world of *Alias Grace*, this episode prefigures the complex knowledge that Grace holds as one who has travelled to the underworld (of loss, murder, trauma) and brings back into (semi)consciousness during her hypnosis. But in a comic register, we have Joan Foster, twenty years earlier, being told repeatedly by the spiritualist Leda Sprout that she has "great powers" and should use rather than deny them (*Lady Oracle* 206). Indeed, much of the novel has to do with ghostly visitors—Joan's dead mother, her Aunt Lou, and everyone she leaves behind when she fakes her suicide and removes secretly to Italy; at one point, she has a Felliniesque vision of all of them randomly congregated upon a beach, smiling and waving to her (9). This tableau, which insouciantly mixes the dead and the living neatly encapsulates Niederhoff's perception that "in Atwood's fiction,

the spirits of the departed are much more intricately entangled with the souls of the living to whom they return" (63). When Joan, the living revenant, finally emerges from her underworld, she enacts a reverse baptism of sorts, using a Cinzano bottle to brain the reporter who was nosing around her apartment (*Lady Oracle* 344). But rather than offering a comforting resolution of Joan's duplicitous, multiple selves, Atwood places in its stead a wry recognition of the mixed bag of personal history: "It did make a mess; but then, I don't think I'll ever be a very tidy person" (345). This ending, of course, prefigures the later, 'serious' novel's revelation of Grace's alternate selves, interpreted by many critics as multiple personality disorder, but it does no more to resolve them into one compliant identity than the ending of *Alias Grace* does.

One of Niederhoff's major points is that Atwood's revenants are not only restored from death into the realm of life; like many of their classical literary precedents, they are also restored to death: "restoration to death and restoration from death are connected" (67). The revenant appears amongst the living often to signal a need to be put to rest; clearly, the Styx is a two-way river. This perception fills many texts, and one might equally look back to *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, as Niederhoff does, or forward to contemporary popular cultural texts. One of the most compelling of these, in recent years, was HBO's television series *Six Feet Under*, which ran for five seasons from 2001 through 2005. This dramatic series traces the various entanglements and personal traumas of the Fisher family, owners and operators of a funeral home in Los Angeles, beginning with the Christmas Eve death of the family patriarch, Nathaniel Fisher, Sr. He continues to make his presence felt in the family, to put it lightly, far into the series, appearing in nineteen of the sixty-three episodes. On the first anniversary of Nathaniel Sr.'s death, each family member resurrects their father as a revenant, remembering, with complex mixtures of tenderness, shame and mourning, the last conversation they had with him, as a means of both calling him back to life and consigning him to his death.



Niederhoff's analysis deepens with the awareness that this calling of the revenant both to life and to death is caught up with the fundamental question of knowledge. Typically, the revenant has or represents some form of knowledge; this is as true of the Greek epics as it is of my recent popular culture example of *Six Feet Under*. As Atwood writes in *Negotiating with the Dead*, King Saul, Odysseus, Aeneas, and Macbeth all turn to otherworldly realms in order to learn information about the future, though, as she acknowledges, in Macbeth's case, the request "backfires; [...] he learns all about the glorious future of somebody else's descendents" (169). Niederhoff compares the status of otherworldly knowledge in *Surfacing* and *Alias Grace* and comes to an intriguing conclusion: Atwood's position on enlightenment epistemologies has changed dramatically over those twenty-four years. Whereas, in *Surfacing*, the truth shall set the narrator free, in *Alias Grace*, it is a distinctly mixed blessing. Indeed, he argues that in *Alias Grace*, Atwood presents "[a] powerful argument against knowledge" (84). Grace has, in fact, no direct knowledge of the murders, and, in psychological terms, it is better for her that way. She has been shielded from the trauma that, in many ways, stands in for many other traumatic occurrences in her life: the death of her mother, possible sexual abuse at the hands of her father, and Mary Whitney's death from a botched abortion. Compare the seemingly bald language of empirical observation in Atwood's *Surfacing*: the unnamed narrator's confrontation of the mysteriously amoebic floating blob in the lake occasions her recognition—as Niederhoff says (cf. 65), her anagnorisis—of the source of her trauma, the abortion of her fetus. For this reason, Niederhoff observes, psychoanalytic paradigms, with their assumption that neuroses need to be spoken into consciousness through therapy, are appropriate to this novel. Niederhoff rightly associates this psychoanalytic scene of revelation and recognition with the empirical language of *Survival*, wherein the much-discussed 'victim positions' are, essentially, various states of denial or knowing. One climbs the vertical path from the former to the latter, throwing off

the shackles of ignorance. But in *Alias Grace*, all such epistemological bets are off.

This growing recognition of the difficulty of knowledge is one that is, I think, crucial to a reading of Atwood's developing vision. Increasingly, she comes to see prophecy as a risky business, and in this she has much of the literary tradition of revenant seers on her side. From Aeschylus to Christa Wolf, Cassandras rarely fare well in their projects of speaking truth to power. Even in a fairly early poem sequence, "Circe/Mud" from *You Are Happy* (1974), though, we can see the stirrings of this awareness of the seamier sides of otherworldly knowledge. Atwood's wisecracking prophet reminds Odysseus that "To know the future / there must be a death. / Hand me the axe" (*Selected Poems* 181). Clearly, prophecy does not come cheap.

I want to take this important insight about Atwood's epistemological shift and suggest other perspectives from which we can view the challenges of such difficult knowledges. Niederhoff helpfully sums up the conflicting critical positions on *Alias Grace* as the "difference between reading *Alias Grace* as a psychological study of multiple personality disorder or as a Gothic fiction about the possession by a ghost" (78), but there is also the possibility of seeing her haunted existence through the growing critical interest in postcolonial revenants. Critical works such as Cynthia Sugars's "The Impossible Afterlife of George Cartwright: Settler Melancholy and Postcolonial Desire," Marlene Goldman and Joanne Saul's, "Talking With Ghosts: Haunting in Canadian Cultural Production," and Sugars's and Gerry Turcotte's collection of essays, *Unsettled Remains: Canadian Literature and the Postcolonial Gothic* (2009) all fasten upon the revenant as the unsettling reminder of a troubled and exclusionary national past: a ghostly trace of colonialism. In this critical approach, though, the uncanny revenants are not necessarily or exclusively portents of pain and trauma; they can also provide the ground upon which alternate choices can be imagined. True, as Niederhoff points out, "literary ghosts are often associated with dangerous and disturbing knowledge about the past" (82). Protagonists can be unsure as to how to receive

these ghostly messengers; as Niederhoff recalls Grace Marks's reluctance to consult a medium: "I don't go in for any of that, as you never know what might come out of it" (455; qtd. Niederhoff 84). Again, in a comic register, I recall *Lady Oracle's* Aunt Lou and her similar reservations about Automatic writing experiments: "I didn't like that feeling of being, well, taken over. I felt I should leave it alone, and I would too if I were you, dear" (113). Like all such cautions in the Gothic mode, however ("Don't go near the maze, Miss, is my advice to you" [*Lady Oracle* 30]), this one is disregarded by the heroine.

Niederhoff's perception, that these ghostly insights are not exclusively negative, makes an argumentative move away from psychoanalysis and trauma theory, wherein psychosis or traumatic damage are certainly not conceived as salutary. See his description of Grace Marks's quilting of patches from garments by Nancy, Mary and herself as both a symbol of "the co-existence of different personalities in Grace" (psychosis) and a "change for the better, a reconciliation of sorts" (80). To extend the analysis, it may be comparable to that ethically challenging balance among three other women—Charis, Roz and Tony—and Atwood's ultimate in horrific revenants, Zenia. Thought to have been blown up in Beirut, she rises again to spread mayhem before she, too, is returned to death, but not before the three women she plagues are moved to acknowledge this thing of darkness as theirs.

The reverse may also be true: resurrections that appear to bring renewed opportunities are capable of a more sombre reading; in *Lady Oracle*, Joan Delacourt is surprised to learn that her mild-mannered anesthetist father has been known to revive those who have attempted suicide, and some of those who have so wanted to die are anything but pleased to be resurrected. One of them suddenly and violently shows up at the Delacourt house, pounding on their front door and vowing to kill Joan's father. "You'd be surprised how many of them are glad," he explains to Joan's mother in the aftermath of this upsetting incident. Clearly, though, what Joan calls this "resurrectionist

side of his personality" (73)—bringing the dead back to life—is not the uncomplicated good that many people would hold it to be.

The break with enlightenment epistemologies, which allows Atwood to perceive that not all knowledge is an uncomplicated good, can also inform readings of hurtful histories. The ghosts of the past, not only a personal but a national past, bring with them their painful traumas, to be sure, but also a ground from which to imagine alternative justices. As Atwood wrote in *Negotiating with the Dead*: "All writers must go from *now* to *once upon a time*; all must go from here to there; all must descend to where the stories are kept; all must take care not to be captured and held immobile by the past" (178). This is, it seems to me, a crucial insight. In reading Atwood's texts for their complex hospitalities to messengers from the past who bring us their stories, as Burkhard Niederhoff instructs us to do, we find a promising means of reading not only her work but the work of many of her contemporaries who bear witness to difficult and painful truths about the past while not being "captured and held immobile" by them.

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## Ghosts, Knowledge and Truth in Atwood: A Reader's Guide to Six Responses\*

BURKHARD NIEDERHOFF

I have been delighted and enlightened by the six responses to "The Return of the Dead in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* and *Alias Grace*." The aim of the present reply is to assist readers in finding their way around my essay and the various comments and criticisms contained in the responses. Thus I will first summarize how the responses relate to my argument (contradiction, extension, elaboration, ...) and what their principal claims are. Then I will conclude with some remarks in defence of my views.

My essay may be summed up as follows. There are several ghosts in *Surfacing*, most notably the narrator's parents and her child, whom she imagines to be living with her divorced husband. The narrator needs to confront these ghosts and to recover the painful knowledge associated with them before she can be restored from her death-in-life

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\*Reference: Burkhard Niederhoff, "The Return of the Dead in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* and *Alias Grace*," *Connotations* 16.1-3 (2006/2007): 60-91; Janice Fiamengo, "Truths of Storytelling: A Response to Burkhard Niederhoff," *Connotations* 19.1-3 (2009/2010): 53-67; Eleonora Rao, "A Response to 'The Return of the Dead in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* and *Alias Grace*,'" *Connotations* 19.1-3 (2009/2010): 68-78; Margaret Rogerson, "Should We Believe Her? Margaret Atwood and Uncertainty: A Response to Burkhard Niederhoff," *Connotations* 19.1-3 (2009/2010): 79-91; Fiona Tolan, "The Psychoanalytic Theme in Margaret Atwood's Fiction: A Response to Burkhard Niederhoff," *Connotations* 19.1-3 (2009/2010): 92-106; Sharon R. Wilson, "A Response to Burkhard Niederhoff's 'The Return of the Dead in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* and *Alias Grace*,'" *Connotations* 19.1-3 (2009/2010): 107-18; Lorraine York, "Surfacing from Six Feet Under: A Response to Burkhard Niederhoff," *Connotations* 19.1-3 (2009/2010): 119-25.

For the original article as well as all contributions to this debate, please check the *Connotations* website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debniederhoff01613.htm>>.

state. *Alias Grace* shares many characteristics with the earlier novel: the detective plot, the traumatising of the narrator, the impact of this traumatising on her memory, the presence of ghosts, and the ambivalent nature of these ghosts, who haunt the protagonists but also help them to survive. Despite the many similarities, there is one crucial difference between the two novels. Whereas in *Surfacing* recovering the knowledge of one's past has a salutary effect, the survival of the protagonist in *Alias Grace* depends on the repression of such self-knowledge. It is not knowing the truth that makes Grace free.

While the writers of the responses have paid me very handsome compliments, none of them has extended her politeness so far as to actually agree with me on an important point. My reading of *Alias Grace* takes the hypnosis scene in chapter 48 at face value: Grace is possessed by the ghost of her friend Mary Whitney, who behaves like an alter in a case of dissociative identity disorder (or multiple personality); it is this being who seizes control of her body from time to time and who also participated in the murder of Nancy Montgomery. Thus there is a solution to the detective plot. While Grace herself remains ignorant of this solution, the reader is in the know. Many critics see this solution as merely one hypothesis among many others. On this view, the difference between *Surfacing* and *Alias Grace* consists in a shift to postmodern scepticism and uncertainty: *Alias Grace* is a work of historiographical metafiction that emphasizes the unknowability of history and offers many different versions of the past without privileging any one of them.<sup>1</sup> Margaret Rogerson devotes her response to a defence of this view against my reading. She points out that the credentials of the professional in charge of the hypnosis, Dr DuPont alias Jeremiah the peddler, do not inspire much confidence, and she argues that, in *Alias Grace* as well as in other works, Atwood plays the role of a narrative trickster who uses "the technique of uncertainty [and] challenges readers to come to conclusions but also problematizes whatever they invent" (90).

Like Rogerson, Janice Fiamengo reads *Alias Grace* along sceptical lines, arguing that "[t]he ambiguities of the hypnotism scene [...] are

inextricable from the narrative playfulness and skepticism that characterize the novel as a whole" (55). However, Fiamengo interestingly differs from Rogerson and from many other critics in that she takes a surprisingly dim view of this playful scepticism. In her comparison of the two novels, she expresses a clear preference for the earlier one. *Surfacing*, she argues, is an original and unorthodox novel out of step with the cultural fashions of its day. It undermines Canadian anti-Americanism by revealing the similarities between Canada and America, it is critical of sexual liberation and of abortion, and it explores difficult moral and religious themes such as evil, sin and redemption. *Alias Grace*, on the other hand, conforms to the *zeitgeist* of the mid-90s, for instance in its use of repressed memory syndrome, in its endorsement of female discursive empowerment, and in its somewhat simplistic and unfavourable portrayal of the Victorian male elite. Furthermore, Fiamengo makes a distinction between two types of ambiguity that also works in favour of the earlier novel. While *Surfacing* is a work rich in meaning, suggesting a broad spectrum of diverse readings, *Alias Grace* is merely a clever puzzle with several mutually exclusive solutions.

The remaining four responses elaborate on my argument or extend it to other works by Atwood (while being in greater or lesser agreement with its assumptions). Eleonora Rao discusses the return of the dead in connection with Zenia in *The Robber Bride* (1993). She points out the cultural nationalism underpinning Zenia and other revenants created by Atwood; these are meant to compensate for the absence of mythical depth, for the famous lack of ghosts that Canada is said to be haunted by. Rao also claims that both in *The Robber Bride* and *Alias Grace* female identity remains unknowable and elusive, thus arguing along the lines of postmodern uncertainty also followed by Rogerson and Fiamengo. Lorraine York shows that the return of the dead also occurs, in a comic fashion, in *Lady Oracle* (1976). She suggests an additional theoretical framework for Atwood's revenants, that of the postcolonial Gothic (which remains, however, a little vague to my mind), and she interestingly extends the scope of the discussion to

prophecy, i.e. to a problematic and dangerous knowledge of the future. Sharon Wilson explores the return of the dead and related motifs in "Isis in Darkness," "The Bog Man" and "Death by Landscape," three short stories from *Wilderness Tips* (1991), drawing on her research on myth and fairy tales in contemporary writing in general and in Atwood in particular. She portrays Atwood as a parodic postmodernist, pointing out the presence of traditional myths like the Osiris story as well as the ironic inflections with which such myths are retold.

Fiona Tolan focuses on the remarks that I make about psychoanalysis in connection with the different roles of knowledge in the two novels. *Surfacing*, I argue, is in broad agreement with the Freudian assumption that the recovery of repressed memory and painful knowledge is a precondition of mental health, while *Alias Grace* is critical of this assumption and of psychoanalysis in general. Tolan puts the implied evolutionary thesis about Atwood's changing attitude to psychoanalysis to the test by analyzing Freudian themes in *Cat's Eye* (1988), *The Robber Bride* and *Oryx and Crake* (2003). She argues that, even in her later novels, Atwood has greater sympathy for psychoanalysis than I give her credit for. There is a critique in these novels not of psychoanalysis as such but of the (male) therapist and his desire to extract knowledge from a (female) patient. "[R]ather than indicating a lost faith in 'the liberating power of true knowledge' [Niederhoff 87], these novels might be better read as resisting the psychoanalytic impulse to reveal and expose, asserting instead the protagonist's agency and ownership of the truth" (104).

In her readings of the three novels, Tolan draws some illuminating parallels, in particular with *Alias Grace*. Jimmy's request, in *Oryx and Crake*, that the enigmatic Oryx tell him about the sexual exploitation she has suffered is similar to Simon's talking cure with Grace, and Oryx's refusal to tell her story resembles the gaps and omissions in Grace's narrative. The most pertinent parallel is probably the one between Grace and Charis in *The Robber Bride*, who also responds to sexual abuse by a dissociation of identity. On the crucial question of



Grace's knowledge or ignorance of her involvement in the murders, the comparison with Charis leads Tolan to the following conclusion (which I find ingenious but too paradoxical to stomach): "[R]ather than choosing between knowing and not knowing, Charis is always cognisant of the truth, but equally asserts her authority over it. In *Alias Grace*, Atwood affords her protagonist an agency similar to Charis's: that is, Grace both knows and chooses not to know" (102).

By way of conclusion, I would like to say a few words in defence of my own reading, in particular in defence of my dissent from the sceptical interpretations of *Alias Grace*. The hypnosis scene is of crucial importance here: do we accept the solution suggested by this scene or do we consider it to be just another instance of the proliferation of stories, of different versions of the unknowable past? Admittedly, the presence of Jeremiah complicates matters. On a previous occasion, he offers Grace a partnership and a career change from servant to travelling clairvoyant; the implication is that they would put on a well-paid act for happily deceived audiences (267-68). When Grace encounters Jeremiah alias Dr DuPont again at the prison governor's house, she reminds us of his gifts as a magician: "I could have laughed with glee; for Jeremiah had done a conjuring trick, as surely as if he'd pulled a coin from my ear [...] just as he used to do such tricks in full view, with everyone looking on" (306). After these feelings of glee, however, Grace experiences other emotions: "But then I recalled that he'd once travelled around as a Mesmerist, and done medical clairvoyance at fairs, and really did know the arts of such things, and might put me into a trance. And that brought me up short, and gave me pause to consider" (306; my italics). On an earlier occasion, Jeremiah tells Grace, "You are one of us," suggesting that she has a telepathic talent and a secret knowledge, not that she is a good actress (155).

The point of the hypnosis is not that Jeremiah is pulling a coin from Grace's ear or a made-up story from her mind but that, despite our anticipations of such trickery, it releases something that no one has planned or expected. The experiment turns into a mixture of hypnosis and séance, in which the dialogue with the voice of Mary Whitney is

orchestrated with knocks and raps that indicate the presence of other ghostly visitors. This is not the “fully scientific procedure” announced by Dr DuPont (396), who loses control of the proceedings and is as bewildered as the others. He has to ask Mrs Quenell for help (399), sounds “desperate” (402) and “shaken” (405) and admits to Simon and Reverend Verringer that he does not know what to make of the experiment (405). The behaviour of Grace alias Mary during the hypnosis also makes it difficult to believe that it might be an act. Elsewhere in the novel she is a modest, almost prudish person who apologizes to Simon for even mildly indecent language (116, 119, 158) and objects to the “filthy talk” of the prison guards (240). The voice in the hypnosis scene gives a “high, erotic moan” in front of an audience of gentlemen and gentlewomen, sneers at Simon’s sexual fantasies about the prison governor’s daughter who is sitting next to him, and refers to the latter as a “slut” with a “little furry mousehole” (400). Grace would have to be a superb actress indeed to do this in a convincing manner.

The solution of the hypnosis scene also makes sense of passages that would otherwise remain enigmatic, contradictory or pointless. It fits in with the hints at child abuse, which is considered the most common cause of dissociative identity disorder, and with the references to the ghosts of Mary and of Grace’s mother (see my original article 75-79). It also explains Grace’s periods of amnesia, the comments made by others about her strangeness or insanity (e.g. 278, 314), and James Walsh’s testimony against her at the trial, which conflicts with her own memories (360). Stephanie Lovelady points out another reason why it is unlikely that Grace is putting on an act in the hypnosis scene. Admittedly, Grace is not entirely truthful when she tells her story to Simon, occasionally withholding events or opinions. But the reader is privy to her thoughts and knows what she omits, and “even in her own interior monologue she [Grace] never admits to the murders or hints that she has any memory of them” (Lovelady 57).

The main argument against seeing the hypnosis scene as an act is the lack of a plausible motivation. If Grace and Jeremiah wanted to

put on a performance, they would not insult their audience in such a gross fashion, and they would come up with a story a little more likely to get Grace out of prison. The question of motivation is connected with the question of character, on which Fiamengo makes a pertinent point: "Grace may be a schizophrenic victim unaware of her alternate personality [...] or a deceptive sociopath [...]. Or she may be a girl who has struggled to survive against the odds, using the resources available [...]. She cannot be all three" (58). As Fiamengo sees similar amounts of evidence for all of these hypotheses, Grace to her is a cleverly constructed riddle rather than a reasonable likeness of a complex human being. Thus it becomes "difficult for the reader to respond to her [Grace] as a fully realized character" (57).

I am quoting this conclusion not because I agree with it but because it very clearly states a consequence of the sceptical reading. This consequence is a sacrifice of character, which not all of the critics who opt for this reading are as clearly aware of as Fiamengo. My own sense of Grace (and also of Simon Jordan and Rachel Humphrey) is different. The characterization of Grace has both depth and detail. The reader knows very much about her, including the clothes she is wearing, the work she is doing and the innermost thoughts that are going through her mind. The reader can also respond to and sympathize with her. In one of the most powerful chapters of the novel (little discussed by critics in pursuit of uncertainty), Grace tells Simon how her family crossed the Atlantic when she was twelve years old, how her mother died at sea under extremely squalid circumstances, and how she had to make arrangements for the burial as her father was too ill or too indifferent to do so. A telling detail is the choice of a sheet for her mother's body: "And then I began to worry terribly, because all we had was the three sheets" (12). Eventually Grace chooses an old rather than a new one, preferring the interest of the living to the honour of her mother, and feeling guilty about it afterwards. According to the sceptical view, the chapter is primarily about the narrator Grace who is playing with Simon and the reader, creating one of many images of herself. To my mind, we hear a compelling

story of suffering amidst unspeakable squalor, which creates a strong interest in the character Grace and adds crucial touches to our image of her. It shows her intense grief and despair but also her resilience and her sense of responsibility. Furthermore, it is a traumatic experience that anticipates her reaction to the similarly traumatic death of Mary Whitney. Grace is haunted by the idea that the ghost of her mother is trapped in the ship, and she reveals a peculiar tendency to mix up her own identity with that of the women close to her: "I felt as if it was me and not my mother that had died; and I sat as if paralyzed, and did not know what to do next" (120). The evidence in this chapter and in many others makes it difficult to think of Grace as a narrative gambler who keeps her cards close to her chest and plays them for purely strategic reasons.

Finally, it should be kept in mind that the solution suggested by the hypnosis is by no means a neat and tidy one; it does not deprive the novel of all of its ambiguities. It rather shifts the focus of ambiguity and uncertainty from epistemology to psychology and ethics. Fiamengo points out that one cannot speak of the Grace of the final chapter as a fully healed and balanced person (56). There is an instability about her identity which is reminiscent of the classic treatments of the double theme. "Here then, as I lay down the pen and proceed to seal up my confession, I bring the life of that unhappy Henry Jekyll to an end" (Stevenson 76). This is the final sentence of *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, written by the doctor himself—or is it? Who precisely is the "I" who refers in such a distant fashion to "that unhappy Henry Jekyll"? Similarly, the plural pronoun in Grace's concluding words, "And so we will all be together," creates a final note of uncertainty about the precise nature of this coexistence. Have the ghosts of Mary and Nancy been laid to rest, or will they continue to haunt Grace?

The solution suggested by the hypnosis scene also poses an ethical problem. If we have no way of knowing whether Grace was involved at all in the murders, questions about her guilt or innocence remain rather hypothetical. If we accept the solution, however, these ques-

tions become much more insistent. “We cannot be mere patchworks!” exclaims Reverend Verringer after the hypnosis. “It is a horrifying thought, and one that, if true, would make a mockery of all notions of moral responsibility” (406). Fiamengo argues that *Alias Grace* focuses on rather safe and topical issues, while *Surfacing* explores more universal and difficult themes like sin, evil and redemption (59-60). But precisely these ethical and religious themes play a central role in *Alias Grace*. They are represented, for instance, in the quilt, a “Tree of Paradise,” which Grace is making in the final chapter, and they are also echoed in an important comment in the same chapter. Grace’s husband, Jamie Walsh, asks her for forgiveness, thus casting himself in the role of culpable agent and Grace in the role of innocent victim. Grace finds this too simplistic:

It is not the culprits who need to be forgiven; rather it is the victims, because they are the ones who cause all the trouble. [...]

I had a rage in my heart for many years, against Mary Whitney, and especially against Nancy Montgomery; against the two of them both, for letting themselves be done to death in the way that they did, and for leaving me behind with the full weight of it. For a long time I could not find it in me to pardon them. It would be much better if Mr Walsh would forgive me, rather than being so stubborn about it and wanting to have it the wrong way around. (457-58)

This comment is reminiscent of an often-quoted passage in the final chapter of *Surfacing*, in which the refusal to be a victim is also connected with an acceptance of responsibility. “This above all, to refuse to be a victim. Unless I can do that I can do nothing. I have to recant, give up the old belief that I am powerless and because of it nothing I can do will ever hurt anyone” (185). Like the narrator of *Surfacing*, Grace is not innocent because, in Atwood, victims are not entirely innocent. Nor is Grace entirely a victim—to what extent she is guilty, to what extent she can be considered an agent and a victimizer as well as a victim, is an open question that the reader is left to ponder at the end of the novel.

NOTE

<sup>1</sup>For a list of critics holding this view, see notes 9 and 10 in my original essay; see also Sharon Wilson's article "Quilting as Narrative Art."

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## About Lew Welch\*

ARAM SAROYAN

*I'm very smart, and over-educated, and so on, but you know—and I can make all kinds of points about that kinda shit—but what I really would like to do is—wouldn't it be wonderful to write a song or a story that anybody would say at his hearth on any given evening just because he loved the way it went? And that's what I want to do. And I think that that is what poetry is about.*

Lew Welch  
in an interview with David Meltzer  
July 17, 1969

In the spring of 1976, I visited the offices of KPFA, the listener-sponsored radio station in Berkeley, with Donald Allen, Lew Welch's literary executor, editor and publisher, who had been asked by the station to help put together a memorial program devoted to Welch to be aired in May, some five years after his disappearance.

While we were there, Eric Bauersfeld, the station's literary director, played a little of each of the half-a-dozen or so tapes of Welch that were in the station's archives, and there was one in particular that struck me. It was a tape of Gary Snyder, Philip Whalen and Lew Welch discussing how they got by as poets, recorded at the station with a moderator in the spring of 1964 to promote a reading they were about to give together in San Francisco. We just heard a quick few minutes of the tape, but the idea of these three poets who had known each other since their days together at Reed College in the late 1940s

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\*Reference: For a related article see John Whalen-Bridge, "'For/From Lew': The Ghost Visitations of Lew Welch and the Art of Zen Failure. A Dialogue for Two Voices," *Connotations* 16.1-3 (2006/2007): 92-115.

For debates inspired by this article, please check the *Connotations* website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debsaroyan01913.htm>>.

all in the same discussion together, seemed almost too good to be true. I remember suggesting to Donald Allen on the spot that the broadcast, which had been titled "On Bread and Poetry," would make a good book.

A month or so later, while I was visiting Don, a Bolinas neighbor, he asked if I'd like the job of transcribing the tape for him; and during the next several days while engaged in this project, I felt that I began to get to know Welch. While I'd read his collected poems, *Ring of Bone*, and *How I Work as a Poet & Other Essays/Stories/Plays*, as well as the small volume *Trip Trap*, which he shares with Jack Kerouac and Albert Saijo, I had yet to really make up my mind about him. When I read these books during the summer of 1973, having recently finished a novel, I had wondered whether Welch had taken the all-out step of what I thought of just then as a real writer—the step, that is, of accepting one's personality for better or worse. Ironically, there was something about the unremitting craftsmanship of Welch's poems that made me suspect him; I wondered if he'd ever really ended his apprenticeship.

The recording, running a full hour, made me forget about all this almost immediately. "On Bread and Poetry," with its three interweaving voices—plus the moderator's intelligent and appropriately "square" questions—was as clear a presentation as I had ever experienced of what I think of as the living tradition in American poetry. The three poets are virtually interviewing each other, and their individual approaches and emphases are supported by a shared sense of poetry as important and integral to a healthy society:

**Snyder:** I find it very exciting to have some poems, a few poems which I can show to academic types, or say artistic and literary types around San Francisco, and they will say, "Yes, that's a poem." And I can also read it or show it to a logger or a seaman, and he will say, "That's great. Yeah, I like that."

**Welch:** Yes, that's one of my standards, too.

**Whalen:** And that's something that all of us have been able to do, incidentally. I mean a lot of friends of mine have come around and said, "I showed



something of yours to this bum," and so on, and the bum flipped. And it's great.

**Welch:** The cab drivers like my cab poems. They said, "Yeah, that's just the way it is. By gosh, you write like that, hunh? That's good."

As anyone familiar with their work knows, they were not advocating a superficial populism, but rather calling up an awareness of the deeper common ground we share: seaman and intellectual, taxi-driver and poet. And of the three voices, it was Welch's which most surprised and, despite some hesitation and wariness on my part, moved me. He was the least familiar of the three to me. I had long been an admirer of the work of both Philip Whalen and Gary Snyder, but it was Welch's voice that spoke most directly to me as a fellow human amidst the trials and uncertainties of my own life.

Answering a question from the moderator about how the poets related to the "bulk of the people that you pass on the street, and that you talk to, who don't dress like you, who probably don't think like you, and who probably don't know very much about what you're interested in," Welch said that he had stopped thinking in terms of "any hip-square division":

I really used to, and I think it was a great error on my part. I think it was not only inaccurate, but it was immoral. I mean if you start thinking of *we-them*, naturally you cause all kinds of hostilities to rise [...]. And that got badly confused sometime around fifty-eight or nine—there was just too much of this—of a senseless hostility going back and forth, coming from both sides, about *nothing*.

After I had transcribed the tape, I could no longer identify the craftsmanship of his poems with the tightness of an apprentice afraid to fail. Instead, it came to me how open and full of life his poems and prose were, while at the same time being consistently finely and carefully written. I realized that Welch's craft was not what I had first thought, but rather an implicit part of his generosity as a writer. He wrote so carefully so that everyone could understand him.

A few months later I embarked on a book about Welch because I was interested in how so clear a sense of both poetry and the poet's role, as he articulated it in "On Bread and Poetry," had evolved. The manuscript was written three decades ago while living with my wife and our three young children in Bolinas. When it was done, I immediately put it aside and undertook writing a "second draft," *Genesis Angels: The Saga of Lew Welch and the Beat Generation*, which bears little relation to it. The published book, that is, is an overview of the Beat Generation and its central figures, with Lew Welch the main protagonist, written novelistically in a Beat-inflected, Kerouac-style prose.

The first draft, on the other hand, is a study of the life and writing of one writer, Lew Welch, a lesser-known figure among his peers, whose own words dominate the narrative. In our day of exhaustive, minutiae-oriented biographies, this was, of course, a dicey approach. Why would one take it? I had a strong sense that Welch, for all his frailty and his life-long struggle with alcoholism, was as lucid a guide on his own journey *in medias res* as one could wish for. Then too, a point of intersection exists, I think, where the disinterested mind of the genuine artist meets the disinterested mind of the scientist—physicist, neurologist, or psychiatrist. At his best Welch had a capacity for both a laser-like verbal precision and a self-forgetting honesty one encounters rarely.

More specifically, the way he atomized the creative process seemed to dovetail with the discoveries of the new physics and suggest a common ground. Whether "creating" had to do with combinations of atoms and molecules or with a poem, at the bottom of both enterprises, it now seemed, was a mirror rather than matter, which led back to self-forgetting, or—perhaps another word for it—consciousness. And Welch, I think, explicates his own engagement as well as Gary Zukav narrates the peregrinations of subatomic particles in *The Dancing Wu-Li Masters*. Here, then, is an excerpt from the first draft that tries to track Welch's precise understanding of the process of poetic genesis:

\* \* \*

## The Whole Thing

During the late sixties, Lew Welch took on the role of Tribal Elder to the hippie culture centered in the Haight-Ashbury neighborhood of San Francisco. Anticipating the over-crowding that eventually led to the disintegration of the community, in the spring of 1967 Welch wrote a piece called "A Moving Target Is Hard to Hit," which was duplicated by The Communications Company using a Gestetner and distributed free to residents by the Diggers. A current top-forty hit, "If You're Going to San Francisco (Be Sure to Wear Some Flowers in Your Hair)," seemed to be addressed to young people across the nation, if not the world. Welch wrote:

When 200,000 folks from places like lima ohio and cleveland and lompoc and visalia and amsterdam and london and moscow and lodz suddenly descend, as they will, on the haight-ashbury, the scene will be burnt down. Some will stay and fight. Some will prefer to leave. My brief remarks are for those who have a way or ways similar to mine: *disperse*. ("A Moving Target is Hard to Hit" 6)

The piece ends:

[F]or those who have this kind of way, not out of cowardice, but as WAY [...] sitting in the haight-ashbury in all that heat and the terrible crowd you cannot help anyway (maybe), is simple insanity.

Disperse. Gather into smaller tribes. Use the beautiful land your state and national governments have already set up for you, free. If you want to.

Most Indians are nomads. The haight-ashbury is not where it's at—it's in your head and hands. Take it anywhere. ("A Moving Target is Hard to Hit" 7)

That summer, the fabled Summer of Love, Welch wrote an August 9th letter to Gary Snyder, again in Japan, in which he reports on the explosive American scene:

Well the revolution is finally happening. Detroit and 40 other cities blew up in July—the 1967 total is 70 cities and towns. Marin City, my home town, blew up a weekend ago so bad we thought it prudent to evacuate ourselves [...] It's not so much a racial revolution as a revolution of the poor. Detroit looting was integrated—spade cats helping white cats into the high window.

Not so much about colored skin as about colored TV. TV sets scattered all over Detroit by folks who found them too heavy to get home in all that rifle fire.

[I]t's pretty scary living in violence, I really don't want Jeff [his partner Magda Cregg's son] to get hurt, or Magda, but here is where we live and we just get used to rifle fire (every night for more than two months [...]). (*I Remain 2*: 144)

About Haight-Ashbury he wrote:

[T]he Meth Freak hippy pushers have got so big the Mafia is moving in and pushers in the Hashbury are getting murdered. Three at least. *And* the acid is untakeable because it may be STP (an Army drug developed to pacify or wipe out the enemy, the trip goes on for 72 hours and 4 of my friends, some of them very strong, are now in loony bins), not to mention the bad shit LSD with Meth in it. Gary, people, good ones, are blowing their minds irreversibly. Like, gone. Away.

Of course there are also the beautiful things. Like George Harrison and his wife appeared in the Hashbury and it was 2 hours before they were recognized. Then George led a huge meaningless parade singing and banging his guitar. He is stone serious about his teacher Ravi Shankar, who, naturally, does not condone drugs. George had purple glasses, in the shape of a heart. His wife is very wild looking. [...] pretty, granny glasses, et al.

In this tumultuous period, Welch seemed to discern a kind of urban apocalypse, a chaotic, disintegrating "last stand" of America's urban-industrial era. He wrote a piece called "Final City/Tap City" for the June 28-July 11, 1968 issue of the *San Francisco Oracle* in which he foresaw an end to the cities:

We face great holocausts, terrible catastrophies [sic], all American cities burned from within, and without.

However, our beautiful Planet will germinate—underneath this thin skin of City, Green will come on to crack our sidewalks! Stinking air will blow away at last! The bays flow clean! ("Final City/Tap City" 20)

In the face of the impending disaster he envisions, Welch's love for nature, his enduring faith in the planet itself, informs and modulates virtually all of his later writing with an increasing emphasis. This dimension of his work and thought during the sixties sets it apart from the revolutionary pronouncements so endemic to the period.

When Paul Krassner asked to reprint “Final City/ Tap City” in *The Realist*,<sup>1</sup> Welch revised it and added a section in which he focuses and elaborates on a cultural chasm that goes beyond “the generation gap” given play in the national media:

I always admired Arthur Koestler, and always was enraged by him. I knew him to be smart, well read, and almost pathologically honest. Also, he cared a lot about the things I wanted to know. None of this changed the fact that I knew Koestler was wrong. “Wrong” is a very good word. Very few educated people still know how to use it.

Just 2 weeks ago I found Koestler giving himself away to my sense of his wrongness. He says, in *Yogi & the Commissar*, that we are a “vulnerable animal, living on a hostile planet.”

Clearly this man has never looked at his own two hands. Has never known the miracle of his human eyes. Does not know he is the only animal which can out-climb a mountain goat (as the northwest Indians do, chinning themselves on quarter-inch ledges in the rock, till they drive the goat to where the goat must fall). Can do that, and also swim. Can run with the halter in his hand until the horse drops dead. Can curl up into a ball, as the fox does, let the snow cover him, for warmth, and make it through a blizzard on Mt. Shasta. As John Muir did.

Koestler doesn't know the skin he stands in, the meat he is, and he doesn't know the ground he's standing on. What, possibly, can he tell us about anything else? [...]

Koestler knows he's wrong, he's always cringing about it. He is the scape-goat, here, not because he's the worst, but because he's among the best of those who make articulate the European Mind we must (at pain of death) reject.

Camus and Sartre make the same errors, but have no humbleness.

(“Final City/ Tap City” 17-18)

The sense that direct experience of the world is the necessary basis of sound thinking or writing goes back to Welch's piece “Poems and Remarks” (*I Remain* 1:27-40), which he prepared for William Carlos Williams's visit to Reed College in 1950. There the young poet espoused the Chinese ladder, as opposed to Plato's ladder, as a model for his own development. Rather than seeking the idealized, perfected Platonic forms, the Chinese model proposed the mature stage of *Sh'n-Yee* in which an artist achieved an integration of technique and subject matter taken directly from life.

Speaking in broad terms, this distinction sometimes seems to lie at the heart of the difference between what might be characterized as the East and West coast styles in American art. On the East Coast, where what Welch calls the “European Mind” is traditionally more dominant, the Platonic ideal of perfected form seems to hold sway. In poetry, the work of Wallace Stevens or John Ashbery might be regarded as prototypes.

On the West Coast, where the Asian influence is stronger, the Chinese emphasis on experience as the source and subject of art has created another standard. The poetry of Robinson Jeffers and Gary Snyder might be regarded as embodiments of this Western archetype.

Welch’s emphasis on making his work accessible to the general public, recalling the example of the Tang Dynasty poet Po Chu-I, is among his most important contributions to the tradition. In addition to speaking to the counter-culture, he addressed the public at large in two reviews for the *San Francisco Chronicle* in which he discussed the work of two of his peers, Richard Brautigan and Philip Whalen.<sup>2</sup>

In his review of Whalen’s collected poetry, *On Bear’s Head*, printed in June 1969, he wrote of his experience when he circulated a Whalen poem “Further Notice” among his fellow workers at Montgomery Ward. The poem goes:

I can’t live in this world  
And I refuse to kill myself  
Or let you kill me

The dill plant lives, the airplane  
My alarm clock, this ink  
I won’t go away

I shall be myself—  
Free, a genius, an embarrassment  
Like the Indian, the buffalo

Like Yellowstone National Park.                    (*On Bear’s Head* 45-46)

Welch recalled:

Soon, "Yellowstone National Park" was used by secretaries, bosses, whatever kind of wage slave as a way of showing their integrity when things got tough. These poems are useful. ("Philip Whalen as Yellowstone National Park" 26)

In the July 1969 interview with him conducted by David Meltzer, Welch quoted the dedicatory poem "to the memory of/ Gertrude Stein & William Carlos Williams" that introduces *Ring of Bone*:

I WANT THE WHOLE THING, the moment  
 when what we thought was rock, or  
   sea  
 became clear Mind, and

what we thought was clearest Mind really  
*was* that glancing girl, that  
 swirl of birds ...

( all of that )

AND AT THE SAME TIME that very poem  
 pasted in the florist's window

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

carefully retyped and  
 put right out there on Divisadero St.

just because the florist thought it  
 pretty,

that it might remind of love,  
 that it might sell flowers ...

The line

Tangled in Samsara!

(*Ring of Bone* v)

This poem, dated "Mt. Tamalpais 1970," clearly encapsulates Welch's poetics. The first part presents his vision of the state of consciousness he identifies as the source of poetry: "the moment" in which the mind is "JOINING with whatever-is-out-there," as he wrote to Donald Allen in 1960 (*I Remain* 1: 207). This is the moment spoken of in Buddhist literature in which there is no separation between the observer and what-is-observed, the essentially wordless and eternal "moment" that occurs in forgetting oneself (*Ring of Bone* v).

The second part of the poem, beginning "AND AT THE SAME TIME," presents Welch's vision of the proactive function of poetry in society at large. The poem by Whalen "pasted in the florist window [...] that it might remind of love, / that it might sell flowers" has a "useful" place in the social scheme of things. Born out of an essentially timeless experience of communion between the poet and the world, the poem has a civic function in the time and place of its making, tangling itself in Samsara, the worldly sphere. Near the end of the interview with Meltzer, Welch says:

The poem is not the vision. The vision is the source of the poem. The poem is the chops, but the real chops are being able to go across that river and come back with something that is readable.

\* \* \*

*Lew's a healthy thing. He is a healthy thing. And it doesn't even matter if you burn yourself out, and drink too much, and commit suicide. People do that anyway. Cat-skinners do that. Advertising executives do that. That's part of some of the hazards you run in life. And the hazards you run in, so to speak, the psychological impurities that are in the material that have to burn out sooner or later.*

Gary Snyder  
in an interview with the author  
March 1977

University of Southern California  
Los Angeles, CA



## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Lew Welch, "The Digger Papers," *The Realist*, August 1968. Repr. in *How I Work as a Poet* as "Final City/ Tap City," 14-21.

<sup>2</sup>Lew Welch, *San Francisco Chronicle*, December 15, 1968 (review of Richard Brautigan) and *San Francisco Chronicle*, June 22, 1969 (review of Philip Whalen). Both repr. in *How I Work as a Poet* 22-28.

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## Written Sounds and Spoken Letters: Orality and Literacy in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*\*

BÄRBEL HÖTTGES

Ever since its publication, the narrative structure of Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* (1987) has been a popular topic of critical debate. In view of the novel's complex architecture, this pronounced critical interest is not particularly surprising—Morrison's narrative offers an intricate network of interacting perspectives that simultaneously confirm and question each other so that it is sometimes hard to determine who is telling the story and what is happening in the novel's fictional world. Most critics analyzing the novel's narrative texture conclude that *Beloved* is closer to storytelling than novel writing and that existing narratological models need to be revised with regard to Morrison's work. Cheryl Hall, for instance, argues that "as critics, we must come to [Morrison's] work with a new set of assumptions, based not on what Morrison calls the traditional 'pyramid' form (with rising action, climax, denouement, etc.) but on forms arising from the oral tradition, in which song and story intertwine and are often inseparable" (90).

The general impression that Morrison's text bears resemblance to a storytelling session is no coincidence because oral traditions obviously have been an important aesthetic and stylistic model for Morrison. She wants her stories to "appear oral" ("Rootedness" 341) and tries to achieve

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\*Reference: Hannes Bergthaller, "Dis(re)membering History's *revenants*: Trauma, Writing, and Simulated Orality in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*," *Connotations* 16.1-3 (2006/2007): 116-36.

For the original article as well as all contributions to this debate, please check the *Connotations* website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debbergthaller01613.htm>>.

an effortless and an artless, and a non-book quality, so that they would have a sound .... And the closest I came, I think, to finding it was in some books written by Africans, novels that were loose ... the kind that people could call unstructured because they were circular, and because they sounded like somebody was telling you a story. ... I wanted the sound to be something I felt was spoken and more oral and less print. (qtd. in Hall 89)

Most critics identify this oral quality of Morrison's writing as an important stylistic device, which not only characterizes Morrison's art and confirms her status as an outstanding writer, but which she also uses to challenge Western concepts of history and subjectivity. Morrison's combination of different voices, for example, allows a *community* rather than a single voice to tell a story, and the interplay of perspectives undermines the idea of a single, objective history, which always tells the story of the winner and usually further marginalizes and excludes its victims (cf. Ippolito 192; Sale 42; Pérez-Torres, "Between" 193-98).

In his essay "Dis(re)membering History's *revenants*: Trauma, Writing, and Simulated Orality in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*," Hannes Bergthaller also examines oral elements in Morrison's novel *Beloved*. Rather than focusing on history and subjectivity, however, Bergthaller connects Morrison's style with the attempt to deal with and overcome the trauma of slavery:

*Beloved* [...] is full of descriptions of communal story-telling, call-and-response preaching and choir singing. It is these 'oral' interactions which help the victims of slavery, as they are depicted in the novel, to remember their past and thereby to 're-member,' to heal, both themselves and their fractured community. [...] [B]y recovering and "working through" traumatic aspects of the national past which have been violently repressed (LaCapra 89), the novel enacts a communal healing process. (118)

This healing process is not restricted to the novel's fictional world—the community that is established through the use of oral elements also includes the readers and draws them into the world of the characters, creating a space of intimacy that allows the audience to relive the characters' situation:

Just as antiphonal narration creates an intimacy between Denver and *Beloved* [...] so *Beloved* is assumed to create a space into which the reader must step in order to fulfill its promise of communal restoration. The novel would thus do for the reader what *Beloved* does for Denver, allowing him to "see" and "feel" like the characters in the novel do [...]. (Bergthaller 128)

The idea that Morrison uses her novel to re-member the African American community and to initiate a healing process that goes beyond her fictional world is not new, and several critics have expressed similar views (see, for example, Krumholz). In contrast to many other scholars, however, Bergthaller goes a step further, because he not only identifies and interprets oral elements in Morrison's text but also acknowledges that *Beloved* nevertheless is a *novel* written by a single author rather than a communally told story. Uncritically taking Morrison's novel for an oral story

effectively conflates "the representation of cultural practices with the latter's operativity" (Schinko 303n; my translation). In other words, it assumes that the novel itself can function in the same way as the scenes of antiphony and oral instruction which the novel describes—that orality can be successfully simulated, as it were, in a written text. (Bergthaller 129)

Rather than classifying Morrison's work as an oral text, Bergthaller consequently describes the novel as *simulated orality*, i.e., the novel employs elements of orality but transforms them into a written text.

One could assume that this insight seriously undermines the novel's effectiveness, as if Morrison's text was a magic trick that only works as long as the illusion of orality is maintained. Bergthaller explains, however, that the reading of Morrison's narrative as an oral story ignores an important component of Morrison's work because it entails "a sidelining of the text *as text*" (131). In order to be fully effective, Bergthaller maintains, the intimacy that is created through the illusion of orality "must break down as the reader puts down the book" (134) because only a written text can allow the characters to heal and to move on while preserving *Beloved*'s fate on the pages of a novel at the same time.

I agree with Bergthaller's argument that Morrison needs the illusion of orality and the reality of the written text in order to develop the narrative's full potential. However, I would even go a step further and suggest that Morrison does not develop and destroy the illusion of orality but rather employs an extended form of orality which openly and simultaneously combines written and oral elements. This complementary narrative structure is not merely a stylistic device but an integral part of Morrison's artistic agenda to challenge Eurocentric perspectives and to write a distinctively *African American* kind of literature.

A passage that can be used to illustrate this idea is also a central passage in Bergthaller's essay, the exorcism of *Beloved*. Pregnant and constantly growing, *Beloved* has drained away almost all of Sethe's energy when the women of the black community finally decide to intervene:

Some brought what they could and what they believed would work. Stuffed in apron pockets, strung around their necks, lying in the space between their breasts. Others brought Christian faith—as shield and sword. Most brought a little of both. (*Beloved* 257)

They stopped praying and took a step back to the beginning. In the beginning there were no words. In the beginning was the sound, and they all knew what that sound sounded like [...]. For Sethe it was as though the Clearing had come to her with all its heat and simmering leaves, where the voices of women searched for the right combination, the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words. Building voice upon voice until they found it, and when they did it was a wave of sound wide enough to sound deep water and knock the pods off chestnut trees. It broke over Sethe and she trembled like the baptized in its wash. (*Beloved* 259-61)

Bergthaller argues that Morrison celebrates orality in this passage because it "exalt[s] the power of the human voice to heal and to bring into being" (131): "Through their song, the women avail themselves of the creative power of 'nommo'<sup>1</sup> in its purest form. Morrison's wording explicitly sets it into opposition to a Western (more specifically, a Judeo-Christian) understanding of language, pointing to the continuing presence of African origins" (132).

It is tempting to read the passage in this manner, because superficially it seems indeed as if Morrison rejected the Judeo-Christian model in favor of the African concept of *nommo*—after all, she turns the biblical “[i]n the beginning was the Word” (John 1:1) into “in the beginning was the sound.”<sup>2</sup> A closer look at the passage reveals, however, that Morrison does not reject the biblical model in this passage—she rather *extends* it in an African American way because the idea of sound includes not only the creative power of *nommo* but also the *word* and other forms of human and non-human utterances.

This extension of the human voice is important in several ways. First and foremost, the sound is the only way to communicate with the ghost: With their song, the women go back to a time *before* the word, and only this preverbal utterance can reach the ghost whereas spoken words cannot, as Sethe's and Denver's earlier attempts to communicate with the invisible baby ghost reveal:

[...] Sethe and Denver decided to end the persecution by calling forth the ghost that tried them so. Perhaps a conversation, they thought, an exchange of views or something would help. So they held hands and said, “Come on. Come on. You may as well just come on.”

The sideboard took a step forward but nothing else did. (*Beloved* 4)

The sound's inherent potential to address the ghost is linked to another important feature of the woman's song: pain, whether physical or psychological, eludes language but can find expression in sound. As Elaine Scarry points out, pain entails a “resistance to language” (5)—indeed, “[p]hysical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned” (4). It is therefore no coincidence that the sound rather than the word is able to reach *Beloved*, the incarnation of slavery and the embodiment of trauma and pain.

Furthermore, the sound is also important because it “[breaks] the back of words.” The sound thus does away with the abuses of language such as schoolteacher's definitions which allowed him to classify Sethe and her children as animals rather than human beings.<sup>3</sup> In

this respect, it is indeed the sound that is a new beginning: it drives Beloved away, saves Sethe's life, and redeems both Sethe and the community around her because it provides both parties with the chance to correct the mistakes of the past.<sup>4</sup> In short, it finally gives both Sethe and the community the strength to leave the past, the "Sixty million / and more" mentioned in the book's epigraph, behind.

Despite the modification of the biblical text, however, Morrison's sound is still part of a deeply religious and Christian experience, as the image of baptism—the central symbol of the Christian community—indicates: the sound becomes a powerful wave, and Sethe trembles "like the baptized in its wash" (*Beloved* 261). The sound consequently has a religious function in *Beloved*, and it is part of a syncretic ceremony that draws on both Christian and non-Christian sources: The women bring African charms "[s]tuffed in apron pockets, strung around their necks, lying in the space between their breasts" to exorcise the ghost, but they also bring "Christian faith—as shield and sword" (*Beloved* 257). Similarly, their song is Christian and biblical ("In the beginning was ...") but also some kind of African conjure ("... the sound"). The sentence is, to use Mikhail Bakhtin's words, "a mixture of two social languages within the limits of a single utterance" (358), but just as the biblical model, it signals the presence of a metaphysical sphere and facilitates atonement and redemption.

The modified quotation does consequently not imply departure from Christianity but religious appropriation: the biblical text is still present and discernable, but at the same time, it has been incorporated into the system of African American culture. Neither of the two traditions can dispel the ghost on its own, but their combination becomes a powerful tool. Morrison's quotation does thus not imply a competition between biblical and African traditions, but rather describes and highlights the development of a modified and updated version of Christianity that acknowledges and caters to the needs of an African American community.

This combination of American and African traditions is an important and recurring motif in Morrison's work. Often, Morrison mixes

African and American religious traditions to signal the compatibility of African and American cosmologies. In *Beloved*, for example, Baby Suggs's services in the Clearing serve as a powerful example of the successful combination of Christian and non-Christian traditions. At first, these meetings seem to have little in common with Christian services since Baby Suggs is an "unchurched preacher" (87) and speaks about the need to love one's body rather than about sin and redemption:

After situating herself on a huge flat-sided rock, Baby Suggs bowed her head and prayed silently. The company watched her from the trees. They knew she was ready when she put her stick down. Then she shouted, "Let the children come!" and they ran from the trees toward her [...]. She did not tell them to clean up their lives or to go and sin no more. She did not tell them they were the blessed of the earth, its inheriting meek or its glorybound pure. She told them that the only grace they could have was the grace they could imagine. That if they could not see it, they would not have it.

"Here," she said, "in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard [...]. *You got to love it, you!*" (*Beloved* 87-88)

Despite these seemingly unchristian commands, the meetings are part of black Christian church life in the winter, and Baby Suggs is clearly connected to Christian imagery: Even though she distances herself from Matthew 5:5 ("Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth"), Baby Suggs's words nevertheless evoke the Sermon on the Mount and suggest a connection between Baby Suggs and Jesus; the rock she chooses as a pulpit reminds the reader of the "rock" and founder of the Christian church, Saint Peter; the staff she puts down once she is ready to preach is reminiscent of the staff Moses used to lead the Israelites and to divide the Red Sea; and her invitation to "let the children come" clearly alludes to Jesus's famous call: "[s]uffer little children, and forbid them not, to come unto me; for of such is the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 19:14; cf. Ryan 280).<sup>5</sup> Moreover, the command to love is, of course, a deeply Christian advice, even if the victims of the dehumanizing forces of slavery have to learn to love and to re-member themselves before they can truly love their neighbors. As



Emily Griesinger explains, Baby Suggs's services are "[n]ot *typically* Christian because they say nothing about God or Jesus Christ" but they are "*genuinely* Christian nevertheless in their assertion that human life is holy, all of it, and needs to be loved" (693). As many scenes in Morrison's novel, Baby Suggs's services are thus neither African nor Christian, but draw on a number of different sources and combine Western and non-Western traditions.<sup>6</sup>

Morrison's religious blends are one example of her stylistic combination of different cultural cosmologies—her combination of oral and written traditions are another. Her narratives are thus not novels that pretend to be oral texts but rather novels that incorporate elements of orality. They are, as Edward Dauterich puts it, a *hybrid* form of expression, which actively uses the combination of different traditions to create something new and distinctively *African American* (cf. 26).

The idea that the space between two cultures can be a zone of innovation has been a popular topic of critical debate in the last two decades. Critics such as Homi Bhabha, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Mary Louise Pratt have developed various concepts to map the space of intercultural contact and to explain and interpret the forces at work in these zones. Homi Bhabha, for instance, calls the zone in between two cultures *Third Space* and claims that this zone "gives rise to something different, something new and unrecognisable, a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation" (Bhabha, "Space" 211). This *Third Space*, "though unrepresentable in itself, [...] constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew" (*Location* 37). As a result, these "'in-between' spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood—singular or communal—that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself" (*Location* 1-2).

In a similar manner, Gloria Anzaldúa describes the borderland in-between two cultures as a space of new social and societal develop-

ments: "Living on borders and in margins [...] is like trying to swim in a new element, an 'alien' element. There is an exhilaration in being a participant in the further evolution of humankind, [...] dormant areas of consciousness are being activated, awakened" (19). For critics such as Bhabha and Anzaldúa, being "in-between"—hybridity—is thus no longer a handicap but rather an advantage that gives rise to a new form of cultural agency, which is not accessible from a monocultural position.

Both Bhabha and Anzaldúa are aware of the frictions that also are part of the contact zone. As Anzaldúa puts it, "[i]t's not a comfortable territory to live in, this place of contradictions. Hatred, anger and exploitation are the prominent features of this landscape" (19). Nevertheless, these critics see those traditionally located at the margins of a society—members of ethnic minority cultures—at the center of societal innovation since they can combine, negotiate, and redefine different cultural, social, and linguistic perspectives.

Toni Morrison expresses similar ideas in her narratives. Her novels are neither African nor American but *African American*, and this African Americaness expresses itself in plot elements, images, intertextual references, and in stylistic devices such as the combination of oral and written features. As a result, *Beloved* is not a novel that *pretends* to be an oral story, and it is certainly not a magic trick that depends on the illusion of orality, but Morrison combines orality and literacy to create something new and distinctively black.

The effect of this combination goes beyond aesthetic play and fulfills several functions at once: On the plot level, oral elements such as patterns of call and response and a plurality of voices help to establish a fictional community, which is necessary to initiate both individual and communal healing. As Morrison explains,

There is a necessity for remembering the horror, but of course there's a necessity for remembering it in a manner in which it can be digested, in a manner in which the memory is not destructive [...]. And no one speaks, no one tells the story about himself or herself unless forced. They don't want to talk, they don't want to remember, they don't want to say it, because they're

afraid of it—which is human. But when they do say it, and hear it, and look at it, and share it, they are not only one, they're two, and three, and four, you know? The collective sharing of that information heals the individual—and the collective. ("Realm" 247-48)

The healing process that Morrison describes here depends on the *spoken* word because only oral exchanges are truly participatory, polylogic, and additive (cf. Ong 37, 45-46). In addition, an oral text is transient; it can be shared in the protected circle of the community, but at the same time (and in contrast to a written text), an oral story ceases to exist once the speaker(s) fall(s) silent. This transient quality of oral texts plays an important role in Morrison's *Beloved*, because forgetting is a necessary skill in the novel's fictional world: the ghost of the past—Beloved—needs to be exorcized if the characters want to live. Beloved's story is, thus, "not a story to pass on" (275) as only those who can leave their traumatic past behind have the chance of a future.

On a metanarrative level, however, Morrison makes clear that Beloved's story—the story of slavery—also must *not* be forgotten. Slavery is, as Morrison argues in an interview with Bonnie Angelo, part of a "national amnesia" ("Pain" 120), and to remember its victims was one of Morrison's primary concerns when she wrote the novel:

There is no place you or I can go, to [...] recollect the absences of slaves; nothing that reminds us of the ones who made the journey and of those who did not make it. There is no suitable memorial or plaque [...]. There's no three-hundred-foot tower. There's no small bench by the road [...]. And because such a place doesn't exist (that I know of), the book had to. ("Bench" 44)

Paying attention to the forgotten and neglected—calling "her beloved, which was not beloved," as Morrison puts it in the epigraph of her novel—*Beloved* becomes a literary memorial for those who have suffered from slavery and its consequences. Beyond the characters' fictional world, Beloved's story is thus a story that must not be *passed* on in the sense that the book tells a story that must not be ignored (cf. Henderson 83; Pérez-Torres, "Knitting" 130).

The hybrid structure of Morrison's novel—its combination of oral and written elements—supports this dual objective: elements of orality turn the narrative into a seemingly spoken account that re-members the community, heals the characters, and can be forgotten once the demon of the past has been faced. Simultaneously, the written text preserves the story of *Beloved* on the pages of a book and makes sure that her fate does not fall into oblivion: "Like the ghost's footprints, the written words remain, a reminder of that which had to be 'dis(re)membered' in order for the community to re-member itself" (Bergthaller 134).

To fathom Morrison's novel, one has to detect both the written text and the oral story. Rather than reading the novel as simulated orality which "must break down as the reader puts down the book and the words on the page collapse back into bare letters" (Bergthaller 134), I would suggest reading the narrative as a text that tries to be oral and written at the same time. The constant interplay of these two different expressive levels—its hybrid nature—significantly contributes to the novel's multidimensional structure, but it is also an expression of Morrison's status as an *African* American writer. Despite slavery and despite everything that has happened, Morrison suggests, a black existence in the United States is not only possible but also profitable because it entails a form of cultural agency which monocultural traditions lack. The cultural power inherent in the African American tradition is strong enough to both remember and forget the ghost of the past and thus the basis for a promising future.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>William R. Handley defines the West African term *nommo* as “the magic power of the word to call things into being” (677; cf. Jahn 124-26; Bergthaller 125). Morrison addresses and acknowledges this power in one of her interviews: “I sometimes know when the work works, when *nommo* has effectively summoned, by reading and listening to those who have entered the text” (“Unspeakable” 33).

<sup>2</sup>All Bible references are to the King James Version.

<sup>3</sup>While teaching his nephews, Sethe’s former master schoolteacher used the defining power of language to turn slaves into a subhuman species: “Schoolteacher was standing over one of them [his nephews] with one hand behind his back [...] when I [Sethe] heard him say, ‘No, no. That’s not the way. I told you to put her [Sethe’s] human characteristics on the left; her animal one on the right. And don’t forget to line them up’” (*Beloved* 193).

<sup>4</sup>The passage describing the exorcism mirrors the scene of the murder: When young Sethe realizes that the slave catcher has found her, she attacks and kills her daughter in a desperate attempt to protect her, and the community passively watches the scene. When a benevolent white man approaches Sethe’s home eighteen years later during the exorcism and Sethe is convinced that the slave catcher has come to claim her child once more, she tries to attack the *white man*—this time, however, the community steps in to save an innocent life.

<sup>5</sup>Morrison only alludes to the King James Version, but she directly quotes the Revised Standard Version, the New International Version, and the English Standard Version: “Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them; for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven.”

<sup>6</sup>For a more detailed discussion of the combination of African and American religious elements in Morrison’s fiction, see Höttges 83-158.

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## ... To Say Nothing of Frogs and Angels: A Response to Tom MacFaul\*

BRUCE BOEHRER

Tom MacFaul offers a persuasive account of the English mock-epic tradition's emergence out of Spenser's, Jonson's, and Davenant's early experiments with the form. Rather than contesting this narrative, I should like to continue a bit in the same vein by broadening the field of reference.

English mock epic derives its inspiration from earlier continental practice reaching back to Graeco-Roman times, and MacFaul has already explored much of the classical background to "Muiopotmos," "The Famous Voyage," and the "Jeffereidos." But in doing so he has concentrated on what we might call high or elite sources: classical epic proper and a few related genres such as the ode. As it happens, the principal surviving example of Graeco-Roman mock-heroic verse, the Homeric *Battle of Frogs and Mice*, made its formal entrance into English literary history twelve years after Jonson had assembled his Epigrams, and six years before Davenant would compose his "Jeffereidos." When George Chapman's *The Crowne of all Homers Workes* appeared in 1624 as the final installment of the poet's monumental Homeric labors, it provided readers with the first-ever English translation of the *Batrachomyomachia*, done in a handsome folio format that placed the poem ahead of the Homeric Hymns and Epigrams, in a transitional position between the great epics and the minor Homerica. In 2008 Princeton University Press reissued Allardyce Nicoll's 1956 Bollingen

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\*Reference: Tom MacFaul, "The Butterfly, the Fart and the Dwarf: The Origins of the English Laureate Micro-Epic," *Connotations* 17.2-3 (2007/2008): 144-64.

For the original article as well as all contributions to this debate, please check the *Connotations* website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debmacfaul01723.htm>>.



edition of *The Crowne*, now with a new introduction by Stephen Scully, so the time seems right to reconsider the volume's impact on English letters.

MacFaul has noted how Spenser's, Jonson's, and Davenant's experiments with the mock-heroic form contributed to their broader efforts at laureate self-fashioning. For his part, Chapman never earned the royal favor that distinguished these three of his contemporaries, but it was surely not for want of trying. Chapman's self-identification with Homer remains perhaps the most distinctive feature of his literary persona, needing no documentation here. By translating the *locus classicus* of mock epic in a context that attributes it to Homer, the English poet enlisted this genre to his vision of the laureate's calling, assigning it a status similar to that of the *Culex* in the traditional *cursus Virgilianus*. Likewise, in recovering the past both for and to the present, *The Crowne* also assimilates Homer's reputation to that of his English translator.

By presenting the *Battle of Frogs and Mice* as an integral part of the Homeric corpus, Chapman was simply following received wisdom. While some doubts regarding the poem's authorship can be traced back to classical times,<sup>1</sup> Chapman's base-text for all his Homeric translations, Spondanus's *Homeri Quae Extant Omnia* (1583; reprinted 1606), included the work's original Greek text together with a Latin translation by Aldus Manutius. That translation, which appears without attribution in Spondanus's *Homer*, had already turned up alongside Latin versions of the *Iliad*, *Odyssey*, and Homeric Hymns in the *Homeri opera Latine ad verbum translata* of 1537. So when Chapman conscripted the Hellenistic mock epic to his vision of laureate achievement, he attached his project as translator not only to the authority of Homer himself but also to the collective body of continental scholarship on Homer's work.

As a result, by the Interregnum there existed a prominent English translation of a mock epic ostensibly by Homer himself, together with various efforts at mock-heroic verse by the most successful royal poets of the late Tudor and early Stuart dynasties. It was already an impos-

ing lineage, and it implied a close connection between the parodic and the heroic, at least on the level of literary achievement. Thus it seems—in retrospect at least—inevitable that Milton would seek an accommodation with mock-epic form as part of his own bid for laureate distinction. *Paradise Lost* famously operates not just as an epic but as a compendium of lesser genres as well, encompassing within itself versions of pastoral, epithalamium, *sacra rappresentazione*, meditative verse, and more. Amidst all this, the poem's investment in mock epic first emerges at the end of Book 1, as Satan and his followers enter an under-sized Pandemonium by reducing themselves to the stature of "that Pigmæan Race / Beyond the *Indian* Mount" (1.780-81). Here the image participates in the same "absurd miniaturization" that MacFaul observes in "Muiopotmos" and the "Jeffereidos," and with much the same aim that MacFaul identifies in the former of these poems: "to arrive at true epic seriousness" (147).

But of course the real proving-ground for mock epic in *Paradise Lost* is Book 6's account of the War in Heaven. Located at the heart of the poem in both its ten- and twelve-book versions, this narrative effectively assimilates the entire western tradition of martial heroism to Milton's investment in "the better fortitude / Of Patience and heroic Martyrdom" (9.31-32), all with a delicacy of touch that seems to have completely escaped the poet's earliest readers.<sup>2</sup> Even Dr. Johnson and Voltaire's Count Pococurente were apparently immune to the irony of a battle-sequence in which all physical injuries heal as soon as they are inflicted, in which both weapons and physical courage are thus rendered comically meaningless, and in which the outcome is finally decided by a single hero who puts forth not even "half his strength" (*Paradise Lost* 6.853).<sup>3</sup> But the episode is a momentous one from the standpoint of English literary history, for it witnesses the conquest of high epic by mock epic, as the martial tradition of Homer, Virgil, et al. is subjected to corrective belittlement from the standpoint of a prevenient Christian inspiration.

The foregoing comments of course make no pretense to dealing exhaustively either with Chapman's translation of the *Batrachomyoma-*

*chia* or the mock-heroic elements of *Paradise Lost*—let alone the tradition of English mock epic which both these poems in their different ways exemplify. I wish simply to point, by way of a brief response to Tom MacFaul's work, to the broader narrative within which that work participates and which it helps to elucidate in some detail. I suspect MacFaul has already considered the importance of both Chapman and Milton to the story he tells, and I would not be surprised to see him deal with these poets in other, related publications.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>See Scully 39.

<sup>2</sup>For the early reaction to *Paradise Lost* 5-6, see Hughes 201-02.

<sup>3</sup>For Voltaire's view of Milton as a "barbarian [...] who, imitating in all seriousness the comic invention of firearms in Ariosto, has the devils fire cannon in Heaven," see *Candide* (84); for Johnson's objections to "the confusion of spirit and matter which pervades the whole narrative of the war in heaven" in *Paradise Lost*, see the *Lives of the Poets* (439-40).

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## More Hot Air: A Large and Serious Response to Tom MacFaul\*

THOMAS HERRON

Let Poets feed on aire, or what they will;  
Let me feed full, till that I fart, says *Jill*.  
(Herrick 216-17)

Literary criticism has long been divided between privileging (and attempting to identify) material causes as the source of (and reason for) the creation of a literary work, as opposed to emphasizing a work's otherworldly and/or moral significance as its main inspiration and reason for being. This critical division continues in MacFaul's lively analysis of three "micro-epics" (or *epyllions*), Edmund Spenser's "Muiopotmos: or The Fate of the Butterflie" (1595), Ben Jonson's *Epigram CXXXIII* ("On the Famous Voyage") (1616) and William Davenant's "*Jeffereidos, on the Captivity of Jeffery*" (1638). MacFaul's light capering between the creative-critical poles of earth and air—material vs. spiritual causation—leaves this reader puzzled, however, and asking for more sustained and consistent analysis.

At stake, furthermore, is what constitutes good art worth analyzing in depth, as opposed to mere hot air. MacFaul calls "[a]ll three poems [...] brilliant and bravura performances in their own distinctive ways" (161) but in this case, we may wish to distinguish between good art and long fart. These three widely varying poems, published over a period of forty-three years, are linked by little other than the laureate

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status of their authors and a few “mock-epic” motifs, including the heroic voyage, a confrontation with the bestial and monstrous and—unstressed enough by MacFaul—a preoccupation with Hell and hence the wages of sin. Spenser’s scintillating poem is rich in images, sources and poetic diction, lyrically graceful, nicely plotted (with two Ovidian digressions that greatly increase the poem’s thematic complexity), pleasing, teasing and tasteful, with darkly disturbing elements; Jonson’s poem is verbally brilliant, intellectually complex, playful and bawdy albeit frankly (and effectively) disgusting.<sup>1</sup> Davenant’s emission, however, cannot measure up to the other two in intellectual substance nor quality of sound.<sup>2</sup> A poem beginning with the clunky rhymed couplets

A Sayle! a sayle! cry’ d they, who did consent  
Once more to break the eighth Commandement  
For a few Coles, of which by theft so well  
Th’are stor’d, they have enow to furnish Hell (Davenant 37, ll. 1-4)<sup>3</sup>

should have been stopped immediately. When reaching such lines as

[...] Thou Pirat-Dogge  
(The wrathfull Captive then reply’ d) not *Ogge*  
(The Bashan King) was my Progenitor;  
Nor doe I strive to fetch my Ancestor  
From *Aneck’s* Sonnes, nor from the Genitals  
Of wrastling-*Cacus*, who gave many falls. (39, ll. 63-68)

we feel relieved that the poem is so short. Does a rampaging pirate care who *Ogge* is? This is part of the joke, of course, but the narrative is similarly halting, the whole thing pedantic. MacFaul’s politicized analysis of the poem—a tale of a dwarfish court jester attacked by pirates and a chicken on his way home from France—is intriguing (“Given Charles I’s own diminutive and non-heroic stature, the poem may also glance at the King” [MacFaul 157]), but—like a true mock-epic protagonist—I refuse to go any further with it.<sup>4</sup>

The other two poems, on the other hand, deserve and receive more attention from MacFaul, although I have a similar conclusion regard-

ing his treatment of both: I disagree with MacFaul's opening thesis that the two poems, despite their parodic epic take on human foibles, "attempt to reduce the heroic mode to an absurd minimum" (MacFaul 144). *Davenant's* poem arguably does this (deliberately and inadvertently). Rather, I choose to read "Muiopotmos," about the doomed butterfly Clarion, as containing a sincere moral message as well as a forthright imperial-heroic theme.<sup>5</sup>

As for "On the Famous Voyage," as MacFaul himself writes, "Jonson sees a truer heroism in inspecting the city's drains" than in celebrating an "imperial" and "national heroism" of the kind promoted elsewhere by Spenser (in his "Prothalamion," for example; MacFaul 157). I agree, but wish to further emphasize the moral significance in Jonson's poem as well, so as to make it seem less ironic, or silly and ephemeral, at heart. Publicizing bad sewage is not without moral merit, any more than Swift's "A Modest Proposal" is merely absurd, or John Snow's simple removal of the choleric pump handle was a trivial act. Jonson's "Voyage" is shocking but also cunningly and effectively written, so as to emphasize the infernal and to make the reader wish, like Hercules, or God, or Dante,<sup>6</sup> to divert a larger flood into London so as to clean it out for good. A similar sentiment operates in Spenser's "Muiopotmos" but only insofar as we fear and comprehend the folly of fair Clarion and condemn the damnable actions of "a wicked wight / The foe of faire things, th'author of confusion" (ll. 243-44), the dark spider Aragnoll.

#### *Einfahrt*: Spenser's hellish entry

MacFaul explicates "Muiopotmos" in confusing fashion. In line with his emphasis on the material significance of the micro-epic and its concomitant focus on "human littleness" (144), he reads the poem, on the one hand, as a political allegory whose referents wobble in and out of focus: it alludes to Sir Philip Sidney obliquely in the doomed butterfly Clarion (144-46),<sup>7</sup> or, at least, "[r]ather than allegorizing

Sidney, Spenser allegorizes the *idea* of the once-future king, and the fantasies that attach to such a figure" (147): this is a good idea. Elsewhere, in the Juno/Arachne episode, the poem also "*clearly* allud[es] to Queen Elizabeth's supposedly providential victory over Philip II's Armada" (151; emphasis added).<sup>8</sup>

On the other hand, the poem reaches aesthetic heights despite the dangers of a politicized world that breeds nihilism: the "meaningless" "doom" of its hero is "somehow beautiful" (149), and "[b]eauty [...] needs to be valued on its own terms, not as part of a quest for power" (153). A century of criticism on the poem has split the interpretive baby down the middle: is it an aesthetically glittering poem about trivial things, i.e., art for art's sake and/or a pleasant diversion,<sup>9</sup> or is it a morally serious, including political, allegory of the tragic fall of the high and mighty?<sup>10</sup> MacFaul continues this trend by arguing both at the same time.

The interrelation of the two deserves more careful explanation than is found in MacFaul. We should indeed seek a serious moral and political meaning(s) underlying the poem's (and Clarion's) "sweetness and light" (MacFaul 151). To do so is not to trivialize the meaning of the poem, to ignore its lyric grace and beauty or to belittle its stature or that of its allegorical referents; if anything, should the poem be about the fall of the high and mighty (such as Sir Philip Sidney, or my preferred candidate for the butterfly, Lord Deputy of Ireland Sir John Perrot, rumored to be a bastard of Henry VIII) by the high and mighty (such real-life Spenserian villains as Lord Burleigh, James I or Feach MacHugh O'Byrne as Aragnoll), then indeed it has great significance as a satire on court and a critique of bad princes ("and the fantasies that attach to such a figure" [MacFaul 147]). This despite its mock- (or "micro-") epic guise. Indeed, the poem also contains a model of a good prince in it, i.e., Queen Elizabeth I, who as Juno in the second Ovidian digression punishes the transgressive Arachne (progenitor of Aragnoll) and plants peace in her stead. M. Marjorie Crump writes that "[i]n the [classical] epyllion the digression is often as important as the main subject, and sometimes even becomes the more important of

the two, the main subject acting as a framework" (24). In this case the poem's allusion to the defeat of Neptune, a.k.a., Philip II and his imperial minions, could function as the serious, epic-themed heart of the mock-epic poem.<sup>11</sup>

Should we also understand the poem as alluding in hidden allegorical fashion to political players in Ireland, which was Spenser's immediate political and material context in which he wrote the poem (he was a colonial administrator and planter there from 1580 until his death in 1599 and made many complaints in prose and poetry about the country and its infernal circumstances), then we might understand the poem and its concluding parody of the *Aeneid* (Clarion dies a death akin to Turnus, as MacFaul notes [152]) as concerned with the very large and serious subject of the colonial *translatio imperii* of British power across the Irish sea. Spenser arrived in Ireland in the service of Lord Deputy Grey in August 1580, and within a month of their arrival Grey's troops were savagely ambushed by O'Byrne and the *Gabhall Raghmall* at Glenmalure in the Wicklow hills near Dublin. Read in this light, Spenser intends the spying and ambushing spider Aragnoll to connote that heart of darkness in Ireland. Aragnoll stands for the angry and resilient Catholic Irish native (allied with Philip II), including O'Byrne, who took advantage of overweening English military pride one Lord Deputy after another (including Perrot).<sup>12</sup>

To take it to another level: MacFaul argues that Don Cameron Allen's religious moralizing of the poem (cf. Allen), wherein the poem is "'an allegory of the wandering of the rational soul into error,' [...] may be to take the poem too seriously" (149). A fair response to this is: only if one chooses not to read it seriously. There are more than enough indications that Clarion signifies the soul, in a poem with a Greek title and source material (Greek *psyche* means "soul" and "butterfly"). Clarion flits

aloft unto the Christall skie,  
To vew the workmanship of heavens hight:  
Whence downe descending he along would flie  
Upon the streaming rivers, sport to finde; (ll. 44-47)



Aragnoll is a devil incarnate, “a wicked wight,” “grimme Lyon,” “[t]he shame of Nature,” a “griesly tyrant” trapping Clarion in his “subtill loupes” of a “curséd cobweb” (ll. 243, 434, 245, 433, 429, 423). We are therefore encouraged to plot a Christianized allegory across the poem’s shimmering wings. For “whatso heavens in their secret doome / Ordained have, how can fraile fleshly wight / Forecast, but it must needs to issue come?” (ll. 225-27) How, in turn, do we escape the snares of evil acts? How do we escape a hellish end? “[N]one, except a God, or God him guide, / May them avoyde, or remedie provide” (ll. 223-24). Spenser’s poem is itself a cobweb of moral significance suspended over a rich corner of his Irish (and British) garden: those who skim its superficial surfaces or are blinded by its glints of poetic nectar risk the same downfall and damnation as our butterfly.

*Ausfahrt*: Jonson’s infernal exit

Jonson’s poem, rather than being a trap, functions as a diabolic purgative of the kind he himself describes: “potions, / Suppositories, cataplasmes, and lotions” (ll. 101-02).<sup>13</sup> With this noxious medicine he grotesquely albeit humorously damns the city he lives in. The poem makes one squirm and leaves a bad taste in the mouth. But what is Jonson’s main target of satire? MacFaul writes sensibly that “[t]he dangers and absurdities inherent in the heroizing of commercial competition are at the heart of ‘The Famous Voyage’” (153). MacFaul thus brings the poem down to earth as a satire of rotten civility, including mercantile trade (and prostitution), and so (presumably) the poem “reduce[s] the heroic mode to an absurd minimum” (144) and makes a mockery of the epic genre.

Katherine Duncan-Jones is not so sure about the poem’s meaning:

It’s not clear whether Jonson’s chief target was the misgovernment of London, the ‘hot air’ of many recent philosophical and scientific writings [cf. the mockery of Paracelsians and atomists in the poem] or the amusing folly of

arrogant young blades who, like so many gulls in his stage comedies, try to master the congested city which will always end up mastering them. (262)

This last statement sounds like cosmic irony, a large and serious topic. In the spirit of Allen's reading of "Muiopotmos," I would suggest that we further emphasize the infernal circumstances in which our protagonists find themselves, so as to demonstrate the serious Christian moralizing underlying the playful and overly ripe parodic surface of civic, commercial and bodily satire. Underworld traces are omnipresent in the poem, both in its many references to fire (real and venereal) and hell, and in its sources, particularly Virgil. The poem even borrows from a classical source (i.e., Horace) that is itself a pastiche/parody of classical sources describing the underworld (cf. Boehrer). In doing so, Jonson's poem parodies moralistic poetry and associated parodies, but also, conversely, draws attention to the same diabolical subject matter. The discourse of Hell *is* often parodic, beginning with its main occupant, the anti-Christ. I would suggest that the poem is so grotesque and *nasty* in order to maintain the moral force of infernal condemnation. It sticks us, the readers, into a living hell and thus makes its satiric knife-edge that much keener. The epigram's prefatory lines make explicit and repeated references to "hell" (l. 2) and the classical underworld, before the narrative action begins in the section labeled "The Voyage Itself." Hence the reader must him/herself cross an infernal threshold to get into the poem.

Recent critics, by focusing on Virgilian and Horatian precedents (see Boehrer; McRae), have also ignored Jonson's potential allusions to Dante's *Inferno* in the poem. Not simply their shared use of multiple rivers and angry boatmen (ll. 12, 68, 87-88; cf. Dante's Charon, also based on Virgil, of course), "cries of ghosts, women, and men, / Laden with plague-sores" (ll. 16-17; cf. Dante's many ghosts and the plague victims in *Inferno* XXIX), erroneous philosophers (cf. Dante's Limbo and especially the alchemists in *Inferno* XXIX), prostitutes, "Arses" that "were heard to croak, instead of frogs" (l. 13; cf. the tremendous fart by a Malebranche demon that concludes *Inferno* Canto XXI; the Malebranche also jig at sinners who crouch like

frogs<sup>14</sup>), devouring beasts (including “Cerberus,” l. 14) and overwhelming fecal matter, but also the unusual fact that *two* men take the voyage up the Fleet Ditch: Jonson could be alluding to Dante’s pairing of himself and Virgil on their voyage into the underworld.<sup>15</sup>

For these reasons also, perhaps, “On the Famous Voyage” is the last poem in the book of epigrams: the book thereby ends on a dire note, a vision of damnation. As MacFaul points out, the poem is followed on the next page in Jonson’s *Collected Works* by the “orderly” “Ode: To Penshurst” (156). “On the Famous Voyage” is thus a vision of doom that concludes the one section, *Epigrams*, before a more pleasant vision (of paradise?) begins the next, *The Forest* (albeit the short and bitter-sweet lyric on cupid and poetry, “Why I Write Not of Love,” comes in between, as the first item in *The Forest*).

In short, size does not matter: no matter how superficially attractive or lacking in heroics a “micro-epic” may be, it can also teach us “that none knows well / To shun the heav’n that leads men to this hell” (Shakespeare, *Sonnet* 129). It is fitting that this journal should choose as an emblem two dwarves squatting in bubbles of air, pointing and thumbing their noses at each other. It is hoped that the above critique of Tom MacFaul’s engaging essay will encourage further spirited debate without clearing the room.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Critics have traditionally turned their nose up at the poem but MacFaul, like others recently, is right to call attention to its merits. See also McRae; Boehrer; Duncan-Jones.

<sup>2</sup>Wilson-Okamura, for example, characterizes Spenser’s later style as a “big, fat sound” (362).

<sup>3</sup>Note the opening emphasis on the hellish character of the voyage, which aligns it with similar symbolism in “Muiopotmos” and “On the Famous Voyage.”

<sup>4</sup>I am the proverbial pot calling the kettle black: I have no compunction against analyzing bad poetry at length if it suits the overall critical argument: cf. my

analysis of works by Parr Lane and Ralph Birkenshaw in Herron, *Spenser's Irish Work*, ch. 4.

<sup>5</sup>See also Herron, "Plucking the Perrot: *Muiopotmos* and Irish Politics" for this argument. MacFaul, wisely or no, does not cite my work among the range of potential political readings he offers.

<sup>6</sup>"Ahi Genovesi, uomini diversi / d'ogne costume e pien d'ogne magagna, / perché non siete voi del mondo spersi?" "Ah Genoese!—to every accustomed good, / Strangers; with every corruption, amply crowned: / Why hasn't the world expunged you as it should?" (Dante, *Inferno* XXXIII.151-53). MacFaul (162n14) cites Dante in relation to the frailty of butterflies on their way to heaven.

<sup>7</sup>MacFaul (147) argues with negative evidence here: because the arming of Clarion does not mention greaves, perhaps this alludes to Sidney's foolish lack of greaves on the battlefield, which was the cause of his death. Weakening his argument beyond this speculation is the fact that Clarion is stabbed in the "heart" (l. 438), which makes him even less like Sidney. For another identification of Clarion as Sidney, see Lemmi; Mazzola. For a refutation, see Herron, "Plucking the Perrot" 81n6.

<sup>8</sup>For a similar argument, see Orwen; Herron, "Plucking the Perrot" 101-05.

<sup>9</sup>For such a reading, see (for example) Renwick 249; Dundas; Heninger 363; Brown ch. 6. In his dedication to the poem, Spenser himself asks his noble reader to "make a milde construction" of it: Spenser, "To the right worthy and virtuous Ladie; the La: *Carey*" 412. All references to the poem here are taken from the Yale edition.

<sup>10</sup>For this reading, with or without politics involved, see (for example) Herron, "Plucking the Perrot"; Weiner; Lemmi; Orwen; Allen ch. 2.

<sup>11</sup>The same theme appears repeatedly in *The Faerie Queene*. See, for example, Book I, canto xi, stanza 7, glossed in Spenser, *The Faerie Queene* 138n.

<sup>12</sup>Herron, "Plucking the Perrot" *passim*. For a similar argument regarding the political allegory of the Den of Error in *The Faerie Queene*, see McCabe 63.

<sup>13</sup>References to the poem here are cited from Parfitt's edition.

<sup>14</sup>"ranocchi" (*Inferno* XXII.26, 222-23).

<sup>15</sup>As Duncan-Jones notes, a primary source for Jonson's poem, Nashe's "Choise of Valentines," contains only one main protagonist; another, Horace's *Satire* I.5 (discussed at length by Boehrer) contains multiple companions en route to Brindisium, one of whom is Virgil. Furthermore, Jonson's numbering of the epigram as "CXXXIII" in the series has a certain finality to it, insofar as the reader remembers Dante's numerology in *The Divine Comedy*: one hundred cantos, with thirty-three each belonging to *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*; *Inferno* consists of thirty-four but the first canto is prefatory (and hence counts as the thirty-fourth, or extra, that makes the hundred). As is well known, Dante's choice of 33, like his three-line *terza rima*, has Christian resonances both in the Holy Trinity and Christ's age at crucifixion (i.e., 33). In "CXXXIII" Jonson combines the numbers 100 and 33, perhaps as an oblique reference to the *Divine Comedy's* own number totals and

hence another allusion to both the Christian and hellish contexts he borrows from [for a parodic reference to the Trinity, see Jonson's play on the "three for one" return expected by the men (l. 28)]. For Jonson's use of holy numerology elsewhere, including "100," see Severance, "'To Shine in Union'" 197-98; for use of the number 33 as an underlying structural device in the poetic collection *Flowres of Sion*, by Jonson's friend William Drummond, see Severance, "'Some Other Figure.'"

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# From Scotland to the Holy Land: Renegotiating Scottish Identity in the Pilgrim Narrative of William Lithgow\*

HOLLY FAITH NELSON and SHARON ALKER

## I. An Unlikely Pilgrim

That an early modern Presbyterian Scot deeply distrustful of Catholics and Papist practices and highly suspicious of the beliefs and actions of Islamic “infidels” should undertake a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, then part of the Ottoman Empire, seems an unlikely event. That he should arrive there in a caravan guarded by Turks, tour sacred sites with Catholic guides, acquire relics, and attempt to serve an intermediary role between King James VI/I and the Catholic Padre Guardiano of Jerusalem on his return appears even more improbable. But such is the case of William Lithgow of Lanark, Scotland, who, six years after the Union of the Crowns, set out on a lengthy journey, chiefly on foot, that included a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. Lithgow details his adventures in the Levant and elsewhere in his travel narrative first published in 1614 as *A most delectable, and true discourse, of an admired and painefull peregrination from Scotland, to the most famous kingdomes in Europe, Asia and Affricke* and later renamed *The totall discourse, of the rare adventures, and painefull peregrinations of long nineteene yeares travayles, from Scotland, to the most famous kingdomes in Europe, Asia and Affrica*. Lithgow revised, expanded, and added illustrations and prefatory material to his travelogue during his lifetime—other versions appearing in 1616, 1623, 1632, and 1640—taking into account new journeys as well as changing personal and historical circumstance.<sup>1</sup>

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\*For debates inspired by this article, please check the *Connotations* website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debnelson-alker01912.htm>>.

At first glance, the experiences of William Lithgow (1582-c.1645) in Europe, Asia, and Africa, in which the Turk, Arab, and Moor are often negatively stereotyped, seem to lend themselves to post-colonial readings, but Linda Colley, Nabil Matar, and others have rightly cautioned against imposing a colonialist or imperialist hermeneutic on works like *Rare Adventures* which contain little material on colonial efforts.<sup>2</sup> As Colley reminds us in *Captives: Britain, Empire and the World, 1600-1850*, early modern British subjects were routinely captured and enslaved in foreign lands, deprived of their agency and power. Matar details this disempowerment of “European Christians” in countries under Islamic rule in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, emphasizing that “[n]o Muslim fell on his knees before a Briton: rather he hunted down, humiliated, and often held captive, the ‘Goure’ (*kafir*, infidel) who could not but submit to the indignity” (*Islam in Britain* 4). William Lithgow is all too aware of his status as a member of both subjugated ethnic and religious groups that suffer indignities in the Holy Land. In this capacity, he is the object of the Turkish gaze and is regularly referred to as a “Frank”—a term used by the Ottoman colonizers of the Holy Land and neighbouring nations to describe a person of “Western nationality” (*OED* “Frank” *n.*<sup>1</sup> and *a.*<sup>1</sup> A.2.). Lithgow’s Scottishness and Protestantism, from the perspective of the Turk, is elided, and he is reduced simply to the nebulous and inferior Western Christian ‘other.’

This is not to say that aspects of “colonial or imperial fantasies” (Nayar 2) do not appear in non-colonial early modern British works such as *Rare Adventures*. Matar proves the contrary in *Turks, Moors, and Englishmen in the Age of Discovery*, arguing that it was all too common for the British to transfer the language used to describe colonized American Indians onto the Oriental colonizer in the Ottoman Empire in a bid to feel superior despite the obvious subjection of the British to the Turk (16). More recently, in *English Writing and India, 1600-1920*, Pramod K. Nayar shows that, in describing their pre-colonial experiences in South Asia, the British often imagined India in terms of the marvellous and monstrous, categories Edward Said associates with



Orientalism (2). Nevertheless, though similar images of alterity appear in colonial and non-colonial texts, the latter should not be read in terms of British colonization or empire building since they do not operate within a framework of “an insidious and all-powerful imperialism” nor draw on “a systematic discourse of power and knowledge” (Melman 107). Therefore, as Felicity A. Nussbaum suggests, it is essential to “look beyond the European empire and its reaches to other perspectives” if we are to attain a more nuanced understanding of early modern “global relations,” particularly in such a demographically diverse region as the Holy Land (7-8).

In this paper, we attend to the complexity and instability of William Lithgow’s heterogeneous encounters with the religious, racial, or ethnic other, considering how his multifaceted identity, and the competing discourses of which it is constituted, generates fluidity and volatility in his conception of subjectivity and alterity in the Holy Land as well as other foreign regions. We hope to show that a Scottish Presbyterian Royalist with a criminal past who leaves behind an unstable nation to undertake a pilgrimage to a land controlled by Muslim Ottomans and filled with people of countless faiths and nations and who visits religious sites with Roman Catholics as interpreters is not capable of maintaining any simple notion of self (sameness) and otherness. Lithgow’s narrative of his pilgrimage to the sacred space of the Holy Land—marked as it is by an uneasy blend of personal and national narcissism, religious skepticism, spiritual devotion, and the simultaneous attraction to, and fear of, difference and diversity—provides us with a complicated, yet more accurate, view of the unstable response of early moderns to religious, ethnic, and cultural alterity.

## II. The Instability of Self, State, and Discursive Practice

Concepts of the self are fractured in every age, but Lithgow is a particularly useful example of the multiplicity of this fracturing. Lith-

gow's life circumstances produced a personal identity under threat, making it difficult for him to conceive of himself in a stable relation to the other. He recalls that in his youth he was "inveigled" and "inforced, even by the greatest powers then living in my Country, to submit [...] to arbitrement, satisfaction and reconciliation"; later realizing the "hainousnesse of the offence" of which he is accused and the "unallowable" nature of the "redresses" to which he submitted, he chose "to seclude" him "selfe from" his native "soyle" (*Total Discourse* 1640, 7).<sup>3</sup> Gilbert Phelps explains that "the family tradition is that when the four brothers of a certain Miss Lockhart found Lithgow in the company of their sister they set about him and cut off his ears—so that he acquired the local nicknames of 'Lugless Will' and 'Cut-lugged Willie,' and was forced to leave Scotland for fear of further complications" (Introduction 8).<sup>4</sup> So Lithgow begins his journey "dis-placed" and "disoriented" by his fellow Scots who have marked him as other by disfiguring him, compelling him to commence, what Neil Keeble calls in another context, "wilderness exercises" (142).

The religious and political instability of Scotland and England at the time Lithgow composed various editions of *Rare Adventures* also destabilized his national identity, his sense of Britishness. As Lithgow first set out for the Holy Land, the notion of the holy or sacred was in the process of being redefined and solidified in Scotland. As Michael Lynch has argued, "a genuine Calvinist consensus" had begun to emerge in Scotland by the late sixteenth century (228). Indeed, Calvinist theology is unmistakable in Lithgow's later poetry, in which he envisions "mans stinking flesh" as a "Mass of ill! The Chaos of corruption," "rotten slyme" and "the pudle of inruption," whose "best, is but base filthynesse" (*Gushing Teares* 78).<sup>5</sup> Despite this theological accord north of the border, the relationship between the political world and the religious one continued to be turbulent after the Union of the Crowns. Scottish Calvinists distanced themselves from 'Papist' English reformers whom they accused of tainting the true Christian church. As Matar reminds us, the evolving religious discord eventually led to the Bishops' Wars, viewed as a "holy war" "between the

English monarchy and Scottish covenanters" by William Laud, Archbishop of Canterbury (*Turks, Moors, and Englishmen* 159). With the marriage of Charles I to the Catholic Henrietta Maria in 1625, anxiety continued to mount, contributing to the tensions that led to the English civil wars.<sup>6</sup> Lithgow's problems with the union were not purely of a religious nature, however. He was, as Gerald M. MacLean notes, especially disturbed by the unhappy relocation of the centre and source of Scottish power, celebrating in his poem *Scotlands Welcome to Her Native Sonne, and Sovereigne Lord, King Charles* the "Scottish church and Parliament" while lamenting the "unemployment and [...] loss of capital investment in Scotland since the court left for London with the Stuarts" (*Time's Witness* 98). Lithgow criticizes the policies enacted by king and parliament in London, yet remains loyal to the Stuarts who now hold court in that urban centre, producing a tension between his identities as a Scot and a British subject (*Time's Witness* 98-100).

Lithgow's religious and political identity was further destabilized within a broader European context because of the fracturing of the Christian West. Lithgow begins "The Prologue to the Reader" in the 1623 edition of *Rare Adventures* by describing the "tumultuous age" in which he lives. The "combustions of Christendome," he believes, led to the tragic torment of his spirit and flesh in Spain by the Inquisitors, whom he views as Christians in name only ("Prologue" sig. A3). Therefore, although Lithgow thanks God for his "safe return to Christendom" (*Rare Adventures* 229) on several occasions throughout his narrative, soon after uttering these words, he recounts the defects and dangers of these Christian nations, and many of their people, to which he has been safely returned (230).

Personal, religious, and political instability render less certain the relationship of Lithgow to the foreign landscapes, cultures and peoples he encounters on his pilgrimage to the Holy Land, an uncertainty exacerbated by the discursive fluidity of early modern travel writing. Travelogues of the period are forged from an assortment of what we might call political, historical, religious, and proto-scientific discourses associated with various genres. Though Lithgow identifies

*Rare Adventures* as a “true history” at one point, sections of his narrative share features with, for example, political handbooks, Presbyterian sermons, picaresque prose fiction, private memoirs, cultural ethnography, natural history, captivity narratives, Protestant martyrology, and expense sheets. As William H. Sherman explains, “early modern travel writing was so varied that it may not even be appropriate to describe it as a single genre” (“Stirrings and Searchings” 30).<sup>7</sup> This is indeed the case, as travel writing should be viewed as a linguistic site of intersecting, and often conflicting, discourses, each of which is informed by a distinct interpretive framework, leading writers to perceive, shape, and give meaning to their experiences from a range of perspectives. As Lithgow frequently shifts between discourses in *Rare Adventures*, which can be jarring, his constitution of, and reaction to, alterity can noticeably change. He is unable to resolve and unify these experiences with a single voice; rather he selects from a repertoire of discourses based on the distinct nature of each encounter with unfamiliar individuals or groups. Peter Womack has argued that “[t]he vitality of Renaissance travel writing consists in its failure to achieve the ideological closure which imperialism would later necessitate” (159). Lithgow’s work cannot, of course, “fail” to achieve an imperially-inspired harmony that is not yet politically present or culturally available, but it can reveal the significance of discursive practices in constituting identity and alterity in an age of travel.

### III. A Scot in the Holy Land

Writing from a place of instability on multiple fronts, Lithgow frequently attempts in *Rare Adventures* to achieve a static undifferentiated identity by distinguishing himself from those deemed the enemies or adversaries of the orthodox Presbyterian Scot or Briton—the Jew, the Muslim, and the Catholic. In order to establish himself as a unified and superior subject he must, as Richard Kearney explains, engage in a number of psychological “evasion strategies” (5) to avoid

seeing aspects of himself in strangers and strangers in himself, which would weaken his representation of the Scottish or British subject as the elevated term in a simple dyadic structure.

The most marked strategy deployed by Lithgow is to assert the foreign, strange, or monstrous nature of the non-Protestant, non-British peoples he comes across, drawing on ready-made negative discourses of the other. In Lithgow's account of the Holy Land and surrounding areas, we see evidence of his intolerant attitude toward the Turks—or the self-titled “Mahometans”—whom he envisions as terrorizing “Infidels” who “offer up [...] satanicall prayers to Mahomet” and whose “devilish religion” leads them to perform “ridiculous ceremonies” (*Rare Adventures* 115). In describing his travels in Syria, Lithgow invokes a familiar bestial metaphor to describe them lying together asleep in groups with their “coverlet[s] above them”: “I have seen hundreds of them after this manner lie ranked like dirty swine in a beastly sty or loathsome jades in a filthy stable” (122). In his treatment of the Muslim other, Lithgow attempts to differentiate between, and place in a hierarchy, three groups with whom he comes in contact in “the territory of Canaan,” yet ultimately rhetorically unites them as the anti-Christian other: “The [civil] Arabians are for the most part thieves and robbers; the [“sun-burnt”] Moors cruel and uncivil, hating Christians to the death; the Turks are the ill best of the three, yet all sworn enemies to Christ” (136). Though the Jews are little spoken of in Lithgow's account of the Levant, as he enters Northern Palestine, he readily declares that the Land, “together with the Jews” who inhabit it, have been cursed by God (127).<sup>8</sup>

Many of the habits or practices of certain believers in Christ—Catholic and Greek orthodox—are viewed as no less alien or foreign than the Turk, Arab, Moor, or Jew. This is clear in Lithgow's account of the “ridiculous Ceremony” of the Catholics and “orientall Christians” in Jerusalem on Palm Sunday (141). They engage, he recounts, in an “apish imitation of Christ” which can only be characterized, Lithgow believes, as “ignorant devotion” (141). When they are violently beaten by the Turks for their “clamour,” returning to the mo-

nastery “groaning and laden with black and bloody blows,” Lithgow and his fellow Franks “did laugh in [their] sleeves” (141-42). These “slavish people,” he is convinced, lack “civility and government” and behave “as if they had been all mad or distracted of their wits” (152-53); therefore, he concludes that their physical abuse at the hands of the Turks is both justified and comical.

When engaged in such criticism of the ethnic or religious other, Lithgow often falls into what we might term Presbyterian homiletics, and the seemingly objective description of what he observes as a traveler or the apparently impartial history of the area he inhabits is displaced by passionate and often vituperative sermoniac prose marked by an opening apostrophe or exclamatory phrase. Such is the case in his description of Northern Palestine when he looks upon the “heap of stones” believed to be the remains of “the house where Mary dwelt when Gabriel saluted her” (128). Recalling that the “Romanists say” that this house was “transported by the angels” to Italy, Lithgow declares: “Now thou bottomless gulf of Papistry, here I forsake thee: no winter-blasting furies of Satan’s subtle storms, can make a shipwreck of my faith, on the stony shelves of thy deceitful deeps” (128-29). Gilbert Phelps describes this rhetorical phenomenon in the following way: “There are times when the anti-Papist railings take on an air that is either perfunctory or frantic, as if he had suddenly recalled what was expected of a staunch Protestant” (Introduction 15). In falling back on such discourses, Lithgow indeed attempts to take advantage of travel writing as a space in which the self can engage in the “process of Othering” that offers “a wonderful opportunity for self- (and national) (re)invention, a way of encountering, and then countering, difference” (Hooper and Youngs 5).<sup>9</sup>

Regardless of its purpose, this type of description of the Catholic, Muslim, or Jewish other proliferates in *Rare Adventures* and should not be dismissed as uncharacteristic of Lithgow’s prose. It is complemented (as is also the case in conventional colonial texts) by his periodic attempt to assert strongly his Scottish or British identity—which

on one occasion in Jerusalem, he literally inscribes on his flesh. In the 1616 edition of *Rare Adventures*, Lithgow describes his tattooing thus:

In the last night of my staying at *Jerusalem*, which was at the holy Grave, I remembring that bounden duty, and loving zeale, which I owe unto my native Prince, whom I in all humility (next and immediate to Christ Jesus) acknowledge, to be the supreme Head, and Governour, of the true Christian and Catholic Church; by the remembrance of this obligation I say, I caused one *Elias Bethleete*, a Christian inhabitour of *Bethleem* [*Bethlehem*], to ingrave on the flesh of my right arme, *The Never-conquered Crowne of Scotland*, and the now *Inconquerable Crowne of England*, joyned also to it; with this inscription, painefully carved in letters, within the circle of the Crowne, *Vivat Jacobus Rex*. (*Most Delectable* 1616, 113-14)

It should be said that the extremity to which he goes here, with the painful etching of a curiously large and complex tattoo on his arm suggests an atypical need to establish a distinctive religio-political identity for himself. Juliet Fleming has shown that while most Protestant pilgrims to Jerusalem “receive[d] tattoos either at the site of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, or in Bethlehem,” Lithgow’s elaboration of the “standard pattern (a Jerusalem cross) with some devices of his own designed to celebrate the union of the Scottish and English crowns” was highly unusual (*Graffiti* 109). Lithgow is willing to undergo excessive suffering in the Holy Land to imprint permanently on himself what he views as a politically and religiously coherent identity. This is, of course, ironic given that the symbols used hold together elements—England, Scotland, king, and the Christian religion—that Lithgow knows are themselves unstable and uneasy at this moment in history. However, this and the other strategies of evasion he deploys are ways for Lithgow to mark himself and his nation rhetorically and physically as fixed superior entities. He thereby fashions himself as a representative Anglo-Scottish epic hero of an Odyssean sort, mocking other cultures as superstitious, devilish, bestial, or sexually perverse, and elsewhere surviving shipwrecks or persuading a ship’s captain and crew to fight off attackers. Therefore, we do observe in *Rare Adventures* some of the emergent features of

“colonial or imperial fantasies” (Nayar 2), despite the fact that Lithgow is neither colonist nor imperialist.<sup>10</sup>

However, Lithgow’s evasion strategies do not keep alterity at bay in either an internal or external sense. Over the course of *Rare Adventures*, we see him experience great difficulty maintaining an identity which can be consistently defined against the alien or monstrous other. This difficulty manifests itself in four distinct ways in Lithgow’s travel narrative: the intermittent identification with, and imitation of, the other; the admission of alterity within the self; the recognition of the singularity of particular others; and the acceptance of the complexity of alterity.

First, despite his Prebyterian sermonical denunciation of the Catholic or Muslim other, Lithgow seems more inclined to internalize Papist and Islamic habits and practices than he would like to admit openly. Lithgow’s impulse to undertake a pilgrimage, collect relics, produce icons, and be moved to tears at sacred spaces in the Holy Land seems fairly pronounced despite his repeated mockery of these conventionally Catholic exercises and experiences. Though James Ellison has recently argued that “[f]or Protestants as much as Catholics, Jerusalem remained the ultimate goal of a life-time, even if some Protestants had difficulty allowing that it was a specially holy place” (1), Grace Tiffany maintains that early modern Protestants viewed “traditional *physical* pilgrimage [...] as a wholly carnal enterprise” and thus re-wrote the Catholic notion of pilgrimage by satirizing, secularizing, or internalizing it (15).<sup>11</sup> At times Lithgow makes use of the former two strategies while, paradoxically, on a “*physical* pilgrimage,” secularizing his pilgrimage by describing aspects of his experience of the Levant in historical, topographical and economic terms on the one hand, while unmercifully mocking Catholic sacramental concepts of pilgrimage and monumentalism on the other.<sup>12</sup> In these ways, Lithgow strives to justify his desire to visit the Holy Land as a pilgrim on his travels, while distancing himself from Catholic, as well as Greek Orthodox, doctrines and rituals.<sup>13</sup>



And yet, Lithgow's writings exhibit what Anthony Milton, Roberta Albrecht and others have argued is evidence of "residual Catholicism" or "pre-Reformation culture" in early modern Protestant England (Albrecht, *Virgin Mary* 158). Each time he experiences anything close to a Roman Catholic emotion, he does attempt to undermine or qualify it. Yet such emotions remain present in the work. We see traces of a pre-Reformation awareness of the incomprehensible holiness of sacred space in Lithgow's description of his passionate response to the site of Jerusalem: "At last we beheld the prospect of Jerusalem, which was not only a contentment to my weary body, but also, being ravished with a kind of unwonted rejoicing, the tears gushed from my eyes for too much joy" (137-38). In this passage, there is a mystical sense of rapture, something to which he is unaccustomed, but which instinctively comes over him. In the Levant, Lithgow also happily visits monuments and risks his life to stand physically on the "mountain whereon Christ fasted forty days" (146). The mountain seems, in this instance, more than a memorial or symbol for Lithgow, who is also desirous of collecting relics of various sorts. He is particularly pleased by his acquisition of a branch of a Turpentine tree in Jordan, which he describes "as the rarest gem of a Pilgrim's treasure" (145)—later presented to James I—and he accepts gifts, some indented with relics, from the friar whose life he saved as they descended the mountain on which Christ was tempted; he receives "twelve crosses made of the olive wood of Mount Olivet, each cross having twenty-four relics indented in them, with forty pair of chaplets made of the same wood, two Turkish handkerchiefs, and three pair of garters and girdles of the Holy Grave, all wrought in silk and gold, with divers other things etc." (156). His passing claim that these were not "so thankfully received as they were [...] given" does not mitigate the pleasure he takes in detailing the richly ornamented religious objects which he carefully keeps in his possession throughout the remainder of his travels, gifting some of them to Queen Anne on his return (156).

That Lithgow accepts a “patent under their great seal” from the secretary of the Guardian at Jerusalem to confirm his presence in Jerusalem, while fairly commonplace, still indicates a willingness to move beyond a staunch Presbyterian identity—to recognize the authority of a Catholic figure (158).<sup>14</sup> Other British travelers of the period, such as John Sanderson, are known to have secured certificates from “the Greek Patriarch of Jerusalem” rather than the Catholic Guardian (O’Donnell 129), to avoid even the perception of submission to Papal authority in the Holy Land. And Lithgow on occasion seems to attribute a supernatural power to the patent, which is successful in warding off Calabrian bandits intent on murdering him. So too, we would suggest that his desire for a tattoo—despite his attempt to render it Protestant and political—and his reproduction of the tattoo in editions of *Rare Adventures* demonstrates the commitment of Lithgow, and many other Protestant pilgrims, to a deeply-entrenched pre-Reformation visual culture.<sup>15</sup> It seems rather ironic that Lithgow creates a detailed *icon* on his flesh—and in his book—despite his profoundly iconoclastic rhetoric.

Other British Protestant pilgrims contemporary with Lithgow managed to dissimilate in order to avoid Papist practices. In his *Itinerary*, the Englishman Fynes Moryson details his own evasion strategies:

And when our superstitious consorts, being now to leave *Jerusalem*, had gathered great heapes of stones from the monuments, to carrie into their Country, and had received of the Guardians gift, for great treasure, holy beades, Agnus Dei, and like trash, wee so refused to take any such burthen, as still we bewailed our misfortune, that we being not to return the right way home, as they did, but to passe to *Constantinople*, could not carrie such reliques with us, lest they should fall into some Turks hands, who might abuse them. And when our consorts at *Bethlehem* printed the signe of the Crosse with inke and a pen-knife upon their armes, so as the print was never to bee taken out, wee would not follow them in this small matter, but excused our selves, that we being to passe home through many Kingdomes, we durst not beare any such marke upon our bodies, whereby wee might be knowne. (237)<sup>16</sup>

In this light, Lithgow seems far more receptive to Catholic views of the sacred than some other members of the English or Scottish church.

It is true, as O'Donnell contends, that Lithgow often attempts to resignify Catholic objects and images to give them a secular, rather than a devotional, meaning. O'Donnell believes that for Lithgow such objects are "not relics of holy places but tokens of his valour and hardiness as a traveler" and their "transcendent aspect [...] is flattened" because they are "tokens in social and credit relations abroad and at home" (133).<sup>17</sup> However, O'Donnell admits the complexity of Lithgow's perception of religious objects, stating that his treatment of his Catholic patent and his recent presence at the Holy Sepulchre "could imply either faith in the document's intrinsic protective efficacy or pragmatic awareness of its power to disarm malefactors who are superstitiously reverent towards Christ's tomb," recognizing that the former reading "has the potential to destabilize his stance of Protestant resistance to the devotional aspects of travel to Jerusalem" (129-30). O'Donnell asserts that only one of these readings is possible, contending that, when Lithgow describes the power of the object, he is engaging in parody. Yet, nothing in the text suggests this is the case, and it seems more likely that Lithgow, who frequently moves between discourses to comprehend and to operate within day-to-day experience, has absorbed multiple ways of seeing and knowing, even when these, from a rational perspective, cannot easily be reconciled.<sup>18</sup>

To survive in a global context, Lithgow needs a measure of discursive flexibility, and he does not describe this in the language of dissimulation as does Moryson. After all, Lithgow finds that he must rely on the consciousness and hermeneutic of the Catholic other as he negotiates the topography and religious and cultural significance of the Holy Land. He writes of Jerusalem in *A most delectable and true discourse* (1616):

Lo, I have plainly described, the whole Monuments I saw within, and about *Jerusalem*, by the order of these 12 severall daies: the like heretofore, was never by any Pilgrime, so lively manifested. But as I said in the beginning of my description, so say I now also at the conclusion; some of these things are ridiculous, some of manifest untruths, some also doubtfull, and others somewhat more credible, and of apparant truth. The recapitulation whereof, is onely by me used, as I was informed by *Gaudentius Saybantus* the *Padre*

*Guardiano, Lorenzo Antonio il Viccaro, and the Troughman John Baptista.*  
(113)

Here Lithgow admits that it is through a Catholic framework that he must experience the Levant. He must “transpose” himself “into alien horizons,” to borrow Gadamer’s terms (*Truth and Method* 303). The “prejudices” or “fixed set of opinions and valuations” that he carries with him to the “hermeneutical situation” (*Truth and Method* 305), as he attempts to give meaning to the Holy Land, must confront and engage with the horizon of the Catholic other in Jerusalem and elsewhere in the Levant.<sup>19</sup> While he definitely questions the truth of the Catholic interpretation of the Levant, he also accepts that some of it might be a “credible” or an “apparent truth.” And upon his arrival to England, Lithgow adopts a diplomatic role, representing the interests of the Guardian to James I with respect to the possible financial contribution of Britain to the Guardian for the preservation of “sacred monuments at Jerusalem” and the “support [of] their afflicted lives” (157); in this case, it is hard to determine if Lithgow views himself as the ambassador of the Stuart monarch or the envoy of the Guardian.

Lithgow’s limited identification with the Catholic other is not unlike, at times, his reluctant admiration and emulation of the Turks. In his complex attitude toward the Ottoman Empire, Lithgow is hardly unusual.<sup>20</sup> Billie Melman finds in much travel writing on the Middle East in this period, “an attraction to that culture and its site” as well as a “repulsion perpetuated in the cultural stereotypes” (106). Lithgow was well aware of the danger of “turning Turk,” and acknowledges early on in his narrative, in an account of the Dardanelles, that he has seen the sad plight of Christians of both sexes who, to avoid “perpetual slavery,” have “turned Turk”; elsewhere, he remarks upon Christians who “turn Turk” for economic gain (86, 202). Lithgow never imagines himself in these terms,<sup>21</sup> yet in the 1632 edition of *Rare Adventures*, he proudly presents himself in a portrait in Turkish dress (“The Author’s Effigy”) which faces the title page. The image is accompanied by the following descriptive lines of verse:

*Loe here's mine Effigie, and Turkish suite;  
 My Staffe, my Shasse, as I did Asia foote:  
 Plac'd in old Ilium; Priams Scepter thralles:  
 The Grecian Campe design'd; lost Dardan falles  
 Gird'd with small Simois: Idae's tops, a Gate:  
 Two fatall Tombes, an Eagle, sackt Troyes State. (Totall Discourse 1632)*

Though Lithgow's "Turkish *suite*" is something of a necessity on his pilgrimage to the Holy Land, his posture and expression of self-assurance in the effigy, and the visual association of his Turkish dress with the epic heroism of an ancient past, seems to reflect a desire to put on the exoticness and the military, political, and economic success of the Ottomans. As he navigates an "islamocentric environment" (Matar, *Turks, Moors, and Englishmen* 16), experiencing "imperial envy" (MacLean, "Ottomanism" 87) and witnessing the captivity and abuse of "poor slavish [...] Christians" (*Rare Adventures* 95) it seems impossible for Lithgow to resist entirely "turning Turk."

In fact, even as Lithgow ridicules the attire of various Muslims and Catholics, he recognizes that his survival and dignity depends, on occasion, on his ability to garb himself as the ethnic or religious other. Immediately after he secures the branch from the Turpentine tree in Jordan, Lithgow must flee Arab attackers; to do so, he must quickly move from one state of (un)dress to another:

In the end, pondering I could hardly or never escape their hands [...], I leaped down from the tree, leaving my Turkish clothes lying upon the ground, took only in my hand the rod and *shasse* which I wore on my head, and ran stark naked above a quarter of a mile amongst thistles [...]. which when the Guardian [...] saw my naked body, he presently pulled off his grey gown and threw it to me, whereby I might hide the secrets of nature: by which means in the space of an hour I was clothed three manner of ways—first like a Turk; secondly like a wild Arabian; and thirdly like a grey friar, which was a barbarous, a savage, and a religious habit. (145-46)

Though Lithgow clearly jests here at the expense of others, the episode reminds us of his need to adapt to changing circumstances in the Holy Land, to in-habit the other in order to preserve the self. No doubt, Lithgow believes he can adapt his exterior without altering his

interior condition. He says as much in his encounter with Catholics when he promises the Guardian, after he is caught laughing at their suffering, "to abstain from scandaling and mocking [their] rites and ordinary customs [...] seeing [that his] outward carriage in going along with them to see their customs tended no way to hurt the inward disposition of our souls" (142). And yet outward conformity points to some understanding of, and submission to, the beliefs and practices of the "foreigner" or "stranger" with whom he routinely interacts.<sup>22</sup>

Not only must Lithgow be willing to don the dress of the other on his way to Jerusalem, gesturing toward constructedness of identity, he also conflates on occasion the Turkish and Christian self. In describing the "religion and customs of the Turks," Lithgow addresses the Turkish emperor Achmet, writing, "[he] was the most gentle and favourable to Christians, who rather for his bounty and tenderness might have been intitulated the Christian emperor than the Pagan king" (99). Although Lithgow privileges the Christian in this comparison, at the same time he implies that the categories of Muslim and Christian are fluid rather than fixed since they overlap in this instance and depend on external actions rather than a static internal nature, weakening a simple view of the other as irrevocably or essentially different from the self.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, Lithgow also hints at the superiority of the Ottomans on some occasions, indirectly suggesting that imitation of them, or internalization of their values, is warranted. For example, Lithgow mentions more than once the religious freedom enjoyed by the subjects of the Ottoman Empire, remarking, "they permit to all and every one of theirs to follow his own religion as he pleaseth, without violence or constraint" (105). The repetition of this fact leads us to suspect that in this the Ottoman rulers may, in Lithgow's mind, be superior to their Christian counterparts in Britain and elsewhere.

The strategies of estrangement by which Lithgow strives to distance himself from an inferior other in *Rare Adventures* are further undermined by his recognition of the "monstrous" or "foreign" within the self, either in his own soul, in particular English or Scottish individu-

als, or in the collective Anglo-Scottish self.<sup>24</sup> This recognition can be attributed in part to the Calvinist theology to which Lithgow subscribes. As a Scottish Presbyterian, Lithgow tends to interiorize evil rather than simply to exteriorize it, to such an extent that the Islamic or Jewish other is rendered less “foreign” or abject. If we turn to the religious poetry published by Lithgow after he returned from his pilgrimage, it is clear that the religious or ethnic other is no more base or sinful before God than is he, and, by extension, than are other Reformed Christians:

Now having seene, rude *Lybians*, nak'd, and bare,  
Sterne barbrous *Arabs*, savage *Sabuncks'* od;  
Sword-sweying *Turkes*, and faithlesse *Jews* alwhere,  
Base ruvid *Berdoans*, godlesse of a God:  
Yet when from me, on them I cast mine eye,  
My life I find, fare worse, then theirs can be.

The rustick Moorish, sterne promiscuous sexe,  
Nor *Garolines*, idolatrizing shame;  
The *Turcomans*, that even the Divell doe vex!  
In offering up, their first-borne, to his name:  
Nor *Jamnites*, with their foolish Garlick god,  
Are worse then I, nor more deserve thy rod.     (*Gushing Teares* 218-19)<sup>25</sup>

While in the Levant and surrounding lands, evidence of the stranger “within ourselves,” to borrow Julia Kristeva’s phrase, is not difficult to unearth (1). Lithgow finds that those Christians with whom he naturally identifies are capable of great villainy. Such is the case in Northern Palestine when a “Christian [...] named Joab” is appointed as his group’s guide (129). Lithgow discovers that Joab has hatched a “treacherous plot,” sending “a private messenger” to inform “about three hundred Arabs” living nearby that a “rich and well provided” party will soon be coming to their land, ripe for robbery and murder (129-30). Lithgow and the Turks, Armenians and others with whom he travels to Jerusalem, are saved by a Turkish soldier, who notes the suspicious behaviour of the “villain” Joab, and by the quick thinking of the Turkish Captain, who prevents their “massacre” (130). Along similar lines, when Lithgow finds himself under attack by former

French Christians (apostate Franks), his life is saved by “friendly Turks, who leaped out of their boat and relieved me” (84). So too, when Lithgow travels through Crete on his Levantine pilgrimage, “an English runagate [apostate] named Wolson” plots to kill him because Wolson’s brother was beheaded on “Burnt-Island in Scotland by one called Kear.” Wolson explains to three Englishmen, “I have long since sworn to be revenged of my brother’s death on the first Scotsman I ever saw or met, and my design is to stab him with a knife this night” (65-66). Ironically, the tensions played out by the English and Scots in Britain are mapped out on the interactions of English and Scottish travelers in Crete, and Lithgow’s salvation from the British ‘arch-villain’ comes in the form of another Englishman and three Catholic “Italian soldiers” (66). This type of experience with fellow Britons or non-British Christians likely confirms Lithgow’s Calvinist doctrine of total depravity and unsettles any effort simply to project evil onto those he works to represent as other.

Many of Lithgow’s intimate interactions with non-British, non-Christian individuals also subvert his attempts to align the monstrous, strange, and foreign with the Turk, Moor, Jew, Catholic, Armenian, and so forth. Time and again, Lithgow’s inherited discourses of the religious, ethnic, or racial other are inadequate to describe encounters with, for example, kind Jews who entertain him and other Franks “gratis” as they travel from Jerusalem to Gaza (161). These Jews become in short order his “Hebraic friends” (161). When the German Protestants die unexpectedly, it is a wise “Jewish physician” and the Catholic French Consul who ensure that Lithgow receives most of the bequests left to him in the will of the last one to die, goods the Venetian factor had seized (169). Neither does Lithgow have access to a single discourse that can articulate his pleasure in the company of four friars of “great cheer” with whom he drinks Malmsey and dances, even though he tries to dismiss them as “beastly swine” (67). After all, he tells his reader that he would “gladly [...] not have left the monastery,” but had to continue on with his travels as scheduled (66).



Perhaps the most poignant example of Lithgow's personal experience coming into conflict with negative cultural stereotypes occurs when he is imprisoned and tortured by Spanish inquisitors who capture him on his return to Britain. Viciously abused by those he deems only "titular Christians," Lithgow finds himself cared for by an enslaved "natural Turk," Hazier, and a cook, Elinor, a Christian "Indian negro woman" (269, 284). These individuals are not stereotypical figures who conform wholly to Lithgow's inherited discourses on the Turk or Indian, but rather they are named, psychologically authentic people in his story, who are rich in compassion. When Lithgow relates his narrative of false imprisonment and unjust suffering, Hazier weeps and speaks in familial terms to this fallen Scottish Protestant, "Brother, brother, it is much needful for you to take all in patience, for it is impossible now you can escape some fearful trial" (269). Hazier and Elinor secretly tend to his physical and psychological needs, and when Hazier is deceived into keeping his distance for a period of time from Lithgow, on his return, Lithgow refers to him as his "former friend" (285). That Lithgow would ever conceive of Hazier, a "slavish infidel" (285), as a friend is as striking as his affection for his "Hebraic friends" just outside of Gaza (161).

Yet this kind of friendly encounter, in which two distinct subjects interact momentarily as equals of a sort, undermines his dominant understanding of the religious, ethnic, or racial other. On such occasions, Lithgow is compelled to see individuals outside of traditional categories of otherness. In Kearney's terms, Lithgow fleetingly "recognize[s] the stranger before [...] [him] as a singular other who responds, in turn, to the singular otherness in each of us" (5). This, for Kearney, is an ethical moment, because "ethics rightly requires [...] [us] to respect the singularity of the other person" (80). In these moments, "[t]he other is not so traumatically estranging as to hold me hostage. Nor is it so miserably abject as to make me imperious. In ethical relation, I am neither master nor slave. I am a self before another self" (81).<sup>26</sup>

Andrew Hadfield does not envision early modern travel narratives, including *Rare Adventures*, as avenues for ethical engagement with the other. Rather, he argues that they function as indirect commentary on the politics of Britain and Anglo-Scottish relations—that is, on a collective British “self”—rather than a work truly caught up in the “other” of foreign lands. He suggests that in the travel narratives of this period, the other simply becomes a “trope” or a “metaphor” of the national self (1).<sup>27</sup> And Lithgow does, in a dedicatory epistle to Charles I in the 1632 edition, associate his travel narrative with the humanist imperative to advise the king on political matters: “The general discourse itself is most fixed upon the laws, religion, manners, policies, and government of kings, kingdoms, people, principalities and powers—and therefore so much the more fit for Your Majesty” (25).

Yet, even if Lithgow’s original intent was to read the foreigner as no more than a metaphor for aspects of the British self, his personal experiences with a host of singular others take him outside of his Scottish Protestant subjectivity. The “polysemy of alterity” that Lithgow experiences in the Holy Land in particular unravels a neatly wrought “self-other dyad” that informs much of his writing (Kearney 81). In Jerusalem in particular, Lithgow witnesses the “pluralism of otherness” (Kearney 81), taking note, for example, that “[t]here are seven sorts of nations, different in religion and language, who continually (enduring life) remain within this church, having encloistered lodgings joining to the walls thereof” in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre (*Rare Adventures* 152). Here the complexity of alterity—and the way in which identity is forged in relation to it—is intensified, as national and linguistic difference sits side by side with a measure of spiritual and spatial sameness.<sup>28</sup>

We are not arguing here that Lithgow’s Protestant pilgrimage to Jerusalem should be viewed as a benevolent gesture of broadmindedness. Recently, James Ellison has anatomized the pilgrimage to Jerusalem of George Sandys, Lithgow’s contemporary, arguing that Sandys is interested in the ideas of “religious unity” and “tolerance” (Had-

field 2).<sup>29</sup> Lithgow does not seem especially attracted to toleration as a principle; as a Scottish Presbyterian who feels threatened by both Anglicanism and Catholicism, he shares little of Sandys's vision of religious unity. However, we would argue that Robert Crawford's description of him as a "Reformation Presbyterian bigot"—a representative view of Lithgow—needs to be tempered given the complexity of his conception of the other in his travel narrative, towards which Crawford himself gestures (171). Peter Erickson has argued in *Early Modern Visual Culture* that unstable concepts "infringe upon and complicate binaries" based on "true and false religion, civility and barbarism" (58). He continues, "[w]ith Europeans' increasing experience and expectation of global variation, concepts of nation, region, [...], complexion, mode of dress and living all begin to jostle and reassemble" (59). Given these circumstances, even Lithgow, a resolute Scottish Presbyterian, must theorize and write alterity in more complex ways than conventional discourses of "othering" allow.

Though, as we have seen, Lithgow works in *Rare Adventures* to operate within formulaic Anglo-Scottish views of Catholic, Jew, Turk, and Moor (among others), his identification and recognition of points of convergence with the other leads him to half-formed notions that his point of origin alone does not form his identity, that selfhood inevitably alters in relation to the other, that the other may be a subject rather than simply an object of his gaze, and that he is the other in foreign lands.<sup>30</sup> There may be some truth in the claim that there is in early modern travel writing a "pre-colonial imaginary that while not necessarily functioning as a teleological point of origin, can be seen as contributing to a later colonial discourse" (Aune 4.1). It is certainly possible to read Lithgow's conception of identity and alterity in these terms. However, as Womack observes, authors of pre-colonial travel narratives had "no stable discourse for representing Englishmen's [or Scotsmen's] relations with the rest of the world, and the attempts to develop one are exasperatingly but enliveningly hit and miss" (159). Lithgow therefore cannot help but explore new ways to posit identity in relation to encountered others, some of which involve seeing the

self within the other and folding encountered elements into the self. Because he is not yet attached to the concepts and critical apparatus of empire that would later define the discourse of colonialism, Lithgow's narrative might also be seen to contribute to, or at least point toward, modern discourses that "*de-alienate* the other" (Kearney 80).

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### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Five versions of the work appeared (1614, 1616, 1623, 1632, and 1640) before 1645, the presumed year of Lithgow's death. The tenth edition was published in 1692. Hereafter, the work will be referred to as *Rare Adventures*. The Folio Society's abridged edition of the 1632 version of *Rare Adventures*, Gilbert Phelps (ed.), *The Rare Adventures and Painful Peregrinations of William Lithgow* (London: The Folio Society, 1974), will be cited throughout by page number, except where noted otherwise.

<sup>2</sup>It is only on his third journey that Lithgow speaks with an emergent colonial voice, since he appears to view himself as part of the Stuart colonial project in Ireland, mentioning his people in "our colonies" in Ireland, which he differentiates from the defective Irish population, whom he characterizes as suffering from the defects of "Ignorance and Sluggishness" (250).

<sup>3</sup>*A most delectable, and true discourse, of an admired and painefull peregrination from Scotland, to the most famous kingdomes in Europe, Asia and Affricke* (London, 1640), n.pag. (chapter 1). Little is known about the life of Lithgow beyond what he shares in his writings.

<sup>4</sup>Lithgow figures his attackers as "blood-shedding Wolves," "life-betraying foes" intent on "facily devour[ing]" "one silly" and "innocent" "stragling Lamb." To leave Scotland is to flee from "evill" and toward "grace" (*Total Discourse* 1640, 7).

<sup>5</sup>The poem is dedicated to James Graham, the first Marquis of Montrose, who was a Covenanter (and hence a Presbyterian) but later a Royalist (he fought for Charles I during the civil wars). Lithgow shared the Marquis's religious and political allegiances (Stevenson).

<sup>6</sup>Lithgow's last known work was on "The Siege of Newcastle" in 1645, which he claimed to have witnessed.

<sup>7</sup>Sherman's "typology of travel writers" (21-30) is a useful paradigm through which to approach this early modern genre, and his warning not to impose on

'travel writing' of the period a single definition (for example, that it represents "true accounts of actual travels" [31]) is invaluable advice.

<sup>8</sup>Earlier in his travelogue, Lithgow aligns Catholic and Jew in an anti-Jesuitical and anti-Semitic diatribe: "The Jews and the Jesuits are brethren in blasphemies; for the Jews are naturally subtle, hateful, avaricious, and above all, the greatest calumniators of Christ's name: and the ambitious Jesuits are flatterers, bloody-gospellers, treasonable tale-tellers, and the only railers upon the sincere life of good Christians" (43). Such disturbing discourse was commonplace in early modern Britain. One need only read Christopher Marlowe's *Jew of Malta* for an example of anti-Semitic rhetoric of the period.

<sup>9</sup>Here, Hooper and Youngs are reviewing the argument of Helga Quadflieg's essay in their volume, "'As mannerly and civill as any of Europe': Early Modern Travel Writing and the Exploration of the English Self" (29-40).

<sup>10</sup>Jyotsna G. Singh describes such elements of pre- or proto-colonial discourse in early modern British travel writing on India as "traces of an incipient colonial ideology" relied upon by "historical subjects struggling to come to terms with a confusingly different culture that seems to threaten the stable categories and assumptions of English cultural identity." These writers hope thereby to establish "dominance rhetorically and imaginatively" (23-24). In a related vein, with respect to the treatment of the Ottoman Empire in early modern English drama, Daniel J. Vitkus theorizes that "the English encounter with exotic alterity [...] helped to form the emergent identity of an English nation that was eagerly fantasizing about having an empire, but was still in the preliminary phase of its colonizing drive" (*Turning Turk* 27).

<sup>11</sup>Paris O'Donnell summarizes the lengthy scholarly debate over the Protestant attitude towards "the 'physical aspects' of traditional pre-Reformation religious culture, such as pilgrimage and related practices," some arguing that "Protestants abhorred place- and object-oriented practices like pilgrimage and wrote about them in uniformly condemnatory terms" while others point to the "continuing vitality, variety and interest" of such practices (125).

<sup>12</sup>Lithgow repeatedly details the costs of inhabiting the Holy Land—the charges he incurred, for example, "within the walls of Jerusalem." His expenses include tribute money etc. (166).

<sup>13</sup>Daniel J. Vitkus claims that Lithgow (among others) should be viewed as an "iconoclastic anti-pilgrim" who has no "pious" or "devotional" motivations in travelling to the Holy Land ("Trafficking" 36). However, Lithgow clearly identifies himself as a pilgrim to the Levant and describes spiritual experiences during his time there. It is perhaps anachronistic to place Lithgow's pilgrimage narrative on one side of the secular/sacred divide. We would suggest that for Lithgow the pilgrimage serves both spiritual and temporal purposes.

<sup>14</sup>An illustration of the image of Christ and his twelve disciples on the great seal first appeared in the 1632 edition of *Rare Adventures*.

<sup>15</sup>An illustration of Lithgow's tattoo first appeared in the 1623 edition of *Rare Adventures*.

<sup>16</sup>We are indebted to Juliet Fleming's *Graffiti and the Writing Arts of Early Modern England* for alerting us to this passage (108).

<sup>17</sup>Here, O'Donnell appears to validate Vitkus's reading of Lithgow as an "anti-pilgrim" who refers to his "pilgrimage" in ironic terms ("Trafficking" 36, 43).

<sup>18</sup>In the first monograph dedicated solely to the life and works of William Lithgow, *An Intrepid Scot*, Clifford Edmund Bosworth insightfully discusses this complexity in Lithgow. However, he envisions Lithgow as a moderate Protestant who resists, for example, both Catholic iconophilia and Puritan iconoclasm, in the latter case pointing to Lithgow's criticism of Knox and his disciples, who destroyed the "glorious Churches of Abbocies, and Monasteries (which were the great beauty of the Kingdome)" (Bosworth 21; Lithgow, qtd. on 21); Bosworth does not see Lithgow as indebted to a residual Catholicism.

<sup>19</sup>A "horizon," according to Gadamer, can be defined as "a range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point" (301).

<sup>20</sup>See, for example, Linda McJannet, who traces the complex perception of Turks in sixteenth and early to mid-seventeenth-century court and civic drama, in which the English variously depicted the Turks as "models of magnificence," figures of "power and imperial grandeur," warmongering "enemies," or "versions of themselves, as intrepid fellow traders and as representatives of the great cities with which they traded" (251-53).

<sup>21</sup>Bosworth argues that "Lithgow himself was wholly immune from such temptations and contemptuous of renegades" (5). We cannot agree that Lithgow is "wholly immune from such temptations" despite the disdain he expresses for apostates.

<sup>22</sup>The question of outward conformity to religious practices in particular was a matter of great importance in England and Scotland in the late sixteenth and early to mid-seventeenth century, especially in terms of the willingness or refusal of Catholic recusants to conform to traditions of the English Church, and of the often violent resistance of Presbyterians to the imposition of such traditions on the Scottish Church.

<sup>23</sup>This is not to say that Lithgow, even in this particular chapter, simply admires the "puissance of the Great Turk," for not long after his description of Achmet, he reflects on how "Christian princes could concord and consult together [...] to subdue the Turks and root out their very names from the earth" (100).

<sup>24</sup>Recall that his very reason for leaving Scotland is to escape evil.

<sup>25</sup>In a typical attempt to qualify his claim, Lithgow includes an annotation beside the first of these stanzas: "savages are better than bad Christians."

<sup>26</sup>During Lithgow's imprisonment in Spain, he (a captive), Hazier (a slave), and Elinor (a "drudge") are de facto "slaves" and are thus leveled as beings, since all are wholly subject to the tyrannical rule of an absolutist power.

<sup>27</sup>Hadfield's thesis is "that much early modern travel writing and colonial writing was written, in whole or in part, in order to participate in current pressing debates about the nature of society, the limitations of the existing constitution, the

means of representing the populace at large, the relative distribution of power within the body politic, fear of foreign influences undermining English/British independence, the need to combat the success of other rival nations, religious toleration and persecution, and the protection of individual liberty" (12).

<sup>28</sup>Later, while suffering unspeakable pain at the hands of the Spanish inquisitors, Lithgow remarks on his own surprise that he "stuck fast" to his faith, despite being exposed to "so many sects and varieties of religions dispersed over the face of the earth" (285). He recognizes here that "plurality of [religious] alterity" is a threat to the stability of his spiritual identity, though he remains steadfast through "the grace of God in me" (paradoxically the divine Other within the self) (285).

<sup>29</sup>It is interesting that Edwin Sandys, George's father, "was Elizabeth I's Archbishop of York and a leading defender of the church's duty to persecute dissent in the name of unity," a position from which George Sandys distances himself (Hadfield 2).

<sup>30</sup>Phelps appears to be pointing to such half-formed notions when he writes that Lithgow "himself seems to have recognized that his travels had affected his outlook, made him in fact a 'citizen of the world'" (Introduction to *Rare Adventures* 15).

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## *The Rape of the Lock* and the Origins of Game Theory<sup>\*1</sup>

SEAN R. SILVER

When I teach Alexander Pope's *The Rape of the Lock*, I generally spend an entire class on the game of cards. Early in the third canto the Baron and Belinda sit down to a game of ombre; what occurs over the "verdant field" (iii.52) of the card-table, described in the half-serious, half-teasing idiom of the mock-epic, forms the central set-piece of the poem. I find that students respond to the game best when they can see it—when the rudimentary rules are explained, and the students can see the game as it unfolds. To this end, I have experimented with a PowerPoint presentation which restages the game of ombre as though it were conducted at an online gambling website, which I call [www.rotlombre.net](http://www.rotlombre.net). The point is to streamline the rules of the game, to make it look more like a game that they know, Hearts or Texas Hold-'em, for instance. I aim, that is, to emphasize the social relations which the game itself organizes. The payoff moment—at least in terms of the pacing of the lecture—is the last, deciding trick, when the Baron leads with the ace of hearts. Belinda slaps down her "unseen [King]," which "falls like thunder on the prostrate ace" (iii.95-98; Figure 1). Students, freed from thinking about the rules of play (is this "codille" or "vole"?) are prepared to discuss the sexual politics at play, the Baron's sad—and losing card—crushed by Belinda's gesture of masculine majesty. They therefore arrive at a provisional answer to the

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\*Reference: For related articles see Oliver R. Baker, "Pope's Ombre Enigmas in *The Rape of the Lock*," *Connotations* 17.2-3 (2007/2008): 210-37; Kathryn Walls, "A Question of Competence: The Card Game in Pope's *Rape of the Lock*. A Response to Oliver R. Baker," *Connotations* 19.1-3 (2009/2010): 229-37.

For debates inspired by this article, please check the *Connotations* website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debsilver01913.htm>>.

opening riddles of the poem, the twinned question of “what strange motive” would “compel / A well-bred lord t’ assault a gentle belle” (i.7-8), and “what stranger cause [...] / Could make a gentle belle reject a lord?” (i.9-10). They are ready to see the subsequent rape of the lock as a violent response to a spurned advance—a sexual assault meant, crudely, to reassert the Baron’s gender identity. And they are also prepared to open up discussion of other dimensions of the game, this Spanish game played in England. They are equipped to reapproach the assembled worlds of playing-card kings and queens—the poem’s “swarthy Moors” (iii.48), “warlike Amazon[s]” (iii.67), and so on—as a miniature mirror of the nascent British empire.

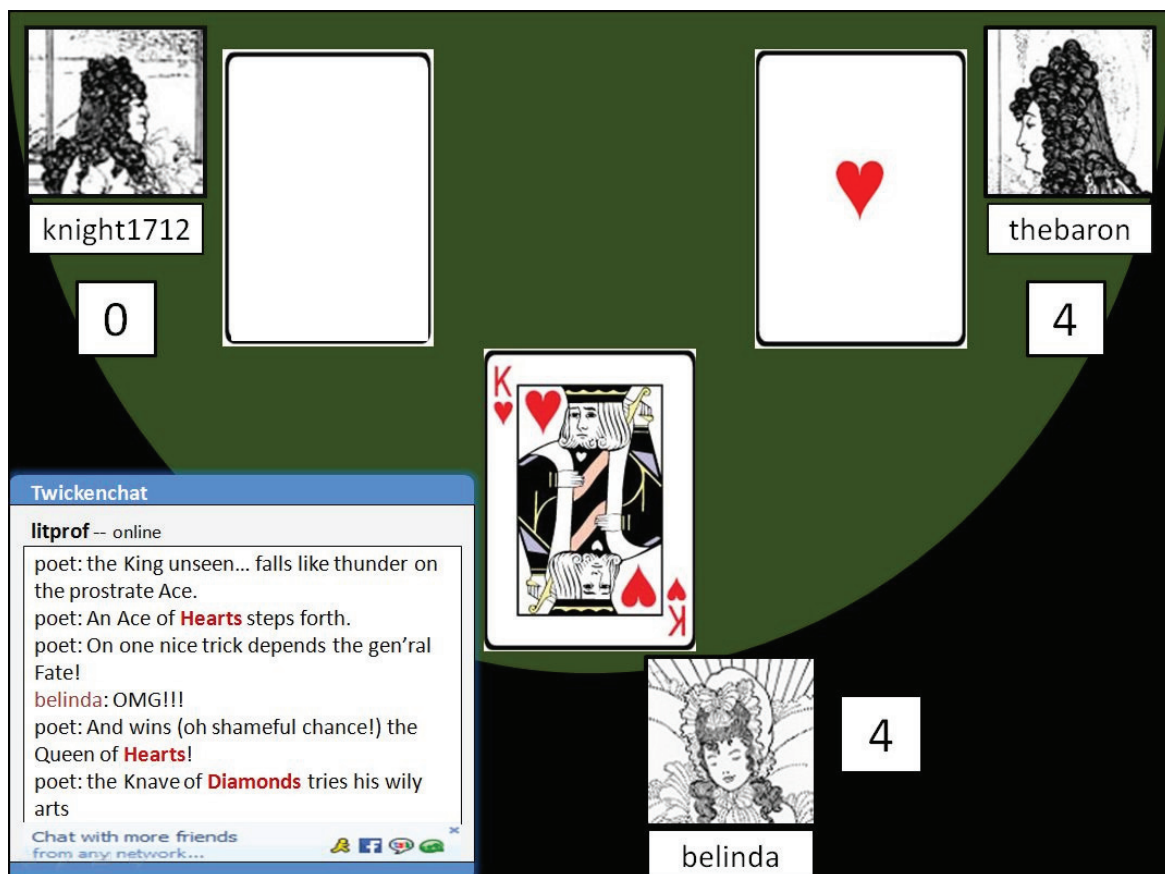


Figure 1. “[T]he King unseen [...] falls like thunder on the prostrate ace.”

There is a large body of work which treats Pope’s game of ombre as an opportunity to talk about something else, to turn the discussion to, for instance, the gender politics of Pope’s eighteenth-century coterie culture, or the object world of London’s rapidly mercantilized econo-

my.<sup>2</sup> This is of course the approach I adopt in the classroom. I mention this at length because it stands in contrast to what is emerging as a significant and distinct thread in discussions of *The Rape of the Lock*. Beginning with William Pole's remarks in 1873, a number of scholars have developed readings of this scene which work to isolate the play of ombre from its cultural contexts—which turn to the game simply to discuss the game. The most recent among these, Oliver Baker's "Pope's Ombre Enigmas in *The Rape of the Lock*," may be taken as exemplary; Baker's method, which he indicates he developed in consultation with W. E. Markham and T. R. Cleary, develops what he takes to be a rigorous approach to taking the game on its own terms, in its own terms (233n1). Rather than cataloguing the poem's complicated allusive webwork, or charting out its rich and complicated social embeddedness, Baker's approach instead develops a nuanced understanding of such issues as the order of play, the cards dealt, and the strategies and tactics of a hand of ombre. As he himself notes, Baker thereby stands as the latest standard-bearer of a surprisingly long and eclectic list of scholars, which includes such luminaries as Geoffrey Tillotson and William Wimsatt. His paper asks to be understood, therefore, as an entry in an established tradition of reading, an established body of work which seeks to analyze a game—this game—as an artifact with a self-sufficient critical vocabulary. In this sense, it is satisfyingly exhaustive, part of what might be recognized as a tradition of game-theoretical treatments of games as merely games.<sup>3</sup> Put differently, what we have here is a surprisingly resilient form of game-theoretical criticism: the seemingly closed loop of a game taken merely as itself.

Having said this, however, I would like to sound a note of caution. Baker's method is what he calls "unbiased close reading" (212); it is an attempt "to fully account for the content of Pope's forty couplets" (211). One might begin nevertheless to suspect that Baker's "unbiased" approach is in fact attended by a host of biases—biases which, not surprisingly, occlude much of the potential "content" of Pope's eighty lines. It will be the work of this essay, therefore, to sketch out

the critical assumptions underlying Baker's approach, this special form of game-theoretical criticism. This investigation will require a turn, for a moment, to the history of chess. I turn to chess, briefly, in part because it is the oldest game exhaustively to be represented in English-language literature; the body of writing on chess outweighs that of any other single game. But my point in the end will be to suggest that readings like Baker's of *The Rape of the Lock* have a wider salience: they illuminate a special way in which game theory, far from promising simply to exhaust literary representations like Pope's poem, may in fact depend upon literary representations—or, more broadly, cultural context—for its explanatory power altogether. Let me, then, lay all my cards on the table. It will be my argument that *The Rape of the Lock* is not explicable through a game theoretical approach. On the contrary, the game theoretical approach is explicable through *The Rape of the Lock*. In a wider sense, far from excluding the cultural contexts of Pope's world, the game theoretical approach continually rediscovers them, for game theory traces its origins to the very coterie culture which *The Rape of the Lock* describes. It emerges precisely from the card-playing culture of Alexander Pope's Twickenham—for culturally specific reasons which I will discuss in their place. This essay's final trick will therefore offer an alternative history of game theory itself, through a reading of Pope's poem. For *The Rape of the Lock*, in the end, captures not only a game and a world; it also offers an opportunity to revisit the assumptions of game theoretical readings of all sorts of encounters, including pastimes like ombre and chess—but also like love and war.

\* \* \*

Among the very first handful of books printed in English was the first English-language book on gaming: William Caxton's very free translation of an Italian original entitled *The Game and Playe of the Chesse* (1474). It is a curious book. As Jenny Adams notes, Caxton's translation, despite its title, "does not, in fact, have much to say about a game

or about playing it." *The Game and Playe of the Chesse* traces, exhaustively, not so much the strategy and play of the game as, instead, its relationship to the world of feudal relations. "The work," Adams notes, "uses the chessboard and its pieces to allegorize a political community whose citizens contribute to the common good" (Introduction 1). It begins therefore not with the pawns, which would be described in the first major book on the play of chess (by the composer and librettist François-André Danican Philidor) as the "soul of chess" (xix).<sup>4</sup> Nor does it begin with board and the rules of the game. It begins instead with a description of the piece which would be most important in a feudal society: the king. It proceeds to enumerate the king's various companions and counselors, numbering the pawns as the members of imagined professions: blacksmiths, drapers, farmers, etc. Chess, that is, becomes for Caxton a transparent excuse to introduce a culture.<sup>5</sup> Criticism has thus tended to focus on *The Game and Playe of the Chesse* as an example of a mirror for a magistrate, for it proposes a way of reading the State as a game with rules and procedures.

The textual representations of games in English may therefore be thought to have had, from their beginnings, a mixed mode of discourse. Books on games have been, on the one hand, purely self-referential, composed of the rules and procedures of the game itself; looked at in this way, such a representation is interested strictly in how better to play a game as a game, with, that is, clearly definable procedures and objectives. Such representations have however also been, sometimes though not always at the same time, the mirrors of ostensibly unrelated modes of human discourse—politics, surely, but also love, business, and so on. Indeed, the predominantly "social" or "allegorical" forms of game-books, to borrow Adams's language, seem to *predate* the first handbooks on what might be called the strategy and play of games. Caxton's *Game and Playe of the Chess* predates Gioachino Greco's *The Royall Game of Chesse-Play*, the first such game-play handbook, by nearly 200 years. Is it possible, one might therefore wonder, that game theory is a relatively late development, which,

rather than defining some essential substratum of the play of games, requires a prior cultural substratum to sustain it? The English republication of Greco's book, which in part capitalizes on the reputed love for "The Royall Game" by the martyr-king Charles I, would seem to suggest that even such eminently analytical games as chess are rarely ever *simply* games. There is some ideological or cultural remnant which clings to games—and which the fact of the game therefore offers continually to return to performance.

Chess has survived the royal culture in which it was originally embedded; like all games, it continues however to inhabit these two broad, by no means mutually exclusive, modes of discourse, what might be called the game-theoretical, and the "social" or "allegorical." Representations can, of course, slope predominantly into one or the other form. Take, as a nearly pure example of a game represented in the first mode, the chess game between the supercomputer HAL 9000 and Frank Poole in Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968). While killing time on a voyage to Saturn, astronaut Poole has challenged HAL to a game of chess, and has been hopelessly outplayed; HAL points out that he is about to win—says "I'm sorry Frank, I think you missed it. Queen to bishop three. Bishop takes queen. Knight takes bishop. Mate"—and Poole in fact resigns. Shortly afterwards, HAL inaugurates a plan to trap Poole outside the spacecraft, thereby, as it were, checkmating him in a surprisingly fatal way. But apart from simply anticipating the plot which is to follow, the issue which the film seems to pose through this chess set-piece is simply the very possibility of a computer playing a game at all. The way in which a computer plays chess becomes a way of posing the so-called 'hard' question of consciousness, whether HAL is in fact sentient. Here it seems critical to think about the game as a game—which the players play with various levels of skill. Scholarly treatments of this game tend for this reason to focus on factual reconstructions of move orders, with a few speculations upon the logical precision of the 'mind' of the supercomputer.<sup>6</sup> The best of these is, I think, Murray S. Campbell's "An Enjoyable Game." Campbell applies to HAL 9000 vs. Frank Poole

the lessons he learned while tinkering with Deep Blue, the IBM super-computer which defeated then-world-champion Garry Kasparov in a six-game showdown.<sup>7</sup> Campbell's essay adopts an approach which the film itself, in speaking the game's language, seems to prompt; he, like HAL, dwells extensively on move orders, variations, and improvements. The lesson he draws, in the end, is one of HAL's sentience, and perhaps insanity, determined precisely through the logical or illogical flow of the game. The fact that HAL is wrong about the mating line it sets out (there is a mating line, but not as HAL describes it) becomes in this mode of critical discourse a crucial explanatory clue.<sup>8</sup>

There is of course another way in which games enter into the world—in which the game articulates a different register of human discourse, structuring, for instance, romantic attraction or political struggle.<sup>9</sup> Take as an example of this social or allegorical mode of representation the well-known game of chess in the *Thomas Crown Affair*—the one with Steve McQueen and Faye Dunaway (1967), a film which is virtually contemporary with *2001*. Vicki Anderson (Dunaway) is an insurance investigator; she is investigating Crown (McQueen), a bank executive who she suspects has robbed his own bank. The scene which interests me begins when the two meet in Crown's posh and well-appointed library. Anderson notices a chessboard; Crown, cognac in one hand and cigar in the other, asks if she plays. The affective pacing of the scene which follows is shaped by the rhythm of the chess game they sit to play; it is, in other words, a scene conducted entirely through a game of chess, while being nevertheless about something completely different. After the first few moves, the camera begins to lose track of the pieces; the players likewise spend less time looking at the board than each other. Anderson traces the curve of her neckline; she touches Crown's fingers over the chessboard; she caresses the phallic head of one of her bishops in an invitation so obvious that even the thick-headed playboy Thomas Crown can't miss it. Everything about the staging of this scene indicates that the moves, themselves, are only the blind for some other struggle or



contest. Crown, about to lose, instead makes a counter-offer: he invites her to “play something else,” leaving silent the pun on the “mate” which was about to follow. When the game falls away what is left is the romantic attraction which is the real engine of the film, for the “affair” of *The Thomas Crown Affair* is in the end not about a bank robbery or insurance fraud. Such a chess game, like such an insurance investigation, structures the conduct of human commerce, providing the (however abbreviated and accelerated) rules of courtship. This courtship is not necessarily a low-stakes contest, as the amount of money in play itself suggests. Indeed, this contest of romantic attraction also mobilizes the banking establishment, global commerce (ivory chess-pieces, Persian rugs, Cuban cigars, French cognac, etc.), the insurance industry, and so on. But the clear point is that the encounter over the chess-board is a blind for a clearer, and more common, generic device—the sexual plot of comic drama. Bank executive and insurance investigator have, in other words, been “play[ing] something else” all along.

When HAL says “Mate,” he simply means that he is about to win a game of chess; when Anderson leaves the same word unpronounced, she is not referring to the game at all. Alexander Pope’s game of ombre might therefore be read in two ways—as the precise formal equivalent of the game of chess in *2001: A Space Odyssey*, or as the formal equivalent of the game of chess in *The Thomas Crown Affair*. In the first instance, in the words of Geoffrey Rockwell, the game “formally isolate[s] a pocket of activities,” abstracting a “time [...] and place from the real world” (94); it stands as its own isolated object with its own sufficient rules and procedures. In the second instance, the game falls away to reveal something else, the psychological drives (romantic attraction) and global forces which exist outside it but nevertheless structure its play. In the first case, the game has its own (sometimes opaque) aesthetics and ethics, and is therefore often simply excerpted and made to stand as an object of its own. In the second case, the game is the object of a wide range of critical approaches, but has, itself, no essential ethical or aesthetic content. It is understood to

be an integral part of the longer work and larger world in which it appears. Finally, and slightly paradoxically, in the former, the characters are themselves the objects of critical inquiry, since they speak, think, and express themselves in the language of the game which they play. In the latter, the characters are less important than the social forces at work. Put differently, in the first case, the game is a hermeneutic object, sufficient to itself, sealed up in a spaceship, as it were, and hurtled off to Saturn. In the second case, the game is part of a network, played in a library, rich with allusions to the global and literary world of which it is a part. As the trend of my remarks should, I hope, make clear, Baker's piece treats the game in *The Rape of the Lock* as an artifact of the first form. It takes up a specific game of ombre but consistently, perhaps even counter-intuitively, declines to consider the game's parabolic valences—taking up a critical position against the trend of recent, influential readings, which emphasize the embeddedness of the game's politics.<sup>10</sup> This reading offers an extended consideration of the game in its own language, including variations which the game might have taken, but did not, and, in this sense, is the partner piece to Campbell's "An Enjoyable Game."

As Baker puts it, "[other] scholars can engage in [...] literary analysis of the characters, motives, and social context of Pope's poem" (226-27); his task is instead to take up the burden of what he calls "the evidence of close reading" (226). He intends to determine "how skillfully, or unskillfully, the players enacted the first mock-battle at Hampton Court" (210); he intends likewise to evaluate "the individual players' [*Ombre*] skills," ranking them from "skilful Nymph" (Pope iii.45, qtd. in Baker 223) to "novice or [...] nincompoop" (222). As he notes, his is the latest installment in a history of reconstructions of this particular game (cf. 211-12). These treatments, taken together, form part of a special category of what Herbert De Ley calls a game-theoretical approach to criticism; it is a special category because they represent game-theoretical approaches to the literary representation of a game. This would seem to provide what Baker calls an "unbiased,"

satisfyingly closed treatment of a hermetically sealed episode: a game read by game theory (211).

Baker's approach is nevertheless anything but tautological. It is moreover different than simply laying the groundwork for later critical approaches, as though revisiting the rules of the game were to determine the theoretical substructure of the struggle between Belinda and the Baron. A game-theoretical approach, on the contrary, draws on a wealth of assumptions, not least being the anatomy of human motivation. As De Ley notes, "[r]ather than studying things that happen *to* the players (except as they may change the conditions of the game), game theory focusses on the players' rational decisions" (44). Game theory, that is, is a focused way of thinking about human activity as a sum of isolatable, anatomizable elections—of 'logical choices.'<sup>11</sup> In order for it to have explanatory force, it must assume that people, as Prashant Parikh puts it, make rational decisions about "positive benefits and negative costs" (919) based on the analysis of "partial information" (920). This is most obvious when Baker claims, for instance, that "[o]nly when Pope's audience have reconstructed the two defenders' hands" can they know whether they "should have drawn new cards" (215). The assumption is that when our information of the hands becomes unlimited, we can have perfect access to what a perfectly skillful player would or would not do, thereby, transparently, associating motivation in a straightforward way with the strategy of the game.

The promise of codifying motivations is of course both the great strength and the singular limitation of the game-theoretical approach—which has, in the twentieth century, expanded from the treatment of games to explain broader patterns of social behavior.<sup>12</sup> Games are, historically speaking, part of the development of a polite culture of publicness elaborated by theorists and historians after J. H. Plumb, Norbert Elias, and Jürgen Habermas. From combat to card-playing, the development of games is an integral part of what Norbert Elias and Eric Dunning describe as the "civilizing process" (cf. Elias and Dunning 21-24); warfare gives way to poker.<sup>13</sup> But the applica-

tions of game theory, in general, tend to recapture what Elias and Dunning argue are the atavistic roots of polite games of leisure; they reapply lessons learned in the analysis of card and board games to seemingly radically different fields of human endeavor—most importantly, economic theory and military strategy. The *Theory of Games and Economic Behavior* (1944), by Manhattan-project mathematician John von Neumann and Oskar Morgenstern, is the most significant study in this tradition. Such books as John McDonald's *Strategy in Poker, Business and War* (1950) borrow and popularize von Neumann and Morgenstern's insights; they likewise make explicit the links which underlie such an approach: undergirding the critical application of game theory is the assumption that human decisions in larger-order social situations are ultimately as rational, or as rationalizable, as decisions made over the card-table.<sup>14</sup> Largely due to the influence of such books, two-person, zero-sum game theory became the dominant narrative of the cold war era. Such a narrative, in Steven Belletto's words, worked by "conceptualizing the cold war as a game, and by playing this game according to specific rational strategies" (333).<sup>15</sup> This theoretical sleight-of-hand may have worked, at least inasmuch as it helped demonstrate the winlessness of thermonuclear war, but it also has precisely the sort of corollary effects we would expect in a game-theoretical treatment of a cultural problem. American game-theoretical military strategy, for instance, abstracted the war from the rest of global politics; as Belletto notes, under the game theory narrative "the particularities of various third-world countries" became "less visible than their status as stakes" (335), as, in other words, the payoffs of a two-person, zero-sum game played between rational, non-culturally-embedded actors. What is lost in applications of game theory to real-world situations is precisely the "social" or "allegorical" dimensions of games themselves.<sup>16</sup>

The explanatory appeal of game theory is therefore evidently closely knit to its historical applications; the assumption is that an understanding of the rules of a game captures human behavior—from local, individual decisions to broad political trends, from struggles between

business partners to clashes between NATO and the Eastern Bloc. The alternative to game-theoretical approaches, again, as De Ley understands them, is what he calls the “narrative semiotic” approach—understood in the widest possible sense of the term.<sup>17</sup> Such an approach imagines a hero “buffeted by fortune, a figure in the grip of forces greater than himself” (De Ley 44). Such a hero (or, Pope would add, heroine) would be governed by “some possibly subconscious, possibly mystical, or Jungian, or Lévi-Straussian psychological itinerary” (44). We might also think of Alexander Pope’s invention of what he slyly calls a “Rosicrucian” (p. 143-44) system of sylphs, demons, and gnomes.<sup>18</sup> The invisible world of *The Rape of the Lock* might be read, somewhat simply, as therefore merely figuring or shadowing forth some essential set of subconscious motivations, drives, or desires (cf. Fairer 53): take, for example, the moment when Ariel, appalled, sees “an earthly lover” (iii.144) lurking at Belinda’s heart. Indeed, the entire catalogue of Belinda’s dreams, with its moving toyshop of sword-knots, coaches, and other gewgaws might be thought allegorically to structure precisely this set of psychological or proto-psychological drives, just as the Cave of Spleen in the fourth canto might be thought to figure, in a more laborious way, a mystical, eerily Jungian subconscious.<sup>19</sup>

This reading is nevertheless itself certainly too narrow; as Alex Hernandez notes, the Cave of Spleen is at once a gallery of Belinda’s motives, and, through a sort of series of Ovidian metamorphoses, a confused clearinghouse of the spoils of British Mercantilism (cf. Hernandez 571). The sylphs might indeed also, in an extended sense, be read throughout as allegorical reflections of the social and political world which places Belinda at its center, for they pick out and guard particular items of Belinda’s object-world: Zephyretta the “flutt’ring fan” (ii.112), Brillante the diamond “drops” (ii.113), and so on. Their very names imply their allegorical roles, hovering, as they do, over the objects of Belinda’s dressing-table: gemstones, perfumes, ivory, tortoiseshell, etc. Pope likewise barely implies that the invisible creatures of the Rosicrucian system are meant to stand in as the engines of

empire, for it is their locomotive power—the breeze from their wings—which moves Belinda’s pleasure-barge, and perhaps the trading-ships of commerce, as well.<sup>20</sup> The Baron would seem to localize, in a sort of microcosm, trading routes with such places as the Ottoman Empire. Writes Pope, it is “Coffee” (iii.117) which “Sent up in vapours to the baron’s brain / New stratagems, the radiant lock to gain” (iii.19-20). It is not the Baron, but the coffee, which produces the “stratagem.”<sup>21</sup> When they sit down to cards, then, these players seem generally to be, in De Ley’s words, at the mercy of “forces greater than [themselves]”—forces as large as the reach of the British mercantile system. From the forces of Empire arranged on Belinda’s dressing-table to the Baron’s caffeine high, *The Rape of the Lock* has therefore very little to say about people as ‘rational actors.’

There are nevertheless compelling reasons to think that a game-theoretical approach would suit *The Rape of the Lock*, not least because it describes a world squarely in the middle of—or, more precisely, on the margins of—the historical ground zero of the development of the English public sphere. Pope himself describes the card-game itself as a “combat” (iii.44), hearing the atavistic revenants of mortal struggle sublimated into polite play. There is in fact a yet more compelling reason than this: namely that game theory itself originated in precisely the time and cultural context of Pope’s poem, with a letter penned in 1712—the same year as the first edition of *The Rape of the Lock*—by an Englishman named Waldegrave. Waldegrave’s letter proposes what would come to be called a mixed strategy solution to a puzzle in the card game *Le Her*—a puzzle which, anticipating Cold War strategy, Waldegrave solves by assuming that it is two-player, zero-sum.<sup>22</sup> Like all myths of origins, the rest of the story is somewhat less certain, beginning with which Waldegrave, precisely, penned the letter. Various candidates have been proposed.<sup>23</sup> It is however certain that the game-theorist Waldegrave lived first in London, and later, as a Jacobite in exile, in Paris. It is also known that he was, like Pope, a British Catholic, when Catholics were restricted from living in England’s urban centers. This means that Waldegrave was almost certainly in

England, as part of the extended Catholic coterie culture centered in Twickenham, at precisely the time that Pope wrote *The Rape of the Lock*. Indeed, a 1714 letter from Pope to John Caryll—the addressee of the 1714 edition of the poem—mentions “Lord Waldegrave” (*Works* 6: 222), who is possibly the game theorist himself—though more probably the theorist’s uncle. We can at any rate be certain that the Twickenham world described in so much detail by Alexander Pope was the very proving-ground of game theory in the first place.

As the trend of my argument so far should indicate, however, a close look at *The Rape of the Lock* tends less to provide apt material for a game-theoretical approach than it does a way of returning to game theory’s fundamental assumptions—especially the very assumption that human decisions, even decisions in a relatively local context like that of a game, can meaningfully be isolated as a series of rational decisions made according to clear payoffs and utilities. Pope’s Catholic circle included John Caryll (the addressee of the poem), the Waldegraves, the originals for the Baron (Lord Petre), Belinda (Arabella Fermor), and indeed the whole cast of characters in *The Rape of the Lock*. The key thing, as recent work has demonstrated, is that this circle constituted a persecuted religious minority, a group vividly conscious of itself as living under social and cultural penalty in a ‘militantly Protestant’ England (see Brückmann 14).<sup>24</sup> There is a wealth of criticism exploring the centrality of social marginalism to Pope’s poetry, including a recent essay arguing for the ultimately Catholic origins of the “Rosicrucian” machinery in *The Rape of the Lock*; Pope has, according to this line of thought, smuggled a basically Catholic understanding of the world into a poem about the British *beau monde*.<sup>25</sup> What I would like to observe is that this world—the world of the mathematician Waldegrave—was also the world for which the mock-epic was most suited. This is because the severe restrictions on property ownership, the carrying of weapons, the holding of public office, and so forth, enforced a scaled-down existence, the chief thematic resource of which was, according to Peter Davidson, “bathos” (69). Denied the right to carry weapons, for in-

stance, the characters of *The Rape of the Lock* fight with hatpins, clouded canes, and snuff-boxes. The very origin of Belinda's "deadly bodkin" (v.88)—once the seal rings of her great-great-grand sire—suggests the sort of sublimation at work, just as the oft-noted comparison of her petticoats to Achilles's shield extends it. In this world, it is less that the pretensions of high society are satirized by comparing them to trivial worlds than it is, I suspect, that trivial things have been all along invested with concerns much larger than them. Denied the right to hold office, the people of Pope's world play cards. Denied the ability to engineer government, Waldegrave theorizes two-player, zero-sum games. It is therefore only more obvious in this world than elsewhere that a card-game is never just a card-game. It is instead the sublimated clash of civilizations—the marshalling of troops and world resources—which the Catholic English could not directly organize.<sup>26</sup> We might therefore reverse the assumption that game theory develops out of an unbiased look at games; quite the contrary, it is instead that game theory develops directly from a culture in which cards always already adumbrate the high-stakes gambles of political gamesmanship.

I would like to conclude by offering a few remarks about Pope's game of ombre, read as a Catholic or coterie game. Baker suggests, in an endnote, that it is possible that "the Baron is a very skilful player" who "decides to 'let' [Belinda] win" the game, though he dismisses this as "inconsistent with his subsequent behavior, and inconsistent with the rest of Pope's satire about *le beau monde*" (236n23). I would like to suggest a different possibility, outside the limits of the game-theoretical model, which does not assume that the Baron is trying rationally to "win" or to "lose" the game, or that Pope's poem is, strictly speaking, a "satire." To be quite clear, Baker does not read the poem as though it were simply a game. He reads the game of ombre as though it were simply a game, with clear stakes and motivations.<sup>27</sup> Seen this way, the Baron's side of the game of ombre begins this way: he surveys his cards, calculates that the serious risk of bidding and losing outweighs the slim probability of bidding and winning, and



therefore prefers not to bid, hoping successfully to defend against the bidder, but risking only the minor defeat of an unsuccessful defense. He then organizes his card-play best to thwart Belinda's bid, not so much positioning himself to win, as fighting not to lose. This is of course over-simplified, since, as Baker notes, one of the "counter-intuitive feature[s]" of ombre is "that it is often more [financially] 'rewarding' to successfully defend against an *Ombre* bid, than it is to successfully make that bid" (227). But the logic is true to the game-theoretical approach, which in general prefers assigning preferences to describing motivations.

I am not at all convinced however that such a scheme—even if it were complicated to address the Baron's true perceived utilities—quite captures the form of the Baron's logic, or, for that matter, Belinda's. If, for instance, we look specifically for the language of 'winning' in *The Rape of the Lock*, it turns up in two places. The second occurrence is in the last two tricks of the only *tour* in the game. The Baron has been on a winning streak. There are two tricks to go, and he needs them both to impose *codille*. He leads the jack of diamonds; Belinda's sloughs her queen of hearts. Here is how Pope describes it:

The knave of diamonds tries his wily arts,  
And wins (oh shameful chance!) the queen of hearts.  
At this, the blood the virgin's cheek forsook,  
A livid paleness spreads o'er all her look;  
She sees, and trembles at th' approaching ill,  
Just in the jaws of ruin, and codille. (iii.87-92)

More than one critic has noticed that Belinda's response is out of proportion with the winning (or losing) of a trick. One way of thinking through this problem is in the complex of meanings layered in the rhetoric of "winning"—of what it means to "win" the Queen of Hearts. In the simplest sense, it simply means that the Knave of Diamonds, because Diamonds were led, "wins" Belinda's slough card, the Queen of Hearts. This is simply a matter of the rules of ombre—of Belinda's possibly misplayed hand. And, of course, winning in this context means, by extension, that the Baron is 'beating' Belinda. But

there is clearly, here, an allegorical scene being staged, which is recognized by both Belinda and the Baron, in which the Knave of Diamonds—a sort of eidolon or avatar for the Baron—plays and wins Belinda’s most proper icon, the Queen of Hearts. It is a question of which way we are to read that “of”: Belinda’s card is not just a face-card belonging to the suit of hearts; it is also the image of a ruler who has power over the hearts of men. Belinda is, as it were, the image imprinted (like Esther Summerson to William Guppy) on the hearts of the men of the coterie world of *The Rape of the Lock*.<sup>28</sup> The Baron’s “win” therefore signifies in two ways. Belinda is, according to the rules of the game, possibly about to suffer “codille.” But the “win” is also yoked zeugmatically to the “ruin” of social and romantic conquest. (Likewise, the “knave of diamonds” clearly stands in for the Baron. It is, however, similarly uncertain whether we are meant to identify the Baron with the riches that diamonds imply, or whether we are meant to think that he is merely the dupe of an industry—i.e., the international trade in gemstones—which depends upon the romantic plot to survive.) These are the stakes which begin to explain Belinda’s response.

The question then is how it is that a game, with all its rules and procedures, may be articulated to a sexual plot, may in fact be *determined*, in all its steps and stages, by a sexual plot. That is, if before I was suggesting that a game could provide the inhabitable form for a plot of romantic attraction, I am now proposing that it may in fact be more useful to think of games as *themselves* already determined by the social or allegorical modes they only ostensibly structure. Pope’s *The Rape of the Lock* can again provide a way forward. The other place that the language of “winning” turns up in the poem is not in the context of the card game at all:

Th’ advent’rous baron the bright locks admired;  
 He saw, he wished, and to the prize aspired.  
 Resolved to win, he meditates the way,  
 By force to ravish, or by fraud betray;  
 For when success a lover’s toils attends,  
 Few ask, if fraud or force attained his ends.      (ii.28-34)

Seen this way, the game of ombre is just one of the “ways” the Baron “meditates” as a means to “winning”—that is, achieving or gaining—the lock. This looks, at first, like the straightforward payoffs of the game itself have simply been sublimated into a series of fetishes; the real object of desire is Belinda, who has been displaced into a lock of hair, or a playing card. A new matrix of perceived ordinal utilities could be proposed, plotting fraud and force against winning or not winning the lock. The mistake however would be to think that the Baron’s decisions could ever be subsequently broken down into rational motivations and ‘payoffs,’ that with enough qualifications and complications, the rhetoric of winning and losing would ultimately always be governed by rational thought, for the poem provides very little evidence for rational behavior at all. This passage, for instance, appears in the context of a sort of devotional sacrifice; the Baron rises before dawn to burn a hecatomb of offerings—tokens of former loves, mash notes, French romances, and so on. He falls ‘prostrate to the floor’ in a prayer “[s]oon to obtain, and long possess the prize” (ii.44). It is not at all clear to me that these strategies—prostration, devotional sacrifice, prayer—can be meaningfully wedded to a game-theoretical approach to *The Rape of the Lock*, for they seem to evade the economic logic of costs, risks, and gains altogether. It is perhaps best then to think less of the game as a romantic contest writ small, then, than as the articulation of desires which precede and evade the logic of perceived utilities altogether. A desperate logic of sacrifice seems to be driving the Baron’s behavior, motivated by, but not articulated to, a sublimated desire for Belinda, or Belinda figured as her lock of hair. Read this way, we are not in the spaceship of *2001*, in which a game can be read simply as a game; the game, that is, is not its own compact object with its own rules and aesthetics. Rather, we are in the library of the Baron—the mock-epic world of Alexander Pope—with the cultural contextual burden which that implies.

Here, then, is how a reading of context, beginning with motivation rather than preference, can help explain the human play of cards. Approaching the game as the displaced articulation of a sexual plot

helps explain the last trick in the *tour*, when the Baron plays the Ace of Hearts which he has been holding back until the end. This is a moment which arrives, as closely as possible, to revealing the Baron's drives, when the allegory, such as it is, collapses into what seems to be a direct offer of marriage. The Baron has already "pour[ed]" his diamonds out before Belinda; he has entered into what seems to be a recognizable ritual of courtship, which depends upon international circuits of exchange, including the global circulation of diamonds. He then plays a card which is merely a white field framing a red heart, thereby neatly paralleling, in reverse, the "livid paleness" which "o'erspreads" Belinda's "looks." Put differently, he is laying his panting heart on the table, having organized a card game into a complex offer of marriage. (The Baron's "prostrate ace" may further be meant to remind us of the other moment of "prostration" in the poem—when the Baron falls into uncertain but desperate prayer before his immolated pile of billet-doux.) And this means that Belinda's final play—plunging the King of Hearts on the Baron's single heart—is best read as an assertion of masculine dominance in a romantic exchange, answering and replacing, as it were, the Queen of Hearts with the King of Hearts as her most proper emblem. Pope's poem insists that Belinda's King of Hearts is until this moment "unseen"; Baker interprets this to mean that Belinda has accidentally slipped it behind another of her cards, perhaps the Queen of Hearts. He marks this as a sign of her unskillful play. But another possible reading—indeed, it seems to me, the more likely one—is that the King is unseen to everyone *except* Belinda. She, for her part, has held it back in a questionable move of card-playing strategy precisely to enable this scenario in a romantic contest. I am therefore convinced by Baker's argument that Belinda is not particularly adept at ombre; she seems, however, to be at least the Baron's match in balancing multiple valences of social discourse. Put differently, it is only the Knight—the forgotten third man—who thinks ombre is about the cards on the table; the Baron and Belinda have been playing something else all along.

This still does not answer the complex riddle of causes which opens the poem. It is only, instead, to suggest that a card-game is what allows Belinda and the Baron to articulate those causes; it is to argue that the game of *El Ombre*—the Spanish game called ‘The Man’—is for Belinda and the Baron both a complex struggle of gender politics, and the distillation of global patterns of commerce, articulated through the language of a card game. There is a long tradition of thinking of game theory in connection with economics—beginning perhaps with Cournot’s *Researches into the Mathematical Principles of the Theory of Wealth*, but cemented, certainly, by von Neumann and Morgenstern. So it may be best to think of the game of ombre in *The Rape of the Lock* through Georg Simmel’s insight about the nature of money: that it only seems to be an objective system—is only experienced as an objective system—because it represents the concretized form of other people’s subjective desires. Money is the fantasy of objective value which enables all sorts of exchanges.<sup>29</sup> We might say the same thing about ombre—which is only barely more complex than the eighteenth-century British monetary system. Ombre facilitates a complex range of exchanges because it appears to stand outside those exchanges, when, in fact, it is the exchanges themselves—the contest of desires—which produces the system’s seeming objective and concrete reality. It is because of this that neither Belinda nor the Baron seem to be playing a simple game of ombre, for the game of ombre is for them hardly a simple game at all. As the coterie context of *The Rape of the Lock* makes evident—but only more evident than other contexts—the card table is most fully understood as the contested terrain between subjective desire and the strange world of its objects.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>The author would like to thank Zeynep Gürsel, Jonathan Freedman, and the anonymous reader at *Connotations* for their assistance with this article.

<sup>2</sup>See, among others, Felicity Nussbaum; C. E. Nicholson; Laura Brown, *Alexander Pope and Ends of Empire*; Stewart Crehan; Beth Kowaleski-Wallace.

<sup>3</sup>See, for instance, Baker 211-13, as this tradition has come to bear on readings of *The Rape of the Lock*.

<sup>4</sup>Philidor writes, “les Pions [...] sont l’ame des Echecs.”

<sup>5</sup>The best discussion of Caxton’s *The Game and Playe of the Chesse*, and of the allegorical uses of chess in the medieval period generally, is Jenny Adams, *Power Play*, esp. 124-55. I would also like to refer to Adams’s “Longene to the Playe” which usefully summarizes other recent treatments of cultural and social considerations captured by Caxton’s treatise.

<sup>6</sup>The position on-screen was reached in a game played by two German masters (Roesch-Schlage, Hamburg 1910); this game provides the most probable move order. Cf. Tim Krabbé.

<sup>7</sup>In an odd, possibly proleptic twist, Campbell analyzes HAL, whose name is simply IBM shifted up one letter, through lessons learned in programming what in the world of 2001 must be his predecessor—IBM’s Deep Blue.

<sup>8</sup>As Geoffrey Rockwell puts it—controversially, I think—“Most games have no purpose other than their play and for that reason games are played voluntarily for their own sake” (94).

<sup>9</sup>Caxton’s *The Game and Playe of the Chesse* (1474) treats chess as a political system; an earlier French translation treated it as an allegory for the emotions of two courting lovers (the anonymous *Les Echecs Amoureux*, composed circa 1400). Both are loose translations of Jacobus de Cessolis, *Liber de Moribus Hominum et Officiis Nobillim Super Ludo Scacchorum* (ca. 1280, first printed 1474).

<sup>10</sup>Nicholson, Brown, and Crehan, but also Aubrey Williams; Louis A. Landa.

<sup>11</sup>Take, for instance, the remarks of Martin J. Osborne and Ariel Rubinstein in their *Course in Game Theory*: “The models we study assume that each decision-maker is ‘rational’ in the sense that he is aware of his alternatives, forms expectations about any unknowns, has clear preferences, and chooses his action deliberately after some process of optimization” (4).

<sup>12</sup>This line of argument has been taken up by Peter Swirski and Paul Lanham, who between them discuss the promise of game theory as a literary-heuristic tool. See Lanham; Swirski; and see also Joseph Heath’s extensive discussion of this question.

<sup>13</sup>I am indebted to Jonathan Freedman’s remarks in “What Maggie Knew.” He refers to Norbert Elias and Eric Dunning, *The Quest for Excitement*.

<sup>14</sup>See early discussions of this issue in von Neumann and Morgenstern 8-9; J. D. Williams 6-17.

<sup>15</sup>See also Philip Mirowski.

<sup>16</sup>Consider, for instance, *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962), that Cold-War film in which hero Raymond Shaw finds himself to be the unlikely lynchpin of a series of plots: a romantic narrative, a psychological struggle, the dysfunction of a political family, and a vast Communist conspiracy. The film might also be thought to hinge on the meaning of card-play during the Cold War—on the not-at-all simple psychological pressure layered into the play of solitaire, and, indeed, into the meanings of the Queen of Diamonds. Such a film asks us to think of games as themselves caught up in culture and politics, rather than inviting us to interpret human behavior as ‘game-like,’ that is, transparently interpretable.

<sup>17</sup>Narrative semiotics, in the narrow sense of “Greimasian analysis” (De Ley points to Algirdas Julien Greimas “About Games”) historically stems from readings of epic, romance, and folk tales. This approach would seem apt for *The Rape of the Lock*, given the poem’s mock-epic pretensions.

<sup>18</sup>The most thorough treatment of Pope’s “Rosicrucian” system is Bonnie Latimer, “A History of the Sylphs in *The Rape of the Lock*.”

<sup>19</sup>See, for instance, Ralph Goodman.

<sup>20</sup>Ariel himself claims that “‘th’ aërial kind” “guide the course of wand’ring orbs on high,” “brew fierce tempests on the wintry main,” and generally “o’er human race preside, / Watch all their ways, and all their actions guide” (ii.76-88). For the argument that “things, not people, are the heroes” of Pope’s poem, see Crehan, 45-68, esp. 46.

<sup>21</sup>The already-classic essay on the work of chemicals in *The Rape of the Lock* is Richard Kroll’s “Pope and Drugs: The Pharmacology of *The Rape of the Lock*.”

<sup>22</sup>A detailed discussion of Waldegrave’s problem and its history appears in Anders Hald, esp. 314-322, 378-392.

<sup>23</sup>The best candidate is Charles Waldegrave, though others have been proposed. Cf. David Bellhouse.

<sup>24</sup>See also Alison Shell; Paul Gabriner.

<sup>25</sup>The argument for Pope as a marginalized poet is developed at length in Maynard Mack; and Helen Deutsch, esp. 40-82 and 83-135. The argument for *The Rape of the Lock* as a specifically Catholic poem is developed in Howard Erskine-Hill; Murray G. H. Pittock; and Ronald Paulson.

<sup>26</sup>See Howard D. Weinbrot’s remarks on the eighteenth-century sense of the savageness of Homeric combat, esp. 30.

<sup>27</sup>In a real-world setting, such stakes might be determined—as von Neumann and Morgenstern suggest—by asking actants how much they would prefer certain payoffs to others. Actants might claim for instance that they prefer winning roughly—or perhaps precisely—three times as much as they would dislike losing. In the absence of such information (*The Rape of the Lock* does not even suggest the presence of money to govern the stakes) game-theoretical approaches instead generally revert to ‘ordinal utilities,’ that is, the ranking of preferences.

This is the simplest form of this approach pioneered by Brams, but taken up subsequently by a number of theorists, in part because it has, in De Ley’s words, the “advantage” (44) of being ““relatively simple and easy to apply”” (Brams, qtd. in De Ley 45). The game of ombre in *The Rape of the Lock*, if it were charted out as a Bramsian matrix of ordinal payoffs strictly in relation to the Baron’s hand, might look in its most rudimentary form like this:

	The Baron makes an <i>Ombre</i> Bid	The Baron does not make an <i>Ombre</i> bid
Win <i>la vole</i>	8 (successful bid)	3 (failed defense)
Win (without vole)	7 (successful bid)	4 (failed defense)
<i>Remise</i>	2 (failed bid)	5 (successful defense)
<i>Codille</i>	1 (failed bid)	6 (successful defense)

Figure 2: Matrix of the Baron’s Ordinal Payoffs

Charted out in this way, the Baron’s most desirable outcome would be to bid and then to win *la vole* (8); the least desirable would be to bid and to suffer *codille* (1).

<sup>28</sup>Belinda is the queen of others’ hearts—a pun which would be leveraged more than once in cold-war era poetry, perhaps most famously by Juice Newton: the Baron is “Playing with the Queen of Hearts / Knowing it ain’t really smart.”

<sup>29</sup>See in particular Simmel’s “Analysis of the nature of money with reference to its value stability, its development and its objectivity” 122-28.

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A Question of Competence:  
The Card Game in Pope's *The Rape of the Lock*.  
A Response to Oliver R. Baker\*

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Oliver R. Baker claims that previous commentators have failed to provide sufficiently comprehensive glosses on the game of *Ombre* as described in *The Rape of the Lock* iii.25-100. Noting that "[w]ithout a credible reconstruction of the three hands, informed readings of the card game [...] are not possible" (Baker 210), he attempts to supply such a reconstruction. Baker is of course right to imply that we cannot determine the significance of Pope's description of Belinda (contemplating her hand) as "[t]he skilful Nymph" (iii.45) until we have assessed her strategies in the light of the rules of the game. But I am not convinced that his reconstruction (of, that is, the hands) is an advance upon that of Geoffrey Tillotson (dismissed by Baker as one of several who have tried but "failed to untangle Pope's enigma," 211).<sup>1</sup> Tillotson is not Baker's sole target, but I have in what follows used his influential account ("Appendix C" in the second volume of the Twickenham edition of Pope's works) to stand for the broad spectrum of interpretations to date that Baker finds so inadequate.<sup>2</sup>

We might begin with the question: how different is Baker's reconstruction of the hands from Tillotson's? The answer, surprisingly enough, is: scarcely at all. True, Tillotson hypothesizes certain preliminaries (a bid by Belinda, discards on the part of all the players), while Baker (213-14) chooses to read Pope's silence on these points as indicating, quite unambiguously, that Belinda does not bid (she plays,

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\*Reference: Oliver R. Baker, "Pope's *Ombre* Enigmas in *The Rape of the Lock*," *Connotations* 17.2-3 (2007/2008): 210-37.

For the original article as well as all contributions to this debate, please check the *Connotations* website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debbaker01723.htm>>.

according to Baker, *sans prendre*), and that the other players choose not to discard (cf. Tillotson 388-89).<sup>3</sup> It is also true that Tillotson takes the liberty of allocating specific values to the non-court cards—a liberty resisted by Baker.<sup>4</sup> Otherwise, however, it would have to be said that his versions of both the Baron's hand and that of the anonymous third player are identical with Baker's own (as set out on 221). As for Belinda's hand, there is only one difference: where Tillotson allocates Belinda a non-court diamond, Baker allocates her a non-court club in its place, attributing her with a void in diamonds. Thanks to this latter point, his reconstruction of the hands is actually identical to one put forward by Edward G. Fletcher in 1935.<sup>5</sup>

This problematic non-court card, whether diamond or club, is the one played by Belinda when following (one of) the Baron's first two diamond leads on the sixth and seventh tricks. Here it is important to note that Baker agrees with Tillotson on Belinda's possession of the Queen of Clubs, and on her use of the said non-court card (either before or after her Queen of Clubs) at this stage of the game.<sup>6</sup> The essential question, then, is whether that non-court card is a diamond or a club. Baker's conclusion that it must be a club is based upon his interpretation of iii.75-80:

The *Baron* now his *Diamonds* pours apace;  
Th'embroider'd *King* who shows but half his Face,  
And his refulgent *Queen*, with Pow'rs combin'd,  
Of broken Troops an easie Conquest find.  
*Clubs, Diamonds, Hearts*, in wild Disorder seen,  
With Throngs promiscuous strow the level Green.

According to Baker, these lines intimate "that Belinda and the Knight slough their losing clubs and hearts on the Baron's two diamond leads—a second disordered heap of Belinda's clubs and the Knight's hearts on top of the first—'[h]eaps on [h]eaps' (iii.86) indeed" (219). As Baker reads it, then, the diamonds of iii.79 are the Baron's victorious leads, lying confused with the trumped hearts (of the Knight) and Belinda's (also trumped) clubs—these latter including the Queen of

Clubs as well as the non-court club that Baker thinks Belinda played on the sixth trick (and that Tillotson thinks she played on the seventh).

Until now, however, Pope has distinguished very clearly between the victorious cards and those that are trumped. These defeated cards include the “two captive Trumps” of iii.50, and the Knave of Spades that “[f]alls undistinguish’d *by the Victor Spade*” at iii.64 (first italics mine). It seems most unlikely that he would change his approach here by confusing the victorious diamonds with the (as it were) wounded or even dead “troops” that they have “broken” and “conquered.” If a diamond is in the heap, it must be as a trumped card, not as a victor. In other words, the trumped cards must (as Tillotson and others have concluded) include (from Belinda) a diamond, along with the third player’s pair of hearts and Belinda’s Queen of Clubs. It would be a mistake, by the way, to allow Pope’s plurals to complicate the matter. A single card is (and was) normally described as the “six [or, of course, any other number] of *diamonds* [plural].”

Baker claims that his (in my view, highly dubious) reconstruction of Belinda’s hand has implications not only for the game, but also for her approach to it.<sup>7</sup> Believing that Belinda’s strength in clubs is greater (by one card) than generally thought, Baker argues that Belinda should have declared clubs as trumps—and, what is more, ventured for the *Vole* (225-26). But if Tillotson is right (as, in my view, is evident from iii.75-80), Belinda’s strength in clubs is no greater than her strength in spades, and her decision to declare spades as trumps is perfectly sensible.<sup>8</sup>

But Baker’s dissatisfaction with Belinda’s approach extends beyond her supposedly unwise choice of trumps. As Baker notes (222), while the Baron is playing his last card (the Ace of Hearts), “[t]he King *unseen / Lurk’d in her Hand*” (iii.95-96; italics mine). From this, Baker concludes that Belinda has been unaware of her possession of the King (having held it tucked behind the Queen of the same suit) until losing her Queen of Hearts in the eighth trick. It is for this reason, Baker thinks, that she does not play it in the fifth trick as (according to Baker, at least) she ought to have done. But while it certainly emerges

that Belinda's King of Hearts would have drawn the Baron's Ace of Hearts and brought her immediate victory, it remains doubtful as to how Belinda (or anyone else) could have anticipated this.<sup>9</sup>

This having been said, Belinda can scarcely merit the epithet "skilful" if she has literally mishandled her hand. A very large question must remain, however, as to whether she is guilty of any such clumsiness. Baker's accusation depends upon his implicit interpretation of "[t]he *King* unseen" (iii.95) as (and the paraphrase here is my own) 'the king, *previously* unseen by Belinda.' There are two (overlapping) inferences involved, and it seems to me that neither carries conviction. First, it is unlikely that Pope would describe the King of Hearts as unseen by Belinda when (as no-one could deny) Belinda *has* seen it—especially if, as Baker claims, she has only just done so. It will be evident, then, that Baker's "by Belinda" inference depends for its viability on his "previously" inference. But while "previously unseen" happens to be one of the definitions of "unseen" given in the *OED*, the citations reveal that the word was applied *not* to items or people that might have escaped notice (as Baker supposes the King of Hearts has escaped the notice of Belinda), but to genuinely strange and/or unprecedented phenomena (miracles, monstrosities, prodigies).<sup>10</sup> "[U]nseen" is, anyway, open to a more rewarding interpretation. Taken to mean "unseen *by the other players*," it works to project Belinda's delighted sense (once the Baron has led his Ace of Hearts, but in the seconds before she trumps it with her king) that he does not know what is coming to him. For a delectable moment, the relieved Belinda may contemplate the imminent effect of her (as she has just realized) powerful card on her perhaps over-confident and unsuspecting, or "unseeing," opponent.

Believing as he does that Belinda is far from "skilful," Baker finds line 45 ("[t]he skilful Nymph reviews her Force with Care") "wickedly ironic" (223). On the contrary, however, what evidence we have suggests that Belinda plays her game quite competently. But although the irony that Baker sees may be a mirage, line 45 still invites the reader to smile. We do not smile, however, at Belinda's supposed lack of intelli-

gence. (Indeed, at ii.9-10 she was credited by Pope her with a “sprightly” and even “quick” mind.<sup>11</sup>) We smile, rather, at her innocence. Belinda has not yet learned to be nonchalant about social occasions. She expects much from her visit to Hampton Court, as we may deduce from her *toilette* at i.21-48, her glowing demeanor at ii.1-14, and (paradoxically, but most tellingly) the excessiveness of her despondency (and her expression of it) after the “rape”—this last being evident from, for example, her lament at iv.149-50: “Happy! ah ten times happy, had I been, / If *Hampton-Court* these Eyes had never seen.” When it comes to *Ombre*, she “burns” to join the others at her table (cf. iii.25-26), and she wants—even expects—to win (iii.27-28).<sup>12</sup> Then, when she does so, her reaction is the very opposite of urbane: “The Nymph exulting fills with Shouts the Sky, / The Walls, the Woods, and long Canals reply” (iii.99-100). Pope’s description of her at iii.45 as a “skilful Nymph” reviewing her “Force” (or hand) “with Care” thus accords with his account of Belinda throughout. She is concentrating hard, applying her (perfectly respectable) intelligence to her hand with an intensity that is as touching as it is amusing.

But to acknowledge that Belinda has her wits about her is not to deny that she has what Baker rightly characterizes as “a fabulous hand” (222). Her success is largely (though not solely) attributable to the cards she has been dealt. Pope’s representation of the game embodies this point through its alternation of contrary perspectives. According to one of these, the “real” people are in control (“Thus far both Armies to *Belinda* yield” iii.65; “The *Baron* now his *Diamonds* pours apace” iii.75). According to the other, the cards are larger than life, brimming with motivation (borrowed, one suspects, from their players) and agency:

The *King* unseen  
Lurk’d in her Hand, and mourn’d his captive *Queen*.  
He springs to Vengeance with an eager pace,  
And falls like Thunder on the prostrate *Ace* (iii. 95-98)

Indeed, it is quite obvious that (as in most card games) the cards determine the decisions of the players at least as much as the players



determine the functions (or, as Pope represents them, the initiatives and relative strength) of the cards.

Ultimately, however, the “Fate” (iii.66) that is symbolized by and disposes the cards is really Pope, whose purpose (if we may infer it from the effect) was to produce, at the very center of his pivotal canto, a parabolic action that parallels, in miniature, the beautifully shaped action of the poem as a whole.<sup>13</sup> But there is a contrast between these smaller and larger actions. As noted by Ralph Cohen, Belinda’s success is due entirely to her male cards—her three *Matadores*, her King of Spades, her King of Hearts.<sup>14</sup> But the cards would seem to be stacked against her in the larger game, whose rules approximate those of life itself. Pope intimates as much (albeit through tactful euphemism) when he describes the distinct minority of court cards that are female: the “four fair *Queens* whose hands sustain a Flow’r, / Th’expressive Emblem of their *softer* Pow’r” (iii.39-40; italics mine).

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>All quotations are from Geoffrey Tillotson’s edition.

<sup>2</sup>Geoffrey Tillotson, “Appendix C” 383-92. This is a revised version of Appendix C as it appeared in the first (1940) edition. But my references to Tillotson apply equally to both versions.

<sup>3</sup>In accordance with his belief we should not assume any preliminaries (including the existence of earlier rounds [or *tours*]) that Pope has not mentioned, Baker suggests that the adverb “singly” in “At *Ombre* singly to decide their Doom” (iii.27) could mean that “Belinda will be *L’Hombre* for this *tour*, or that this contest will entail only one *tour*, or both” (211). But Pope is making a joke of the fact that in *Ombre* the player for whom the game is named (*L’Hombre*) is *always* pitted against two others. As appropriate to the mock-heroic, he makes it sound as if Belinda is taking on an almost insuperable challenge.

<sup>4</sup>As I read him, Tillotson (388) expects his readers to appreciate that his attribution of values to the *plebeian* cards (as in the earlier reconstructions upon which his own is based) is arbitrary—although he does not make this fully explicit (cf. “After the discard the cards *might* stand as follows” [389; italics mine]). At any rate, as Baker himself notes, Pope arranges the game in such a way that “the

numerical value of every non-court card [...] is inconsequential" (213). As for the preliminaries (whether as previously hypothesized, or as constructed by him), Baker does not go so far as to suggest that they have any bearing on how we might interpret Belinda's skill—although he does call the Baron a "novice or a nincompoop, or both" for not having taken the opportunity to discard "his fourth-ranked singleton heart" (222). If we assume that the preliminaries have proceeded according to Baker's reading, Baker is probably right to consider the Baron foolish for not discarding that heart.

<sup>5</sup>It seems to me that Baker blurs this point when he describes his reconstruction as "similar" (rather than identical) to one of Fletcher's. After all, his reconstruction differs only in that Fletcher attributes values to the (losing) non-court cards—and such attributions in Fletcher are frankly arbitrary, as noted at the beginning of his article (cf. Fletcher 30). As explained below, however, Fletcher's notion of the order in which certain cards are played does differ slightly from Baker's. For Fletcher's reconstructions, see his "Belinda's Game of *Ombre*." Fletcher is cited by Baker in note 27. In his efforts to correct earlier reconstructions that ignored Pope's reference to clubs at line 79, Fletcher offers two (as he sees it) viable accounts of the game, one of which has Belinda playing a non-court heart (which he supposes to be a seven) in Trick VI and the Queen of Clubs in Trick VII, and one of which has her playing a non-court club (a three) in Trick VI and the Queen of Clubs in Trick VII. The latter anticipates Baker's in that it involves the attribution of a non-court club as well as the Queen of Clubs to Belinda. It differs only in having Belinda play the non-court club before she plays the Queen of Clubs. On this point Fletcher's suggestion actually seems to me more likely than Baker's, given that Belinda's instinct might have been to save her Queen (for a possible trumping opportunity) until she had no option but to play it. But, as will become evident, I am not convinced that Belinda has a non-court club (*Basto* of course excepted) in the first place.

<sup>6</sup>Although Tillotson and Baker also differ as to whether Belinda plays her Queen of Clubs on the sixth (Baker) or seventh (Tillotson) trick, this difference is of no importance. It is merely an extension of their (above-noted) first difference. To explain: if (as Tillotson thinks) Belinda were in possession of a diamond, she would have been compelled to play it on the sixth trick—so saving the Queen of Clubs for the seventh. If, however (as Baker thinks) she had a non-court *club* in the place of Tillotson's diamond, she might have played the Queen of Clubs for the sixth and saved the non-court club for the seventh. But (*pacé* Baker, and cf. note 5, above) there is no reason why she should not have played her (supposed) non-court club before relinquishing her Queen of Clubs on the seventh trick.

<sup>7</sup>In addition to the argument summarized below, Baker (222) sees Belinda's supposed void in diamonds as posing a risk that she should have taken into account before declaring trumps—although he offers no explicit judgement as to whether or not she appears to have done so. In any case, since the club that Baker gives her proves no more advantageous to her game (when, that is, the Baron takes the sixth and seventh tricks) than the diamond that Tillotson gives her, this point seems to dissolve into irrelevance.

<sup>8</sup>I need to add that, while Baker argues that Belinda's *best* choice would have been clubs, he also claims that her *better* choice (better than spades, that is) would have been hearts (223). He attributes her failure to recognize this to her failure to notice her King of Hearts in her hand (222). I do not see, however, how (even with the King of Hearts taken into account) Belinda could have realized that hearts would have offered her a better chance of winning than spades (where she is equally strong). Baker's note 26 on the excellence of Belinda's chances with hearts as trumps seems to assume that she could have known that the holder of the Ace of Hearts (who happens to be the Baron) would be lacking in the non-court hearts that would have enabled him to preserve that Ace to gain a trump (and the lead) for himself.

<sup>9</sup>On the basis of the unpublished advice of Dermot Morrah (a devotee of *Ombre*) W. K. Wimsatt, Jr. allows that Belinda should perhaps have interpreted the third player's Knave of Clubs on the fourth trick as an indication of the Baron's possible strength in Clubs (139-40). If she had done so, she would (or should) have been dissuaded from leading the King of Clubs. This having been said, Wimsatt eschews the ironic reading of "skilful." He writes, equivocally, that "[i]t is by the standards of the polite card table (not necessarily profound) that we shall measure her skill. She is no doubt skilful in her own esteem" (141). On the question of the third player's playing of the Knave of Clubs, I would suggest (although this has no bearing on the essential issue of *Belinda's* competence) that he has made a mistake. Pope's elaboration on the pre-eminence of the Knave of Clubs in *Lu* (iii.61-62) seems to suggest that for one awful moment the third player has become confused as to the game he is supposed to be playing.

<sup>10</sup>OED "unseen" *ppl. a. and n. 2.*

<sup>11</sup>Cf. "Her lively looks a sprightly Mind disclose, / Quick as her Eyes, and as unfix'd as those" (ii.9-10). Pope's emphasis, as conveyed by his final adjective "unfix'd," is on Belinda's romantically uncommitted state. But he also compliments her mind in no uncertain terms by calling it "sprightly" and "quick." See OED "sprightly" *a. and adv. 2.c.*, and especially OED "quick" *adj., n.<sup>1</sup>, and adv. 20.a.*: "Of the mind and its qualities or operations, esp. wit: alert, active, keenly perceptive; ready, lively, agile."

<sup>12</sup>Baker implicitly interprets the "Thirst of Fame" that "invites" Belinda to play (iii.25) as that of one of the other combatants—whose desire, as Baker sees it, is foiled (210). But Pope is writing allegorically here. Belinda is, I think, prompted by her own longing for glory.

<sup>13</sup>(i) Given that, as he notes, play is anti-clockwise, Baker is able to deduce from the last trick (in which the Baron's Ace of Hearts is followed and trumped by Belinda's King, iii.95-98) that the Baron must be seated to the left of Belinda, and that the third player must therefore be on Belinda's right (see 212, and notes 15, 16). While he claims that "this seating detail does not matter" (215), the order of play (when Belinda is leading, Belinda-third player-Baron; when the Baron is leading, Baron-Belinda-third player) is dramatically significant. Once the Baron has taken over the lead, and the final position is taken by the third player, Pope

needs to understate the existence of that (uninteresting) third player in order to pre-empt any anti-climactic effect—or, in other words, to keep the opposition between the Baron and Belinda to the fore. There is, for instance, no mention of the third player once the Baron's Knave of Diamonds has drawn and trumped Belinda's Queen of Hearts (iii.87-92). (ii) The game, beginning at line 25, concludes at line 100. The mid-point of canto iii (which contains a total of 178 lines) comes at line 89, just before the final trick.

<sup>14</sup>While the King of Hearts is motivated by courtly love, this is only as (one suspects) a girl like Belinda would want him to be. In other words, his Queen's hold over him may be read as a displacement of Belinda's innocent romantic hopes (or, perhaps, her girlish illusions).

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## On Superstition and Prejudice in the Beginning of *Silas Marner*\*

JOHN H. MAZAHERI

In the opening of *Silas Marner*, the narrator uses the term “superstition,” illustrates several kinds of it, and presents its damaging effects. His conception of superstition and the way his criticism is carried out will be the object of this essay. Further, I would like to demonstrate that the narrator opposes superstition to religion and implicitly suggests the latter’s positive aspects.

The story takes place in rural England at the beginning of the nineteenth-century.<sup>1</sup> The village of Raveloe, outside of which the weaver Silas has lived for fifteen years now, is by no means a poor village. It is not, indeed, “one of those barren parishes lying on the outskirts of civilisation” (5), but rather is it located “in the rich central plain of what we are pleased to call Merry England” (5). Superstition,<sup>2</sup> however, was then still persistent among the peasants:

In that far-off time *superstition* clung easily round every person or thing that was at all unwonted, or even intermittent and occasional merely, like the visits of the pedlar or the knife-grinder. (3)<sup>3</sup>

Silas Marner was just one of those “unwonted” persons when he came to settle in Raveloe after he left his hometown, very disappointed by men and having lost his faith in God. First, he was physically different. He was a “pallid undersized” man compared to the “brawny country-folk” (3). The ironic remark about the dog is interesting:

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\*For debates inspired by this article, please check the *Connotations* website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debmazaheri01913.htm>>.

The shepherd's dog barked fiercely when one of these alien-looking men appeared on the upland, dark against the early winter sunset; for what dog likes a figure bent under a heavy bag?—and these pale men rarely stirred abroad without that mysterious burden. (3)

This is one kind of superstition which the narrator presents in the free indirect speech or, as Ann Banfield calls it, in a “represented thought.”<sup>4</sup> The represented thought of the dog (“alien-looking,” “for what dog likes a figure bent under a heavy bag?” and “that mysterious burden”) is not only comic because of the anthropomorphism, but also because of the implicit reverse phenomenon of placing the shepherd on an equal footing with his dog. The expressions “alien-looking” about the hawking weavers and “mysterious burden” about their bags are the represented thought of the dog as well as its owner. Both the owner and the dog, without any good reason, distrust strangers or people who look *different*. This comparison makes the shepherd, who represents the prejudiced country folks of Raveloe, all the more stupid and mean because *he* knows who those hawkers are, but his dog does not:

The shepherd himself, though he had good reason to believe that the bag held nothing but flaxen thread, or else the long rolls of strong linen spun from that thread, was not quite sure that this trade of weaving, indispensable though it was, could be carried on entirely without the help of the Evil One. (3)

The weaving job is associated in the mind of these people with the Devil. The shepherd, who is just an ordinary inhabitant of Raveloe—not backward folks relatively speaking, as we have noticed above—, knows very well that the weaving trade is “indispensable,” but still distrusts the weaver, just because he is superstitious. This detail, however, should not make us think of *Silas Marner* as a kind of fairy tale.<sup>5</sup> This novel is overall another “realist” novel by George Eliot—, realism in the sense she understood it.<sup>6</sup> There are obviously mythical and symbolic elements in *Silas Marner*, but we these are found in Eliot's other novels as well. These elements can be part of a “realist” novel.

To return to our superstitious shepherd, we have seen that the narrator criticizes him for being as ignorant and bothersome to a stranger as his dog is. Implicitly, the narrator is asking the people who are like the Raveloe people: what about hospitality, this basic moral duty? In other words, superstition hurts. The humanist narrator describes this attitude towards foreigners in another powerful FIS<sup>7</sup>: “No one knew where wandering men had their homes or their origin; and how was a man to be explained unless you at least knew somebody who knew his father and mother?” (3). The indirect sarcastic remark refers to the way prejudiced people justify themselves and to the absurdity of their reasoning.

The criticism of prejudice resulting from superstition becomes even more acute as the narrator points out the fact that “the peasants of old times” did not distrust only the wanderers and the newcomers, but also those who had settled in their villages for a long time already. Their prejudice is so deep-rooted that if one of these persons had some sort of education, he would look suspicious, and even if he had lived among them with perfect honesty all his life, they would still distrust him:

To the peasants of old times, the world outside their own direct experience was a region of vagueness and mystery: to their untravelled thought a state of wandering was a conception as dim as the winter life of the swallows that came back with the spring; and even a settler, if he came from distant parts, hardly ever ceased to be viewed with a remnant of distrust, which would have prevented any surprise if a long course of inoffensive conduct on his part had ended in the commission of a crime; especially if he had any reputation for knowledge, or showed any skill in handicraft. All cleverness, whether in the rapid use of that difficult instrument the tongue, or in some other art unfamiliar to villagers, was in itself suspicious: honest folks, born and bred in a visible manner, were mostly not overwise or clever—at least, not beyond such a matter as knowing the signs of the weather; and the process by which rapidity and dexterity of any kind were acquired was so wholly hidden, that they partook of the nature of conjuring. (3-4)

These peasants were prejudiced because they had not known or seen anything else, so their distrust of the wanderer could be understand-

able, but what about their attitude towards the settler? Why “this remnant of distrust” after such a long time? the narrator implicitly cries out. Simply because this person was originally from another region. Another reason for their prejudice or distrust was the person’s “knowledge.” If this “emigrant” spoke better than they did, he was suspicious. Somehow the intellect beyond the ordinary is not trusted. The FIS, “honest folks, born and bred in a visible manner, were mostly not overwise or clever,” is ironic. The peasants were in reality, the narrator believes, conceited people who claimed to be more honest than the “foreigners,” and without any good reason hated them even more if they had more knowledge than they did. Prejudice and superstition are both present: “they partook of the nature of conjuring.” Whether one comes first and leads to the other, it is hard to tell. We just note that the peasants’ “untravelling thought” is both superstitious and prejudiced. So the linen-weavers who have moved from the town become “lonely” and “eccentric” simply because they are “regarded as aliens by their rustic neighbours” and are rejected by them. Then, it is not only Silas Marner who lives isolated in Raveloe. And it is not his fault if he is “lonely” and “eccentric.” It is not his personal unfortunate past alone which has caused this strange life of his. There is something definitely wrong with the country folks themselves—it is their unfairness and nastiness caused by ignorance. Influenced by their parents, even the children have been mean to the weaver:

The questionable sound of Silas’s loom, so unlike the natural cheerful trotting of the winnowing machine, or the simpler rhythm of the flail, had a half-fearful fascination for the Raveloe boys, who would often leave off their nutting or birds’-nesting to peep in at the window of the stone cottage, counterbalancing a certain awe at the mysterious action of the loom, by a pleasant sense of scornful superiority, drawn from the mockery of its alternating noises, along with the bent, tread-mill attitude of the weaver. (4)

The sound of the loom is “questionable” to the children, because the machine is just new to them. They like the winnowing machines or flails better, which they know well. This is understandable, but they look at the loom with suspicion, and that is the problem. Its action



seems "myterious," and, probably, they think it is diabolic. Further, the boys' "half-fearful fascination" is actually similar to that exercised by the Devil, and they look at the "stranger" with a "scornful superiority." Like their parents, the children are at the same time prejudiced and superstitious. They are scared of Silas as if he were the Devil in person. When he gets angry at their maliciousness and stares at them, superstitious ideas cross their minds. They think that the weaver's "dreadful stare could dart cramp, or rickets, or a wry mouth at any boy who happened to be in the rear" (4). The power they credit Silas with is devilish, but it is the parents who have inculcated these noxious and irrational ideas in them: "They had, perhaps, heard their fathers and mothers hint that Silas Marnier could cure folks' rheumatism if he had a mind, and add, still more darkly, that if you could speak the devil fair enough, he might save you the cost of the doctor" (4).

The mimicry shows what the boys say to each other about Silas's power. They in fact repeat what they have heard from their parents. The narrator here describes the peasants' perception of the Devil, which is definitely not biblical. If one knows the Devil's language "fair enough," one could get cured, these naive people think. The narrator has already expressed the hurt caused by superstitious people, and sadly adds that this mentality still exists. With a critical tone, he says:

Such strange lingering echoes of the old demon-worship might perhaps even now be caught by the diligent listener among the grey-haired peasantry; for the rude mind with difficulty associates the ideas of power and benignity. A shadowy conception of power that by much persuasion can be induced to refrain from inflicting harm, is the shape most easily taken by the sense of the Invisible in the minds of men who have always been pressed close by primitive wants, and to whom a life of hard toil has never been illuminated by any enthusiastic religious faith. To them pain and mishap present a far wider range of possibilities than gladness and enjoyment: their imagination is almost barren of the images that feed desire and hope, but is all overgrown by recollections that are a perpetual pasture to fear. (4-5)

This reflection is very important in order to understand the narrator's attitude towards religion. He is not against religion, so to speak, but

against superstition. In his view, God, called the "Invisible," is a good and positive power, which brings "hope," and religion is not against "gladness and enjoyment." Thus, "the ideas of power and benignity" can indeed go together. He contends, however, that the superstitious and "rude" minds of the peasants have "never been illuminated by any enthusiastic religious faith." The latter expression is of great importance inasmuch as it clarifies more the narrator's conception of religion. Quite clearly, "enthusiastic religious faith" is contrasted with superstition. The presupposed idea is that one comes to the former through an "illumination" or divine inspiration. In other words, a conversion which cannot be explained rationally. Still, the term "enthusiasm" is used by Eliot in the positive modern meaning of "passionate eagerness" (*OED* "enthusiasm" 3.a.)—here in the pursuit of God—, and not in the eighteenth century sense of "fancied inspiration or extravagance of religious speculation" (*OED* "enthusiasm" 2.), especially since the narrator does not stress so much illumination as the source of religion but its illuminating (or enlightening) effect on "a life of hard toil." The "enthusiastic," personal religious experience is to be distinguished from the "demon-worship" of these people, for they do not worship God but the Devil. Therefore, the narrator is implicitly making a distinction between true and false religion. At any rate, the peasants' prejudice against Marner did not have any foundation—it was only caused by ignorance. Thus, the weaver's physique seems normal to the narrator, but not so to those people:

[H]e was then simply a pallid young man, with prominent, short-sighted brown eyes, whose appearance would have had nothing strange for people of average culture and experience, but for the villagers near whom he had come to settle it had mysterious peculiarities which corresponded with the exceptional nature of his occupation, and his advent from an unknown region called 'North'ard.' (6)

The emphasis is put on ignorance. Ignorance about the weaving job and about the northern regions. The narrator's tone mimicking the peasants' accent ("an unknown region called 'North'ard'") is sarcastic. In the FIS he also mocks the villagers who blamed the weaver for

living in a different way. If “he invited no comer to step across his door-sill, and he never strolled into the village to drink at the Rainbow, or to gossip at the wheelright’s” (6), it was because from the beginning, due to people’s prejudices, he was rejected by them and so forced to live like an outcast. Besides, the villagers’ life, including “gossiping” and “drinking,” had nothing to be considered good and worth imitating. And one prejudice brings about another. So the weaver’s cataleptic seizures were also subject to criticism. The peasants were not only ignorant in medicine, but were self-assured and thought they knew a lot. Jem Rodney, who had seen Marner in such a state, probably exaggerated what he saw, but this was enough for a superstitious and conceited person like Mr Macey, the “clerk of the parish,” to draw from it a supposedly religious conclusion. Again, in an ironic FIS we read that, according to this trusted man, Marner’s problem was caused by the departing of his soul. It was not a “fit” as some people thought,

[b]ut there might be such a thing as a man’s soul being loose from his body, and going out and in, like a bird out of its nest and back; and that was how folks got over-wise, for they went to school in this shell-less state to those who could teach them more than their neighbours could learn with their five senses and the parson. And where did Master Marner get his knowledge of herbs from—and charms too, if he liked to give them away? (6-7)

The FIS mimics a superstitious man who happens to be a respected church person. The supernatural explanation of Marner’s physical illness by Mr Macey is presented as ridiculous. Besides, the issue of Marner’s knowledge of medicine is raised here again from a supposedly religious standpoint, that of the parish clerk. In sum, Silas Marner is a person associated with the Devil, even according to the church people. He had, indeed, a certain power, but of a satanic kind—“He might cure more folks if he would,” thought Mr Macey, “but he was worth speaking fair, if it was only to keep him from doing you a mischief” (7).

The narrator’s criticism of superstition, which is so prejudicial, goes even further when he mentions the fact that Marner would have been

literally persecuted, had he not been feared by these ignorant people: “[i]t was partly to this vague fear that Marner was indebted for protecting him from the persecution that his singularities might have drawn upon him” (7). Moreover, the villagers, especially the richer ones, needed him, since he was the only weaver in the surrounding area, but their mind had not really changed about him:

their sense of his usefulness would have counteracted any repugnance or suspicion which was not confirmed by a deficiency in the quality or the tale of the cloth he wove for them. And the years had rolled on without producing any change in the impressions of the neighbours concerning Marner, except the change from novelty to habit. At the end of fifteen years the Raveloe men said just the same things about Silas Marner as at the beginning. (7)

This shows how persistent superstition and prejudice are.

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The second part of the first chapter is about the place where Marner lived before moving to Raveloe. He had lived a different sort of life in the city, but people, including himself, were quite superstitious over there, too. He changed because he became a victim of superstition himself, and he suffered so much from it that it seemed he had got cured somehow, even though for other reasons—his isolation caused by the prejudiced people of Raveloe as well as his loss of faith in everything but work and the emptiness of life as a result of all that—he did not find happiness. Besides, he is a sincere and good-hearted person, but it takes many years before he understands the difference between superstition and religion. In this second part of the first chapter, a little longer than the first, the setting is a so-called religious place. The narrator insists here again on the fact that life in those days was not different from the present time. This, too, shows his desire to be realistic and relate the past to his own time. In other words, superstition and prejudice still exist and hurt people:

His life, before he came to Raveloe, had been filled with the movement, the mental activity, and the close fellowship, which *in that day as in this*, marked

the life of an artisan early incorporated in a narrow religious sect, where the poorest layman has the chance of distinguishing himself by gifts of speech, and has, at the very least, the weight of a silent voter in the government of his community. (7-8)

The narrator calls the community of Lantern Yard, of which Silas was a member, “a *narrow* religious sect.” One should not confuse this with religion, for the epithet “narrow” as well as the noun “sect” do not have positive connotations. The democratic spirit probably attracted Silas to this place,<sup>8</sup> but he himself was not an intellectual, and did not have a better understanding of religion than others did. Furthermore, he was liked and respected by the other members:

Marnier was highly thought of in that little hidden world, known to itself as the church assembling in Lantern Yard; he was believed to be a young man of exemplary life and ardent faith; and a peculiar interest had been centred in him ever since he had fallen, at a prayer-meeting, into a mysterious rigidity and suspension of consciousness, which, lasting for an hour or more, had been mistaken for death. (8)

The parallel between this incident and the one witnessed by Jem Rodney in the first part of the chapter is interesting. It is indeed worth comparing the “religious” interpretation provided by Mr Macey in Raveloe with the one which had been given many years before by the Lantern Yard members to the same phenomenon. Silas may not have been an intellectual, but he was sincere and honest. The narrator insists on this; he also identifies the trance as a physiological and pathological phenomenon. By contrast, everyone tried to offer a supernatural interpretation: “yet it was believed by himself [Silas] and others that its effect was seen in an accession of light and fervour” (8). What the narrator is implicitly saying here is that superstition was so deep-rooted, that it was just impossible for these people not to relate Silas’s cataleptic fit to something supernatural. So, this view of religion is rejected as superstition. What follows is even more critical, because it implies a very serious moral issue:

A less truthful man than he might have been tempted into the subsequent creation of a vision in the form of resurgent memory; a less sane man might

have believed in such a creation; but Silas was both sane and honest, though, as with many honest and fervent men, *culture had not defined any channels for his sense of mystery*, and so it spread itself over the proper pathway of inquiry and knowledge. (8)

The narrator is assuming that some so-called religious experiences are just fake, and there are simple-minded people who believe in them. These supposedly religious people are qualified as insane or dishonest, but since Silas “was both sane and honest,” he would not have invented a story to impress others. Anyway, William Dane represented the fake religious person, a Tartuffe, whereas Silas was rather the naive kind who trusted him. And, apparently, most of the brethren at Lantern Yard were naive too, since they believed William: he “was regarded as a shining instance of youthful piety” (8-9), as much as Silas was, if not more. Thus, the Lantern Yard brethren and sisters could not distinguish between the sincere believer and the hypocrite, and when Silas had had his “cataleptic fit” at the prayer-meeting, although various explanations were proposed by different members, “William’s suggestion *alone* jarred with the general sympathy” (9). Even Silas at first believed it.<sup>9</sup> Obviously, the suggestion was calculated and deliberately destructive.<sup>10</sup> And even after William’s theft of the church’s money, putting the blame on Silas, the latter still had difficulty to believe his friend capable of such a perfidy.<sup>11</sup> But he understood all of a sudden what was going on: “Suddenly a deep flush came over his face, and he was about to speak impetuously, when he seemed checked again by some inward shock, that sent the flush back and made him tremble” (11). Silas remembered that there was no knife in his pocket, and finally realized William’s treachery, but he preferred to remain silent and not defend himself, because he could not prove his innocence and charge his friend—“I can say nothing. God will clear me” (12). He is, however, still a believer. It is the act of drawing lots in order to find the truth which will seriously shake Silas’s faith after the unfortunate outcome. First, the narrator himself criticizes the resolution “on praying and drawing lots”<sup>12</sup> as absurd, and says in this respect:

This resolution can be a ground of surprise only to those who are unacquainted with that obscure religious life which has gone on in the alleys of our towns. Silas knelt with his brethren, relying on his own innocence being certified by immediate divine interference, but feeling that there was sorrow and mourning behind for him even then—that his trust in man had been cruelly bruised. (12)

This method of drawing lots, criticized by the narrator, is in fact found in the Bible,<sup>13</sup> but seems so far from a modern understanding of religion that the Victorian reader would have been surprised to hear about the existence of such a thing in England even at the end of the eighteenth-century. That is why the narrator adds that there were “obscure religious” sects, like the one in Lantern Yard, which still practised this method. In any case, Silas had not lost his belief in this principle yet—indeed, he accepted to pray and wait for the outcome of the drawing—, but he had already lost his “trust in man.” He was disgusted by William’s attitude, and had questioned the meaning of friendship. As Cave notes, cheating had certainly occurred, because William was not going to risk to lose in this affair, so “Silas was no doubt required to choose one of a number of sticks or other objects which had been marked in advance” (182n12). When “[T]he lots declared that Silas Marner was guilty,”<sup>14</sup> the weaver lost his faith in *this* “religion” and in *this* “God” altogether.

The narrator never says that religion *is* superstition, but certainly the one practised by the Lantern Yard members was, in his opinion. Marner, however, did not make the distinction, and that is why he lost his faith in what he thought *was* religion. He was also so sensitive that he lost his faith in friendship as well, because of a false friend. So, having nothing else to lose, and perfectly sure of William’s treachery, he decided to boldly say:

“The last time I remember using my knife, was when I took it out to cut a strap for you. I don’t remember putting it in my pocket again. *You* stole the money, and you have woven a plot to lay the sin at my door. But you may prosper, for all that: there is no just God that governs the earth righteously, but a God of lies, that bears witness against the innocent.” (12; emphasis in original)

He became so pessimistic that he felt that Sarah would not believe him any more than the other members did: “[i]n the bitterness of his wounded spirit, he said to himself, ‘*She* will cast me off too.’ And he reflected that, if she did not believe the testimony against him, her whole faith must be upset as his was” (12; emphasis in original). He did not know the whole story yet, so he thought that his fiancée would not question the validity of her religion and would take the drawing of lots seriously.

In the last comment the narrator makes in this opening chapter, he shows one more time the difference between religion and superstition. The latter, resulting from ignorance and lack of understanding of true religion, causes trouble, disappointment, and unhappiness. It is an important conclusion which has to be considered throughout the reading of the novel if one wants to study George Eliot’s attitude towards religion:

We are apt to think it inevitable that a man in Marner’s position should have begun to question the validity of an appeal to the divine judgment by drawing lots; but to him this would have been an effort of independent thought such as he had never known; and he must have made the effort at a moment when all his energies were turned into the anguish of disappointed faith. If there is an angel who records the sorrows of men as well as their sins, he knows how many and deep are the sorrows that spring from false ideas for which no man is culpable. (13)

The basic idea is that “drawing lots” is an unreasonable thing to do for “an appeal to the divine judgment.” The narrator is not rejecting the idea of God, as we can see; on the contrary, God and “divine judgment” are presupposed notions. Now, in order to understand religion “independent thought” is necessary, so everything we read in the Bible may not be godly. Unfortunately, Marner, superstitious like the other members of the Lantern Yard “sect,” lacked this “independent thought,” and, therefore, had no idea what *true* religion was all about. No wonder that he lost his faith in what *he* considered to be religion.



As we have observed, the narrator believes in the religious concepts of guilt and sin, and shows that false religion, or superstition, or “false ideas,” but not religion strictly speaking, hurt people. Besides, from the outset, we clearly feel the presence of a narrator who has embarked upon a story, which is *not* a “fairy tale” but a “realist” and symbolic one just like George Eliot’s previous stories, *Janet’s Repentance*, *Adam Bede*, or *The Mill on the Floss*, even though the symbolic and mythical aspects may seem here more evident than in the latter works.

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If we read the critical studies done on George Eliot, say in the past sixty years, before we discover her novels, we think that she was a humanist-atheist or a humanist-agnostic author; but when we actually read her without any preconceived ideas, we might be in for a surprise, especially if we are familiar with the evolution of theology in the Christian world. Indeed, we find from the beginning in her novels, as I attempted to show in the case of *Silas Marner*, not only a great artist, but also a religious thinker. How then can we explain this “paradox” as Svalgic called it?<sup>15</sup> The fact is that there is no paradox if we keep in mind that most critics, including Svalgic, have based their judgments on non-fictional writings by Maryan Evans, such as letters, essays, translations, etc. They have also disregarded certain facts: for instance Maryan Evans never, as far as I know, said anywhere that she was an atheist. So why does Tim Dolin, for example, label her philosophy a “liberal humanistic atheism” (Dolin 165) and an “atheistic ethical humanism” (Dolin 188)? He adds that if her characters are religious, it is because she “was a realist, and committed to the representation of things as they were” (165). But this leaves unanswered the question of a ‘providential’ ordering of the plot, for instance in the case of *Silas Marner*. Why should Dunstan die in that way, and Silas find his money again? Do these things always happen like that in real life? Why does Godfrey become childless after having rejected the child God had given him? Why has Lantern Yard, a place represent-

ing “false religion” or “superstition,” disappeared when Silas returns there to visit it with Eppie? The narrator never suggests that there is a rational explanation to all these phenomena or that they are all accidental. Rather, the author, George Eliot, presents her readers with an image of life that is full of mysteries. And if the critics want to call this superstition, then the author herself is either superstitious or offers a symbolic story here, not unlike many to be found in the Bible itself. Thus, Dolin himself also writes: “Eliot’s whole thought tends towards ‘the development of the Christian system’ (not its rejection), not just for the sake of reconciling it to inconvenient modern realities; but in order to secure it from anachronism and assure its universality and durability” (172). And quoting a letter: “I believe that religion too has to be modified—‘developed,’ according to the dominant phrase—and that a religion more perfect than any yet prevalent, must express less care for personal consolation, and a more deeply-awing sense of responsibility to man, springing from sympathy with that which of all things is most certainly known to us, the difficulty of the human lot” (*Letters* 5: 31; qtd. in Dolin 173). So this critic, after having labelled George Eliot an atheist, now admits that there is in her works a religious quest. How to explain this contradiction?

Another question to be asked in this context is, why did George Eliot decide to have very religious heroes, such as Dinah Morris in *Adam Bede*? Was it to please the Victorian conservative reader, as some have supposed in a more or less direct way? Barry Qualls thus argues:

Tellingly, the author who represented to her generation what the novel could accomplish did not write, did not think, without the texts that she abandoned when she lost her faith, without the language of the Bible and the traditions that formed around it, without the histories of its texts that she transformed into contexts and structures for the lives of her characters. Her history of religious engagement is a history of Victorian England’s engagement with God and the Bible. (Qualls 119-20)

Yes, she did lose her faith, but in the religion of her youth, not in religion altogether. She broke with evangelical Protestantism, but not with religion or even with Christianity. There is, indeed, nothing in

her fiction which proves that she was an atheist. Her idea of God is just different, more modern, apparently more or less in agreement with the Biblical Higher Criticism of the time, represented in England by a Coleridge for example, and in Germany by a Schleiermacher. Not that she was a follower of anyone in particular. Besides, one can even find in her works, concerning Christian love for example, affinities with Kierkegaard, whom she did not know of course.<sup>16</sup>

Another preconceived idea the critics have had is that they have confused her with Feuerbach.<sup>17</sup> What if she had not translated him? But even a Feuerbach to a theologian like Karl Barth was closer to religion than many so-called theologians.<sup>18</sup> It seems that Barth hints at the notion of the religious unconscious. In sum, it all depends on one's definitions of God, theology, and religion. David Carroll considers George Eliot a "natural historian of religion," not a religious thinker herself. He goes on: "[p]art of George Eliot's purpose, as a natural historian of religion, is to explore the origins of folk myth and its continuity with more sophisticated belief, as the network of biblical allusions implies" (Carroll 145). I do not see any justification of this assertion in *Silas Marner*. Felicia Bonaparte, on the other hand, declares: "To me it seems the work in which, becoming dissatisfied with empiricism as the sole basis of her thought and yet unwilling to return to a theological creed, Eliot sought a way to conceive, for herself and the modern world, a secular but a transcendent religion" (Bonaparte 39). She, too, tries to answer the "paradox" posited by Svalgic. But how can one be secular and religious at the same time? Then she sees in George Eliot's works a *theology* which is "universalist" in essence. And lately Anna Neill has published an article in which she explores the relationship between science and religion, and admits that George Eliot believed in the mystery of life and that she was not as rationalist as many critics have claimed she was. Thus, referring to a famous letter, she writes: "Having praised the 'clearness and honesty' of Darwin's *The Origin of Species*, George Eliot went on to say that 'development theory and all other explanations of processes by which things came to be, produce a feeble impression compared with the

mystery that lies under the processes.’ What sounds uncharacteristically mystical probably expresses a passion for the unknown as it is navigated by the imagination” (Neill 939-40). And concerning *Silas Marner* she writes:

[T]he plot of the novel is driven by the sudden, inexplicable appearances and disappearances of people as well as precious objects. These are mysteries whose natural cause is only sometimes apparent to the narrator and a few skeptical characters on the periphery of the narrative. Thus, even though this narrative describes social life in thoroughly organic terms, its very structure respects the force of the mystical. (941)

Neill focuses on Silas’s catalepsy and believes that George Eliot thought that a scientific explanation to phenomena which seem mysterious to the naive characters in the novel might some day be provided. But she wrongfully confuses George Eliot’s philosophy with that of Lewes and states that the latter predicted “the eventual triumph of science over theology and superstition” (959). Where, in *Silas Marner*, does the narrator express such ideas about science? Why confuse Eliot with Lewes? And where does she put together theology and superstition?

There are, nonetheless, a few exceptions among George Eliot’s readers. For example, with regard to our novel, Harold Fisch writes: “If the hero of *Silas Marner*, like the author of the book, has broken with evangelical Christianity, he has not rejected the Bible along with it. For him, as for George Eliot, it remains to be re-interpreted and re-understood” (Fisch 343). But the most important study which has appeared on George Eliot’s religious quest is that of a well-known theologian, not a literary critic. Peter Hodgson’s book, which has no pretension, should inspire some critics interested in religion. Hodgson indeed admits that God is “present and active” in the story of *Silas Marner* (Hodgson 75), but that George Eliot’s understanding of religion is not a traditional one. Christmas, for instance, through this story is interpreted not as a historic but a mythical event. Yet, this interpretation of the Scripture neither questions the validity of religion nor rejects the idea of God, but rather explains the latter in a

different and new way, which reminds one of Hegel and Schleiermacher: "George Eliot offers a remarkable demythologization of the Christmas symbols" (Hodgson 79). And since, he adds, "[t]heology and art are both 'fiction'" (Hodgson 149), George Eliot presents her theology in a fictional form, a fact that might also help to explain the 'paradox' of Eliot evincing different attitudes towards religion in her non-fictional writing and in her fiction. The fictional quality of religion in George Eliot makes the theologian conclude that "she was in fact closer to a certain kind of postmodern sensibility" (Hodgson 151).

\* \* \*

Basically nobody knows anything about the person who wrote *The Gospel of Mark*. Yet, based on the text itself, many studies regularly appear on this famous spiritual work. And nobody has ever denied its religious content. It is because the text *itself* speaks to the reader, and the author, historically speaking, does not really matter. Why could we not, especially after having made so much progress in hermeneutics and critical theory in the twentieth century, read George Eliot's novels in the same way, by focusing on the text, and nothing but the text? Further, let us suppose that *Silas Marner* is the only thing that Maryan Evans ever wrote, and that we do not have any other document left from her. My point is that in this book there is a religious thought, which is expressed in an artistic way, which is not the regular discourse of theologians or philosophers. Trying to find Lewes in her works because she lived with him, or Spinoza because she translated him, is not only belittling George Eliot's original thought, but also leads to inappropriate and confusing interpretations. The narrator, and the author who invented him as well as the entire story—I mean the author within the text and not outside of it—, have to be heard first. If after this preliminary study of the text, we read other writings left by the author, we may learn more about the text, but the reverse does not help.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>"In the early years of this century" (*Silas Marner* 4).

<sup>2</sup>Superstition is "[u]nreasoning awe or fear of something unknown, mysterious, or imaginary, esp. in connexion with religion; religious belief or practice founded upon fear or ignorance" (*OED* "superstition" 1.).

<sup>3</sup>The italics in the quotations are mine, unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>4</sup>"And to show or represent a character's thoughts, the natural mode is represented speech and thought" (Banfield 69). For another rigorous analysis of free indirect speech, see Pascal. Besides, there are some interesting pages on the use of FIS in George Eliot's works. In the case I am studying here, I prefer the expression "represented thought," because the dog's barking is caused by a "thought" rather than a speech, George Eliot's narrator being of course humorous.

<sup>5</sup>"The folk-tale mode of the opening, the ballad-like elements in the story of Godfrey Cass and his secret marriage to opium addict Molly, Silas's uncanny trances, the mythic substitution of child for gold in a healing inversion of the Midas myth (where Midas unwittingly turns his little daughter into a gold statue): all these elements declare the extent to which the work draws on fairy-tale to sustain its transformations" (Beer 125-26).

<sup>6</sup>For instance in her review of John Ruskin's *Modern Painters* (vol. 3) in the *Westminster Review* (April 1856), Eliot writes about the critic's criteria for good art: "The truth of infinite value that he teaches is *realism* [Eliot's emphasis]—the doctrine that all truth and beauty are to be attained by a humble and faithful study of nature, and not by substituting vague forms, bred by imagination on the mists of feeling, in place of definite, substantial reality. The thorough acceptance of this doctrine would remould our life; and he who teaches its application to any one department of human activity with such power as Mr Ruskin's, is a prophet for his generation. It is not enough simply to teach truth; that may be done, as we all know, to empty walls, and within the covers of unsaleable books; we want it to be taught as to compel men's attention and sympathy" (*Selected Essays, Poems and Other Writings* 368-69). The "sympathy" George Eliot believed in can be found in all of her stories. Thus, in *Silas Marner*, we note that from the outset the reader feels sympathy for the weaver, and for all those who are like him, because he is a victim of prejudice and superstition.

<sup>7</sup>From now on I will use the abbreviation FIS for free indirect speech.

<sup>8</sup>See Cave's note in this regard (181n8).

<sup>9</sup>"Silas, feeling bound to accept rebuke and admonition as a brotherly office, *felt no resentment, but only pain*" (9).

<sup>10</sup>"He observed that, to him, this trance looked more like a visitation of Satan than a proof of divine favour, and exhorted his friend to see that he hid no accursed thing within his soul" (9).

<sup>11</sup>“William, for nine years that we have gone in and out together, have you ever known me tell a lie? But God will clear me” (11). Marner is puzzled, but does not yet question his friend’s honesty.

<sup>12</sup>Cave remarks that “it is wholly in keeping with the Calvinistic theology of the sect that the members choose to place the outcome in God’s hands by relying on chance accompanied by prayer rather than by trusting human methods of inquiry” (182n12). But Calvin himself never admitted such a principle. The identification of chance with the election of grace is in fact Feuerbach’s, as Wiesenfarth (234) points out.

<sup>13</sup>Even in the New Testament, the casting of lots seems alright in *Acts* 1:26. Jesus would not have liked it, of course, but it is by casting lots that Matthias is chosen to replace Judas as an apostle.

<sup>14</sup>In italics in the text.

<sup>15</sup>“Of English novelists of the first rank, George Eliot is easily the most paradoxical. She appreciates the importance of religion in human life and writes novels to enforce it; but she does not believe in God” (Svalgic 285-86).

<sup>16</sup>Another critic who affirms ideas which cannot be verified in George Eliot’s novels in terms of religion is Bernard J. Paris, who writes: “The real crisis in George Eliot’s history came not when she broke with Christianity, but when she broke with pantheism, for only then did she have to ask herself if life has any meaning without God” (11). Another one is Jerome Thale, who writes: “Actually *Silas Marner* is a sophisticated and self-conscious work of art by one of the most tough-minded of the English novelists, a novelist who believed that the ‘highest calling and election is to *do without opium* and live through all our pain with conscious, clear-eyed endurance’” (Thale vii). Thale supposes that George Eliot had the same idea about religion as Marx did. But the difference between Marx and Eliot is that the former totally rejected the idea of God and considered all kinds of religions as “opium,” whereas Eliot never claimed to be an atheist, and the metaphor of “opium” in her language refers to certain traditional understandings of religion. She makes a distinction between superstition and religion.

<sup>17</sup>See for example Knoepflmacher’s “George Eliot, Feuerbach, and the Question of Criticism,” which is mostly on *Adam Bede*. In his *George Eliot’s Early Novels*, on the other hand, the chapter on *Silas Marner* also stresses Wordsworth’s influence (221-59). Overall, this critic would not admit George Eliot as a religious thinker either, in spite of the fact that he recognizes the importance of religion in her works. See also Joseph Wiesenfarth. For instance, with regard to the Christmas story in *Silas Marner*, he writes: “Just as Feuerbach here takes the Christmas story as a myth that needs to be stripped of its theological trappings to be understood in a human context, George Eliot dramatizes Silas’s response to the love that Eppie brings on New Year’s eve, not to the doctrine Mr. Crackenthorp preaches on Christmas day. The saving event in his life is human love” (242). And he concludes his article by saying that, “*Silas Marner* ends, gently but ironically, positing the utopian myth of a demythologized world” (244). First, nothing proves in *Silas Marner* that George Eliot demythologizes in the same way as

Feuerbach does. Why not seeing in her “demythologization” a philosophy closer to that of Schleiermacher or Strauss on the one hand, to that of Kierkegaard on the other, and even somehow announcing Bultmann’s way in the next century?

<sup>18</sup> “[...] the attitude of the anti-theologian Feuerbach was more theological than that of many theologians” (Barth x).

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## “Mundane Things”: Response to Neil Browne\*

MICHAEL ANESKO

Neil Browne’s essay, “The Aesthetic Economy of *The Rise of Silas Lapham*,” asserts that the most ordinary things serve as the book’s most crucial elements—what he calls “pivot points” (1)—that shape not merely the novel’s plot structure but its overall aesthetic design. Inspired by the aesthetic philosophy of John Dewey, Browne argues that our aesthetic experience of the novel is contingent upon our recognition of its material forms. “Mundane things,” he claims, “recognizable to us all, are able to mark for us, to make more real, points in the fictional narrative where our lives and concerns intersect with the ones patterned in a novel” (4). As such, Browne might almost be said to be offering a kind of material corollary to Howells’s theory of realism, corroborated by the text of *Silas Lapham* itself.

Browne offers an ingenious—and wholly persuasive—reading of the novel, focusing particularly upon the most mundane of its material forms: a curled pine shaving, planed by an unseen carpenter in Silas Lapham’s new Back Bay mansion, still under construction as the book unfolds. Like Silas, Browne reminds us, this simple object is “a remnant of the North Woods displaced to Boston” (7); the lumber from which it has been derived has come to stand in the most unnatural of places, the back-filled tidal estuary of the Charles River, now transformed into the most desirable real estate in the Hub. (How fitting that the Athens of America should be built upon a swamp of

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\*Reference: Neil Browne, “Pivots, Reversals, and Things in the Aesthetic Economy of Howells’s *The Rise of Silas Lapham*,” *Connotations* 15.1-3 (2005/2006): 1-16.

For the original article as well as all contributions to this debate, please check the *Connotations* website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debbrowne01513.htm>>.

pecuniary speculation!) As Browne aptly points out, the fresh aroma of the planed wood framing, redolent with sap, disguises what Howells drolly calls the “Venetian” stench of the brackish fens (51): “the shaving retains traces of its origin, its woody scent, which at this point seems able to mitigate the odor caused by the displacement of nature for the sake of development and land speculation” (8). The shaving, then, both embodies and signals one of many “reversals in the text” (1); and this pattern of reversal—Silas’s economic fall and moral rise; the Back Bay house rising and then reduced to ashes; the romantic subplot’s switcheroo—structures the entire work. “So,” as Browne suggests, “in the largest sense, the shaving traces the broadest social concerns of the novel, the actual displacement of nature by the market, and the market as the emergent imaginative construct in the popular imagination” (8).

Close analysis of this passage from the novel allows Browne to posit the shaving as a potent sexual symbol, too:

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

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

“New what?”

“Passion.”

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

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

“Well,” said the girl.

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

“No, I thank you,” she replied. “I think one will do.”

They both laughed again, for whatever reason or no reason, and then the young girl became sober. To a girl everything a young man does is of significance; and if he holds a shaving down with his foot while she pokes through it with her parasol, she must ask herself what he means by it. (115)

When Tom Corey finally presents the shaving to Irene as a kind of trophy (in place of a romantically conventional flower), its erotic implications—at least to her—are complete. The thin sliver of pine wood thus serves as a working emblem in each of the novel's parallel plot structures. Browne then rightly concludes: "That Howells is able to invest so much in a pine shaving is testimony to the power of an aesthetic rooted in mundane, everyday things, things that also retain a trace of their natural origin" (9). Within the framework of the novel itself, the effective use of the realist symbol (a signifier whose field of reference is wholly self-contained within the work itself) has long been recognized as one of Howells's narrative strengths. But while most critics have been content to assess the more obvious examples (such as Lapham's Back Bay house itself), Browne's focus on something presumably more trivial serves his purpose well.

Less convincing, perhaps, is the logic of the broader aesthetic generalization that Browne advances. Is our specifically aesthetic understanding of *The Rise of Silas Lapham* really contingent upon our immediate apprehension of the novel's material details? How many people today have ever seen or touched (let alone *smelled*) a pine-wood shaving? (A more ubiquitous source these days might be the swaying "Little Tree" car deodorizer, a piece of cardboard cut in the shape of a generic pine tree, impregnated with artificial scent.) Who today owns a parasol? Are these "mundane things" truly "recognizable to us all"? Certainly they would have been to Howells's contemporaneous audience. But positing such absolute parallels between the realms of novelistic and readerly experience might, in the end, be rather misleading.

The pine shaving, after all, is not just a symbol. It is also a thing in itself. It is waste. And *that*, too, might profitably be considered a central theme of *The Rise of Silas Lapham*. Howells's novel is full of discarded (or used-up) things: the Lapham's house in Nankeen Square; the broken-down horses that one has to imagine Silas has sent to the glue factory (he only wants sprightly animals in his stable); the yesterday's novels that the Lapham girls only now are reading; the ghosts

of Jim Millon and Rogers, one wasted by war and the other by Lapham's greed. Reverend Sewell's memorable articulation of "the economy of pain" (241) is also a kind of sermon against waste, an utterly utilitarian imperative for the management of human feeling and the avoidance of the false necessity for self-sacrifice.

If we connect, then, to *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, we do so not merely (or exclusively) through its smallest material realities but also through its most abstract dimensions. Real estate speculation and housing bubbles, the threatened disgrace of personal bankruptcy, the perfidious behavior of those most eager to exploit the pecuniary potential of the media: any reader of today's century will recognize—and inevitably respond to—those aspects of Howells's novel, too. They might even seem more "real" than a fragrant sliver of Northern pine.

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## New Money, Slightly Older Money & “Democratic” Writing: A Response to Neil Browne\*

ANDREW MADIGAN

In this essay I will respond to, elaborate on, and critique Browne’s provocative and sometimes astute article on the “Aesthetic Economy of Howells’s *The Rise of Silas Lapham*.” The first issue I will address is a commonplace in Howells scholarship, the author’s attention to everyday objects. Browne alludes to his “close focus on ordinary material things” (1), to which Howells, a theorist and champion of realism, was dedicated. By the accumulation of ordinary, judiciously-chosen physical elements—often called significant details—the writer can create and sustain a realistic atmosphere, decrease the aesthetic distance between reader and text, and therefore better enable the reader to suspend disbelief. Browne also mentions the role of books as realistic objects. He writes, for instance, that “Pen has been reading a sentimental novel called *Tears, Idle Tears*, which romanticizes maudlin self-sacrifice on the part of its heroine” (3). Howells is multitasking with this and other intertextual references. He is treating the book as object—indeed, Lapham’s interior designer comically decorates his home with texts—while also critiquing the melodramatic pre-realistic novel. Howells’s work is perpetually self-reflexive in this manner; *The Rise of Silas Lapham* is both an example of, and a theoretical meditation upon, the various aesthetic rules, techniques and values that he either helped establish or subscribed to. *Tears, Idle Tears*, he is suggesting, is unrealistic and therefore both aesthetically and morally inferior, while

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*Silas Lapham* is realistic and therefore a corrective to such ostensible drivel.

One of the title reversals is the power shift, first economic and increasingly socio-cultural, from established families to arrivistes such as Lapham. The novel, as Browne writes, regards a newly wealthy manufacturer “trying to break into Boston society” and “the shift in post-Civil War United States culture from an agricultural society to an industrialized nation” (1-2). True, the novel centers on the conflict between old money and new, the frontier and the city. We witness Lapham’s gauche, bumbling, often bathetic efforts to buy his family’s way into the right circles and the unwillingness of Boston society to let him. Silas Lapham is historically situated, however, at the tipping point when old money could no longer resist the advances of new money. Browne refers to Tom Corey, “the scion of an old, wealthy Boston family” (2) who becomes engaged to one of Lapham’s daughters and, perhaps stranger still, accepts a job in Lapham’s paint business. Tom’s family, which has lost its money but is unwilling to acknowledge this change of status, even to itself, is appalled by such shocking behavior. As Thorstein Veblen, a contemporary of Howells, argued throughout *The Theory of The Leisure Class* (1899), status and especially the outward manifestation of status are more important than money to the elite class, and working for one’s money signifies low status.

The Coreys are epicene in every sense of the word; their privilege has rendered them almost entirely useless in the evolving market economy of late-nineteenth-century America. This is in contradistinction to Lapham, who is impeccably vigorous, valuable and practical, if also vulgar and unclubbable according to the very class he wants so desperately to be accepted by. Tom is the only Corey who sees the emerging paradigm shift from old money to new, from inherited to earned wealth, which enables him to overcome, to a certain extent, his snobbery and actually perform work, which is anathema to his class. He therefore redefines his social values, himself, and even his patrimony, symbolically adopting Lapham as his new father (cf. Madigan).

A problematically democratic America—it was always a synthetic system, a web, at different points in history, of aristocracy, oligarchy, socialism, etc.—was becoming more meritocratic and, at least in economic terms, more democratic.<sup>1</sup>

We will return to this shortly—the meaning of "democratic," the market economy, realism and Howell's fictive agenda—because it is essential to Howells's work and to Browne's essay. First, though, let us continue to explore the issue of social mobility and, afterward, problematize the notion of "old money."

The issues of social class, new money and upward mobility, so poignant during the fourth quarter of the nineteenth century, are also frequently represented in the work of Howells's contemporaries (Henry James, Edith Wharton and Theodore Dreiser most notably). Beneath the more obvious socio-economic conflict is another, and very closely related, question of race, nationality and religion. The putative aristocracy did not want to legitimize people like Lapham, who were uneducated and self-made, who dirtied their hands with work, and untenably down-market industrial work at that, but neither were they quick to embrace persons from, in their minds, questionable backgrounds. In James's *The American*, for example, Christopher Newman is socially untouchable in Europe because of his titular nationality, and in Wharton's *The House of Mirth* Simon Rosedale's Jewishness is a social handicap. In Howells's own *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, Berthold Lindau is also disreputably Jewish.

Fin de siècle social mobility is even appropriated by Thomas Pynchon in *Against the Day* (2006), his own turn-of-the-century novel written at the turn of a subsequent century. One of the numerous subplots involves the possibility of marriage between the old-money Yashmeen Halfcourt and the nouveau riche Cyprian Latewood, "his family only a generation on from socio-acrobatic aggrandizement" (549). When the topic is broached, a character answers: "'As in Latewood's Patent Wallpaper? Surely not'" (548). Pynchon is obviously revisiting Howells. Silas Lapham becomes the linguistically-similar Cyprian Latewood, and paint is transformed into patent wallpaper



(both are used to cover and decorate walls). Of course, Pynchon twists the signifiers into his own peculiar and amorphous shapes. The relevant characters' genders are reversed, and their ethnic backgrounds are murky; he also complicates matters by referring, with respect to the characters' physical relationship, to bestiality, sodomy and the man's ambiguous sexuality. Ironically, and comically, he injects greater realism (albeit peppered with absurdity) into Howells's unnarrative, though Howells was of course obsessively devoted to realism. Pynchon is suggesting that, despite Howells's apparent dedication to a new kind of fiction detached from its romantic antecedents, "realism" had a long way to go before it became convincingly real. The fiction of Howells's day was overly genteel, he is suggesting, with much of the important, realistic action (sex, for instance) taking place off the page or not at all. Pynchon is portraying the discrepancy between a writer's ideals and his books, an issue I will also explore in greater depth momentarily.

One crucial issue Browne neglects is that the old money simply was not very old. As Ronald Story points out in his very Laphamian study of New England social, economic and residential changes between 1800 and 1870, Boston's upper-crust "Brahmins" insisted on clinging to the erroneous belief that their special status was based on long tradition when in fact their wealth and social standing had only emerged over the preceding half-century and, in some cases, sooner. There was very little old money; there was, properly speaking, new money and slightly older money. Therefore, for a Corey to look down on a Lapham for the newness of his money is not only shallow but also shortsighted and fallacious. It is not inexplicable, however, particularly from a socio-psychological perspective. Their hypocritical and seemingly paradoxical resistance to new money and its concomitant vulgarity and lack of education betrays their own insecurity as relatively new members of the upper class; this insecurity would have been exacerbated on their invariable tours of Europe, in which the more definitively old and cultivated families would have looked down upon *them*. As Betty Farrell notes, the Boston Brahmins, who

were incredibly insular and closed off to "new money," had made their own money, in the not-too-distant-past, from textile manufacturing, fishing, naval stores and other disreputable enterprises. The real-world analogues of the Corey family, then, would have only been a generation or two away from the merchant class, and they would have made their fortune in whale blubber or some other not-terribly-respectable business.

Browne discusses, at great length, ordinary objects and their significance to Howells and his novel. He pays particular attention to Lapham's house and the earth itself: "Silas's wealth and success are literally rooted in a material, ordinary place, in the ground of his family farm. His life rises from the soil" (11). True, as Lapham moves from the organic, concrete and quotidian (farm, soil, paint, authenticity) toward the constructed, abstract and rarified (new house, affectation, society), his family suffers; he loses his grounding in a literal and figurative sense. Howells—like so many nineteenth-century fictionists in the U.S., England, Continental Europe and Russia—is juxtaposing agrarian virtue and cosmopolitan decay, is bemoaning the ills of urbanization and industrialization. "In the end," Browne correctly writes, "not the symbols of wealth, but the materials of everyday life lend their power to Silas" (13).

Browne's analysis of the novel's fine detail is often acute and articulate, but he does not adequately situate and understand these details within their larger conceptual framework. In particular, he misreads Howells's "democratic" aesthetic and fails to challenge Howells's paradoxical "anti-capitalism." Let us begin with the issue of capitalism. Howells's disgruntlement with the Western economic model is well known, and in a trilogy of utopian novels<sup>2</sup> he critiques it. Browne alludes to "the ethics and aesthetics of realism, which Howells clearly saw as counter to an emergent, unrestrained market capitalism and its moral vacuity" (4). What Howells did not seem to realize, however, and what Browne does not take into account, is that Howells may have despised market capitalism but he was intimately connected to it. He prospered because of it, in fact, which calls into question not

only his commitment to these ideals but also makes the “anti-capitalist” label highly dubious.

*Silas Lapham* was first published serially in *The Century Illustrated Monthly Magazine*, beginning in 1884, and was subsequently printed as a complete novel in 1885. Howells made a good living as a world-renowned novelist, editor, theorist and critic. What enabled him to make this living was the great historico-economic shift from the hardscrabble agrarian subsistence mode to the much more affluent mode of industrialized market capitalism. This is the thesis of Galbraith’s *The Affluent Society* and a well-documented fact of economic history. Because of the unprecedented economic growth and stability of the Western economy—because, quite directly, of capitalism—Howells did not have to labor with his hands, but rather could enjoy a more mediated, soft and well-paid profession. Without capitalism, Howells would not have had the education, money or leisure time to become a professional novelist, and he would not have had an audience with the time, money and education to buy and read his books. Howells may indeed have seen himself as anti-capitalist, but capitalism filled his pockets.

The issue of realism and democracy is also oversimplified by Howells and Browne. Browne argues that Howells “advocated realism as a corrective to aesthetic elitism” and quotes Howells’s statement that “[t]he arts must become democratic” (5). Browne asserts that “the use of ordinary material objects to enhance the perception of relations is essential to both aesthetic experience as outlined above and democratic art” (5). He also contends, citing Dewey, that Howells’s “line of democratic aesthetic theory [...] appeals to the ‘great mass of mankind’” (6). For the most part, Browne is merely repeating what Howells and Dewey have said and agreeing with them, so in a sense the error is not his but theirs. In any event, the fallacy in these, and other, statements about Howells and his democratic aesthetic is a formidable one. Browne et al. are guilty of a category error in distinguishing certain fictive and theoretical practices/notions as “democratic.” Browne’s argument floats from “ordinary” to “realistic” without

major problem, but it also lunges from "realistic" to "democratic" without sufficient evidence, which is the root of his argument's weakness. Browne continually conflates "realistic" (1, 3, 4, 5, 10, 13, 15, 16), "ordinary" (1, 2, 4, 5, 11) and "democratic" (5, 6, 10), but there is of course a wide gulf between these words.

Howells strove to write with realistic dialogue, characters and incidents, and he foregrounds his work with concrete, ordinary, representatively-selected objects. By doing so, Howells makes his narrative appear more realistic and ordinary, but of course this has nothing to do with making it "democratic." "Demotic" would be a plausible adjective, but not democratic. Browne's failure is, once again, in missing the larger socio-economic picture. Howells did not write democratic books that appealed to the great mass of mankind; he wrote realistic<sup>3</sup> novels that were read and enjoyed by the educated affluent classes. The working class had neither the leisure, education, money or possibly the interest to read much fiction (see Leah Price, Richard Altick, David Vincent and Jonathan Rose, for example, on nineteenth-century reading habits), and they would have been no more likely to read and enjoy a text simply because, on the surface, it reflected the ordinariness of their external reality. In fact, they might very well have been more likely to enjoy a romantic story that provided an escape from the grim drudgery of their external reality. If anything made fiction more democratic, ironically, it was the twentieth century's continued economic growth following World War II, which led to increasingly high literacy, affluence and leisure time, not to mention the capability of producing cheaper books, the creation of more public libraries, and the emergence of better-equipped public schools. Capitalism, then, which Howells ostensibly opposed, was in fact the very force that allowed him to prosper and which enabled his agenda—the democratization of fiction—to be realized.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Whit Stillman explores this theme in his first film, *Metropolitan* (1990). The wealthy, hyper-literate, hyper-self-conscious characters are obsessed with the decline of their upper-class social circle (which they refer to as HUB, “haute urban bourgeoisie”). Interestingly, the rising social class is embodied in a character, so gauche he does not own a proper overcoat, named *Tom*. Stillman reverses the nomenclature (Howells’s aristocratic Tom becomes the socially-inferior Tom) and makes his Tom slightly better educated than his old-money peers. In the 1990s, compared with the 1880s, it would have been much more likely for someone to be better educated than his social superiors, so Stillman’s “realism” is not in question on this point.

<sup>2</sup>*A Traveller from Altruria* (1894), *Letters of an Altrurian Traveller* (1904), and *Through the Eye of the Needle* (1907).

<sup>3</sup>Even this term is questionable, as suggested earlier with regard to Pynchon. Early realist novels no longer seem as realistic as they once did.

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## The Perception of Relations: An Answer to Andrew Madigan and Michael Anesko\*

NEIL BROWNE

First of all, let me say that I am flattered that Professor Madigan spent so much time on my essay on William Dean Howells's *The Rise of Silas Lapham*. Madigan makes some trenchant comments, and his close reading of my text encourages me to be more aware of some of the slippage in my terminology. However, Madigan's determination to keep intellectual "categories" rigidly intact runs counter to the Deweyan underpinnings that I am trying to assert in my elaboration of aesthetic experience and its possible role in a democracy. For one, Madigan takes issue with the fact that

[w]hat Howells did not seem to realize, however, and what Browne does not take into account, is that Howells may have despised market capitalism but he was intimately connected to it. He prospered because of it, in fact, which calls into question not only his commitment to these ideals but also makes the "anti-capitalist" label highly dubious. (267)

For all my looking, I do not see in my article a place where I call Howells "anti-capitalist," so I am not sure why Madigan includes the quotation marks around the term here and elsewhere in his response. In large part, the conclusion I work toward is stated pretty clearly, I

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\*Reference: Neil Browne, "Pivots, Reversals, and Things in the Aesthetic Economy of Howells's *The Rise of Silas Lapham*," *Connotations* 15.1-3 (2005/2006): 1-16; Michael Anesko, "'Mundane Things': Response to Neil Browne," *Connotations* 19.1-3 (2009/2010): 259-62; Andrew Madigan, "New Money, Slightly Older Money & 'Democratic' Writing: A Response to Neil Browne," *Connotations* 19.1-3 (2009/2010): 263-70.

For the original article as well as all contributions to this debate, please check the *Connotations* website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debbrowne01513.htm>>.

think: "Like the aesthetic economy of Howellsian realism, Silas thrives closer to ground, in a place that enables him *not* to discard entirely the ethos of the market, but to temper it with values that call for more restraint" (13; emphasis added). This is hardly anti-capitalism, and Madigan's choice of phrasing such as "despised market capitalism" (267) seems to misinterpret the argument I am making. Further, because Howells profited by capitalism does not mean that a work of fiction written by him does not seek to curtail the excesses of the market or to urge restraint.

I would like to address the notion that there is a slippage in terms between "realistic" and "democratic." Madigan complains that "Howells strove to write with realistic dialogue, characters and incidents, and he foregrounds his work with concrete, ordinary, representatively-selected objects. By doing so, Howells makes his narrative appear more realistic and ordinary, but of course this has nothing to do with making it 'democratic'" (269). Madigan points to evidence that Howells's contemporary audience was the educated, affluent classes, hence undemocratic which assertion itself seems to beg the question. I suppose rich, educated people can be democratic. However that may be, the argument I am attempting to make in this article is geared toward audience in a diachronic sense. It is a theoretical argument about the potential present aesthetic experience of reading Howells. I state perfectly clearly that Howells overstates his case for democracy: "Although Howells can be accused of sloganeering, what seems to me of the utmost importance is his insistence on the connection between literature and life" (5). I am less concerned with what is in the literature than I am in the idea of connection itself. Again, I do say that Howells linked realism and democracy. And I add that "though I would not choose to defend realism as the only home for a more democratically interested literature, I certainly believe that the use of ordinary material objects to enhance the perception of relations is essential to both aesthetic experience [...] and democratic art" (5). The argument here rests not on the ordinary things themselves but on "the perception of relations" (5). The perception of relations is critical

for democracy or a democratically interested literature, in fact, for the very existence of any kind of community at all. The argument is that ordinary material things provide a tethering point or a pivot point for that perception in *The Rise of Silas Lapham*. That the working classes of Howells's time would rather have read fantasy than realism as Madigan claims is certainly interesting but does not really get to the point of the article, which is that everyday things can provide a recognizable site on which to anchor and initiate a perception of relations that is key to putting aesthetic experience in gear. Again, I do not claim that realism is the only form that can do this but that realism can do it well. The link here is that the perception of relations seems to me central also to a democratic community. The perception of relations then is the common link between aesthetic experience and a democratic community. Dewey's aesthetics can help us understand and Howells's realism can elicit this perception of relations.

Madigan raises the issue of race on his third page, and then lets that drop. I am not sure what to say in response to that in the purview of my article, which does not raise the issue of race, which is perhaps a fault on my part. Madigan also spends a page talking about Thomas Pynchon, which, though fascinating and informative, does not seem to have much to do with either my article or his response to it, unless it is to highlight again the discrepancy between Howells's "ideals and books," which, as I mentioned earlier, seems of little import. I would argue that there is always and already a discrepancy between ideals and acts. That discrepancy is apparent in the meaning of ideal itself. But that does not necessarily discount the importance of the ideal. Madigan shows an astute awareness of the social strata of nineteenth century Boston, and I defer to him on that point. The nuances he points out between new and old Boston money thicken the meanings of the novel, and I appreciate both his expertise on the matter and his insistence that I more assiduously historicize the assumptions contained in the novel.

Certainly Madigan is correct also in asserting that the real democratization of literature came on the heels of the great economic gains



following World War II. I wish to influence an audience in the first decades of the century following, in which that same capitalism—intemperate and loosened of its restraints—is this very moment undermining the very democratic institutions Madigan celebrates, such as “the creation of more public libraries, and the emergence of better-equipped public schools” (269). John Dewey writes that “Literature conveys the meaning of the past that is significant in present experience and is prophetic in the larger movement of the future” (348). I may be a bit out of style, idealistic even, to think, even if I sometimes fail to live up to my ideals, that through a perception of relations to the characters and things in a novel there arises aesthetic experience that is useful for the present and for a more democratic future. My argument centers on the idea that material things in *The Rise of Silas Lapham* often provide a site that facilitates such a connection. That we perceive our relations to others at this point in history seems to me imperative, and the common experiences we share with everyday things can move us along this road. It is not the inclusion of things but how the things enable an audience to perceive its relation to the work of art that seems central to me. It is that moment of perception—that moment in which, according to Dewey, we catch a glimpse of the possible in the actual—that sometimes seems to contain the inception of democratic value. It is not realism, not everyday things, not intellectual categories, not Howells, not Dewey—it is that moment.

Michael Anesko has also written a generous and productive response to my article. While he applauds my analysis of the mundane things in *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, he is skeptical of the parallels I draw “between the realms of novelistic and readerly experience” (261). Once again, I attempted to draw a *relation* between novelistic and readerly experience, not necessarily a parallel, and I should have pointed this out more clearly. However, Anesko has a solid point—the relation of contemporary readers to the material things of nineteenth century New England are not self-evident. This is certainly a place for me to heed Madigan’s call to more fully historicize my argument. Anesko goes on to claim that the contemporary reader may

well better connect to abstract dimensions in the novel—real estate bubbles for example. I could not agree more, and I am again tempted to think in Deweyan terms in which the ideal is defined as understanding the actual in terms of the possible—a movement from the concrete to its possibilities and their consequences. I would suggest that the tie to material things enhances the reader's movement to the abstract.

I especially thank Anesko for his suggestion to better explore the issue of waste in *The Rise of Silas Lapham*. This seems to me a most productive route. He rightly points out that the pine shaving is waste. Which makes me think about all those other pine shavings Silas swept up and used to kindle the fire that burned down his dream house. His ideal is actually consumed and destroyed by the detritus generated through the realization of the ideal. This seems a very salient point for future thinking about American culture. Certainly we can perceive the relation between the past and the present in this idea.

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## Self, World and the Art of Faith-Healing in the Age of Trauma: A Response to Susan Ang's Reading of *English Music*\*<sup>1</sup>

SUSANA ONEGA

Susan Ang's thought-provoking reading of Peter Ackroyd's *English Music* (1992) is based on a double assumption: firstly, that it is a novel whose "enquiry into the nature and interpretation of texts, their relationships with author, reader, and other texts, and whose contemplations upon the state of art and culture draw on the Grail legend and Frazerian vegetation myths which underpin *The Waste Land*" (Ang 215); and secondly, that it simultaneously displays a conscious and intentional dynamics of process and change, so that "within such a work, all structures, all frames, must exist in a state of perpetual jeopardy, always confronting their own provisionality, their own death" (215). From this, Ang goes on to argue that the self-conscious dynamism of the work, its refusal of stasis is "realised in negotiation with the reader, who is himself continuously being made and remade in his interaction with the text, which therefore must also be always in the process of becoming, and being differently understood" (216). Her approach to the novel, then, combines metafiction and myth, the two elements that, as I argued elsewhere, constitute the most salient features in the fictional work of both Peter Ackroyd (Onega, *Metafiction and Myth; Peter Ackroyd*), and of other contemporary British writers with a visionary stance (Onega, "The Mythical Impulse"; "The Vision-

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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; Jean-Michel Ganteau, "*English Music* as Romance of Englishness: An Response to Susan Ang," *Connotations* 18.1-3 (2008/2009): 276-82.

For the original article as well as all contributions to this debate, please check the *Connotations* website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debang01513.htm>>.

ary Element"). In the pages that follow I will try to respond to Ang's argumentation by elaborating on the main points she makes and by offering my own alternative reading of them.

The most innovative aspect of Ang's approach to the novel is the contention that *English Music* is a novel about the nature and interpretation of texts and culture, and that the protagonist, Tim Harcombe, is an archetypal quester in search of the Grail/Book capable of restoring fertility to the waste land of English culture. This outlook on the novel reinforces the association of *English Music* not only with *The Waste Land* but with modernist literature in general since the representation of the book as a world is a recurrent modernist *topos* expressing the writers' loss of faith in transcendence. Thus, in *The World and the Book*, Gabriel Josipovici, after analysing the mythical impulse suffusing the work of many a modernist writer, from Joyce, Proust and Kafka to Robbe-Grillet, famously concluded that, where the medieval artist reproduced 'the world in his book,' the modernist writer, incapable of conceiving the possibility of transcendence, turned the proposition upside down and succeeded in symbolically breaking up the boundaries of his solipsistic prison-house, by turning 'his book into the world':

[T]he book becomes an object among many in the room. Open, and read, it draws the reader into tracing the contours of his own labyrinth and allows him to experience himself not as an object in the world but as the limits of his world. And, mysteriously, to recognise this is to be freed of these limits and to experience a joy as great as that which floods through us when, looking at long last, with Dante, into the eyes of God, we sense the entire universe bound up into one volume and understand what it is to be a man. (Josipovici 309)<sup>2</sup>

With Josipovici's words in mind it can be stated that Susan Ang's description of Tim's quest for the "fertile text" envisions him, like the protagonists of many a modernist *Künstlerroman*, as a purblind artist in the making, attempting to write himself and his world into existence, while *English Music* becomes a World/Book, like Borges' "Li-

brary of Babel" or his "Labyrinth of Paper and Ink," containing nothing less than the sum total of English culture at large.<sup>3</sup>

At the same time, Ang's contention that Tim's quest is a search for the fertile text of English literature and culture readily brings to mind John Barth's seminal essays, "The Literature of Exhaustion" (1967) and "The Literature of Replenishment: Postmodernist Fiction" (1980). As is well known, Barth, in the first essay, described western literature in the 1950s and 1960s as being in a state of "exhaustion" after the extraordinary creativity of the modernist period, and he signalled Samuel Beckett and Jorge Luis Borges as the only writers who had seriously tried to transcend modernism, going beyond the writing practices of Joyce and Kafka. Thus, while Beckett created a paradoxical and minimalist art out of the sheer confrontation with the impossibility of originality and transcendence, Borges escaped solipsistic closure by discarding authorial originality not only as an impossibility but also an absurdity. Drawing on Montaigne, he defined artistic creation as a collective endeavour, the expression of an eternal Supra-individual Spiritual Voice composed of the voices of all the dead poets coexisting forever in an eternal Now (Worton and Still 13). Further, in consonance with the modernist reversal of the mimetic definition of art as a mirror copy of the real world, Borges defined the world as an infinite book or library containing all the contributions of every writer in the tradition. Thus, in his *Ficciones*, the Argentinian writer constantly identifies the world with books and also with mirrors, a *topos* that Susan Ang finds in *English Music* and interprets as an "image [that] conjures up notions of reversal, texts which cannot be read or understood in the usual way but which can be read with the aid of mirrors (other texts?) or backwards" (227). As with other aspects of *English Music*, her analysis of the mirror *topos* is mainly focused on the question of the readers' difficulties of interpretation. However, the symbolism of mirrors in *English Music*, as in Borges' *Ficciones* and in mythical art in general, is much more complex than this. Books and mirrors, often employed as synonyms, are common medieval emblems of the world, and they are also often used as symbols of the

mimetic function of art.<sup>4</sup> Thus, William Caxton, in order to suggest the world-wide range of his popular 1481 encyclopaedia, called it *The Mirror of the World*. As such, mirrors can act as *umbilici mundi* connecting the lower and the upper worlds or, in Platonic terms, the world of Shadows and the Real world. They can also be magical doors connecting the real and the unreal, the world of common day and the world of dreams, as happens in Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There*. This symbolism is made explicit in the episode analysed by Ang, which belongs in Tim's first dream, when the Red Queen from *Through the Looking-Glass* tells him not to worry about his difficulty in reading a copy of *The Pilgrim's Progress* (Ackroyd, *English Music* 28-29), and that: "Of course you can't read it. It's a looking-glass book. You're only meant to hold it and *look* at it as if you've read it. That is the meaning of criticism" (31, original emphasis). Although there is no denying that the Queen's words carry an overt ironic load aimed at critics, her description of *The Pilgrim's Progress* as a "looking-glass book" also begs for a symbolic interpretation, as John Bunyan's book constitutes the archetypal hero's quest story where Tim is hoping to find his name so as to confirm his uncanny impression that he has somehow entered the pages of the book his father had been reading out to him at bedtime. The "looking-glass book" in Tim's hand, then, reproduces *en abyme* the book he has entered in his dream, which is in turn a *mise en abyme* of the book his father was reading to him, which is a *mise en abyme* of *English Music*, the book Tim inhabits while he is awake.

From this perspective, the Red Queen's description of the volume in Tim's hand as a looking-glass text may be read as an allusion to the symbolism of mirrors as devices that can endlessly reduplicate the (textual) world, thus suggesting the plurality and openness and infinitude of *English Music*, its aspiration to the condition of *pure écriture* (Barthes, *Le degré zéro de l'écriture*). This reading is further enhanced by the fact that, in his dreams, Tim always enters various canonical books at once, as happens for instance in the first dream, where he encounters characters and lives episodes of *The Pilgrim's Progress* and of

Lewis Carroll's *Alice*-books. This is the sort of infinite reduplication *en abyme* that governs the construction of Borges's tale, "The Library of Babel," where the universe is conceived of as a "total" (89) library, with numberless shelves arranged in hexagonal galleries and bottomless wells around spiralling stairs without beginning or end, endlessly reduplicated by mirrors. As the narrator explains, this infinite and all-encompassing textual world is made up of "every possible combination of the twenty-odd orthographic symbols," that is, "everything that is utterable."<sup>5</sup> But this sort of infinitely specular Text/World can also have a more chaotic and labyrinthine structure, as happens, for example, in another of Borges's *Ficciones*, "El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan." The protagonist, Ts'ui Pen, is described as a man who gave up everything in order to concentrate on the composition of a book and of a labyrinth. When, after thirteen years of total dedication to this double task, Ts'ui Pen is murdered, the only thing that is found in his rooms is a bulky manuscript containing a vague heap of contradictory drafts that simultaneously offer the reader not one alternative line of development among many, but rather, all kinds of alternatives, every possible combination and ending. The puzzled narrator eventually finds the labyrinth nobody had been able to spot when he realises that book and labyrinth are not two different objects, but one (Borges, "El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan" 105), that is, that the book is "a labyrinth of labyrinths."<sup>6</sup> The reader of Ts'ui Pen's infinitely circular book, where all conceivable endings are possible, is thus given the possibility of endlessly reading, and so living, the same events in infinitely various ways. This tale is a good example of the paradox lying at the heart of all these looking-glass textual worlds, as it combines the circularity and closure of mythical time with the infinite openness of Umberto Eco's *opera aperta* (Eco, *The Open Work*).<sup>7</sup> Similarly, considered from a mythical perspective, the pattern cast by *The Pilgrim's Progress* and the other canonical books Tim enters in his dreams reveals its paradoxical condition as an infinitely open and changeable *imago mundi* of Tim's own circular and close life-quest along the pages of *English Music*.

A well-known feature of (magical) mirrors and looking-glass texts in fairy tales and gothic fiction is their proleptic and performative power. Borges offers a telling example of this power in another of his *Ficciones*, "The Mirror of Ink" ("El espejo de tinta" 341-43), where a magician brings about the tyrant's death by forcing him to 'write' and 'read' the ceremony of his own future death in the mirror-like pool of ink poured in the hollow of his hand. The symbolism of this tale, which expresses the power of writing to create (rather than copy) reality, is echoed in Tim's first dream, when Pliable, one of the characters in *The Pilgrim's Progress*, tells Tim not to trust what he takes for a fact, "unless it was written down" (*English Music* 28).

The rejection of the mimetic function of the work of art as a copy of the real world and its elevation to the realm of the sublime was an attempt to compensate for the loss of faith in transcendence associated with late nineteenth and early twentieth-century movements such as aestheticism, imagism, French symbolism, and modernism. In this respect, as Ackroyd pointedly remarks in his biography of T. S. Eliot, in his early poetry Eliot was very much influenced by F. H. Bradley, the British philosopher on whose work he wrote his doctoral thesis: "Since Eliot came to him [Bradley] by way of Bergson, the last great European philosopher by whom he had been affected, he felt an immediate affinity with Bradley's own scepticism about the uses of conceptual intelligence in either recognizing or defining 'reality'" (*T. S. Eliot* 49). As Ackroyd further explains:

For Bradley 'Reality is One,' a seamless and coherent whole which is 'non-relational'—that is, it cannot be divided into separate intellectual categories. And in his subversion of such orthodox categories as 'space' and 'time,' which reflect only a partial comprehension of reality, Bradley is pushed back towards a larger description which can only be expressed as the Absolute. [...] The Absolute holds together Thought and Reality, Will and Feeling, in a sublime whole. (49)

Bradley situated the Real on a sublime, transcendental plane, but he was sceptical about the possibility of human beings ever contemplating this unitary and absolute reality, as he believed that, in the world



of appearances where we live, any knowledge of the Absolute can only be reached through the experience of “conditional,” “finite truths” (49). Eliot’s response to the problem of solipsistic closure stems from Bradley’s position as, instead of taking the impossibility of being original for granted, like Beckett, or advocating collective authorship, like Borges, he tried to overcome Bradley’s scepticism by reformulating the role of the individual artist within the tradition. In consonance with this, he argued for “a steady enlargement of our knowledge and a continual search for system, unity and coherence” (50). As Ackroyd reflects,

[t]o combine scepticism with idealism, to recognize the limitations of ordinary knowledge and experience but yet to see that when they are organized into a coherent whole they might vouchsafe glimpses of absolute truth—there is balm here for one trapped in the world and yet seeking some other, invaded by sensations and yet wishing to understand and to order them. (50)

One key to Eliot’s understanding of art lies, then, in his (god-like) aspiration to grant transcendental significance to the individual work of art by means of a titanic effort of absorption and unification of knowledge. Thus, as Ackroyd notes,

the act of creation was for him the act of synthesis, both in his poetry and his prose. He brought to bear upon such ideas a unique power of organization so that they seemed to form a coherent and persuasive pattern. Simplicity, order, intensity, concentration are the principles he applied to that end, and from them emerged something very like (but not quite) a poetic creed. (106-07)

Susan Ang mentions “Tradition and the Individual Talent”—together with *The Waste Land* and Joyce’s *Ulysses*<sup>8</sup>—as “another work which has shaped *English Music*” (Ang 223), and she adds that Eliot’s famous contention that “the existing monuments of literature form an ideal order among themselves, that they are not simply collections of the writings of individuals,” can help readers understand both the “mutually defining” relationship of the “works within *English Music*” and “Ackroyd’s concept of ‘English music’” itself (224). But she does not

pursue the issue any further, on the reflexion that “[i]t is impossible to consider all this without asking what the implications are with regard to how *English Music* sees and positions itself in relation to the body of works informing it” (224).

In the next section, the critic moves from the presentation of *English Music* as an utterly open, playfully self-conscious and dynamic World/Book to what she describes as the construction of the “Fertile Text” and the difficulties readers have to respond adequately to the various questions that such a labile text sets. Drawing a parallel between protagonist and reader, she expands the application of the motif of the hero’s quest to the (male) reader, who is thus “thrust into the role of quester with *English Music* as the Chapel Perilous. (And it is very perilous. It is full of traps-for-heffalumps)” (226). From this unexpected position, the reader-as-quester would need “a whole philosophy of reading” to answer the “apparently transparent question: ‘What is this book before me?’” (226). However, the philosophy of reading Ang subsequently broaches is limited to the description of the attitude of the reader who “enquires into, rather than assumes or imposes, meaning” as “both courteous and modest as well as a renunciation of authority over textual meaning.” Her conclusion is that readers must be fully aware that “all books are also individual and different. Therefore, perhaps, they need to be understood on their own terms, rather than subjected to identical regimes of reading and interpretation, put through the spaghetti machine of a particular theory” (226).

Though commonsensical, these remarks on the task of the ideal reader of *English Music* have a clearly ironic, as well as an incongruous ring, since her own reading of the novel in fact forces it through “the spaghetti machine” of the Grail legend and Frazerian vegetation myths while simultaneously recognising its essential openness and dynamism. After comparing the reader to a quester confronting a text which may have “doors without locks, which cannot be forced and whose intransigence must be respected, although the text may then

choose to open itself" (235), the critic herself admits the irony of her position:

Not only might this raise an ironic eyebrow at over-elaborate critical methodology painstakingly directed at already-open texts (and yes, I am always and infinitely aware of all the potential for irony which lies waiting to ambush the writing of this essay), but it also serves to raise the issue of illicit or forced entry, returning to the fore the issue of interpretation as a form of possible coercion (even rape) which the reader must at least be made aware of, and also the question of whether all critical approaches to, or means of entry into, a text (or postmodernist toolshed) are equally justified, or licensed. (235)

It would be impossible to disagree with this cautionary warning. Unfortunately, however, instead of moving on to the formulation of the main tenets of her own "licit" or ethical philosophy of reading, Susan Ang once again avoids responding to the challenge she has just set herself: "This is a question which I cannot claim to answer with any great degree of confidence" (235), opting instead for the endorsement of Peter Ackroyd's broad division, in *Notes for a New Culture* (1976), between, on the one hand, the kind of "humanist" criticism associated with F. R. Leavis and Raymond Williams (235) and, on the other, the "[c]riticism which honours resistance within the text—as [John] Peck's does, and as [Jeremy] Gibson's and [Julian] Wolfreys's does" (232). After mentioning some of the pros and the cons of approaching the novel from either of these divergent perspectives, she concludes that "[p]erhaps the question of the viability of various critical approaches in respect of *English Music*, in the end, needs to be referred to in relation to a criterion of usefulness, or 'fertility' (that is, its potential for generating creative reading) rather than authorial mandate" (238).

Ang's tentative advocacy of "creative reading" evinces a confusion between the tasks of writer and critic that is fully in keeping with her own definition of her essay as a "Fantasia upon Reading *English Music*" and shows the limitations of her interpretation of Ackroyd's distinction between the "modernist" and the "humanist" cultural outlooks, which Ackroyd characterises in terms of their respective

attitudes to self, world, and language. As I pointed out elsewhere (*Metafiction and Myth*),

[h]is main contention is that while for the humanists language is transparent[—]a mere tool for the expression of human values and human nature, that is, an aesthetic instrument for the communication of the experience of the moral self[—]for the modernists language is an autonomous entity, a self-begetting universe of discourse without referent or content. According to Ackroyd, aesthetic humanism reaches its peak in the 1930s and 1940s in the work of New Critics such as F. R. Leavis, John Crowe Ransom, and Cleanth Brooks, who define literature in aesthetic and moral terms as the linguistic expression of man, and criticism simply as the study of style. (7-8)

This outlook informs the literature written by Georgian and Edwardian writers like John Galsworthy, Leslie Stephen, and G. E. Moore, who postulate the morality and utilitarian nature of art. This tradition is continued in the 1950s by Movement writers such as Philip Larkin, Kingsley Amis, and John Wain.

The most important arguments against this theoretical position are raised by modernist writers like James Joyce and Alain Robbe-Grillet, and by (post)structuralist critics like Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida and their followers. For such writers and thinkers, aesthetic humanism is based on a false notion of the human individual (or subject) as a constant or identifiable essence or self. In fact, they contend, the subject is better described as a process, an interaction of material, historical, social, and psychological factors, each of which is in its turn determined by and forms part of numerous other processes. Likewise, where for the humanists language has a utilitarian function, for the modernists it becomes a self-sufficient and autonomous sign-system without meaning or referent. Thus, taking writing (as opposed to speech) as the original linguistic form, Barthes substitutes the notion of text for that of literary genres and defines criticism as the metalanguage of literature, and literature itself as the science of language (Ackroyd, *Notes for a New Culture* 112).

These antithetical positions gave rise, in the 1980s, to a heated debate in the related fields of literary criticism and moral philosophy between, on the one hand, adherents to the traditional humanist

critical approach, who defended the mimetic function of art and, on the other, post-structuralist critics who insisted on the textual dimension of literary works and tried to respond to the question Ang asks herself about the conceptual bases for a licit or ethical reading of texts.<sup>9</sup> J. Hillis Miller specifically addressed this issue in *The Ethics of Reading* (1987), where he contended that the ethical moment of reading is not achieved by simply responding to the moralising or educational contents of a text, that it necessarily requires a response to the *language* of the text. Echoing both Jacques Derrida's and Roland Barthes's concepts of "writerly text" and "scriptor" the then member of the Yale School of deconstruction contended that we must read carefully, patiently, scrupulously, always bearing in mind the fact that the text we are reading can say something different from what we readers wish or expect the text to say and also something different from what we have grasped. Thus, Miller defined the act of reading as a categorical imperative, or rather as the first ethical imperative, since for Miller, ethics is exclusively an ethics of reading, and of a deconstructivist reading at that. Thus,

Miller's insistence on the importance of being attentive and open to the perception of the unexpected and hidden meanings in the text confers on the act of reading a significant double function. It is productive, in the sense that the text, defined by Miller as essentially "unreadable" and abiding by its own internal laws, is always in danger of being betrayed (i.e., "misread") by the reader; and it is performative, in the sense that, by allowing the hidden meanings to surface, the act of reading may effectually contribute to the transformation of the social, political and cultural structures. (Onega, "The Ethics of Fiction" 62)<sup>10</sup>

Once the reader's attention is focused on the language of *English Music*, rather than on its moralising or didactic contents, it is easy to see that its fluidity and dynamism stem from its rhetorical and formal excessiveness and that this excessiveness has a clear ethical message. As Jean-Michel Ganteau points out in his path-breaking essay, "Post-Baroque Sublime? The Case of Peter Ackroyd," the novel's display of hyperbole, excessive troping, hypertextual citation and metaleptic leaps, together with the constant blurring of generic conventions and

ontological boundaries are all in keeping with the (post)baroque aesthetics characteristic of what he considers to be the most productive and challenging contemporary literary mode, the (postmodern) romance. As Ganteau forcefully argues in a later essay, the very excessiveness of this mode and its constant enhancement of emotion and affect efficiently convey a refutation of “any form of globalizing, teleologically determined discourse so as to make the other break through the heart of the same” (Ganteau, “Rise from the Ground” 193).<sup>11</sup> In other words, the openness, dynamism and rhetorical excessiveness of a work like *English Music* is not a gratuitous or playful flourish aimed at trapping critical heffalumps, but rather the expression of an ethical position which, in agreement with Emmanuel Levinas’ ethics of alterity and affects, is based on the refusal of any sort of totalising claims (193). Once the ethical component in the formal and rhetorical embodiment of the novel is taken into consideration, it becomes clear that Tim’s visionary dreams have a structural as well as an ethical function, since they break the directionality of Tim’s quest by providing “looking-glass” texts which, like Borges’s mirrors and labyrinths of paper and ink, endlessly reduplicate and disperse meaning in all directions.

Further, analysing the baroque aesthetics of *English Music* from the perspective of the birth and development of the mode, it may be stated that its excessiveness is the necessary expression of a violent effort at bridging the split between the two worlds brought about by the disappearance of God. As J. Hillis Miller has explained, once rationalism put an end to the possibility of transcendence, literature, like the ritual of the Eucharist after the Protestant denial of the transubstantiation, moved from “the old symbolism of analogical participation” to the “modern poetic symbolism of reference at a distance”, so that, from then on, “symbols designate an absence, not a presence. They point to something which remains somewhere else, unpossessed and unattainable” (Miller, *The Disappearance of God* 6). In other words, once God becomes “a *Deus absconditus*, hidden somewhere behind the silence of infinite spaces, [...] our literary symbols can only make the

most distant allusions to him, or to the natural world which used to be his abiding place and home" (6). It is at this point that baroque art spreads in France, Italy and Spain, as "the expression of the moment of this separation" (7):

In such poetry natural objects twist, curve, and distort themselves as if to express a violent effort to reach something which remains beyond them. [...] *Baroque poetry represents a violent effort by the human imagination to keep open the avenues of communication between man and God.* It tries to express, in a language which is visibly disintegrating and becoming empty, a divine reality which is in the very act of disappearing from the world. In baroque poetry we can witness the crucial moment of the change from a poetry of presence to a poetry of allusion and absence. (7; my emphasis)

This description of the aim of baroque poetry brings to the fore the importance of the human imagination to achieve the impossible task of reconnecting the two worlds after divine reality has evaporated and language can only record its absence. As the quotation suggests, the only possibility of success resides in the visionary power of the artist, who now becomes a shaman, or mediator between the two worlds, someone with the capacity of shaping and giving overall significance (a complete idea) to the anarchy and futility of particular phenomena by the use of myth. The task of the modern artist is, then, to heal the split between spirit and matter through the sacrificial rituals of the imagination.

This was the real task of Clement Harcombe, the "MEDIUM AND HEALER" who worked at the Chemical Theatre (*English Music 2*), conjuring up the spirits of the dead and faith-healing a whole gallery of bodily and spiritually crippled individuals, until he lost faith in his healing capacity, or, to put it in William Blake's terms, until his leap of faith in the power of his creative imagination plunged him into the abysmal spiritual blindness of "Single vision & Newton's sleep."<sup>12</sup> In this respect, the fact that the only education he gave Tim was the massive reading of books, just before bedtime, so that the child could enter the stories in his dreams, accurately describes the nature of Tim's training, since it is only during these visionary dreams, induced by the reading of canonical literary texts, that he could have access to

the power and knowledge his father used to absorb from “the spirits of the past or the spirits of the dead” (11), who reside in the “spirit world”:

“Of course there is a world beyond this one. Some people call it the spirit world, but the name is not very important ...” [...]. “It’s here. It’s all around us. It’s part of us.” He stopped for a moment, and I [Tim] heard a murmur of voices; but I did not want to come too close. Not yet. (337)

At the same time, in keeping with the desired union of soul and world that would restore health to the waste land, the invisible presence of this all-encompassing spirit world is registered by Clement as the accumulation in old buildings of “the spirit of place”:

“Look at it another way. You all know how the atmosphere of an old house is quite different from that of a newly built one. [...] And what is that, but the spirit of place? [...] That is what I mean when I tell you that the spirits are among us, and are a part of us.” (337)

This description clearly reveals Clement Harcombe as a visionary artist/shaman capable of accessing the archetypal forms of the imagination that shape life and art through his spiritual connection with the ancestral dead.<sup>13</sup> Needless to say, his imaginative lapse of faith, which takes place in the solipsistic and thoroughly traumatised London of the 1920s and 1930s, has important consequences, as it brings about the rupture of the precarious connection between the spiritual and the material worlds he had so far struggled to maintain through the sheer power of his creative imagination.

In her reading of the novel, Susan Ang describes the action of *English Music* as “[o]pening in 1992, the year of its own publication” and being “swiftly returned to the childhood of its narrator Timothy Harcombe ‘seventy years before’” (Ang 215). The year 1992 signals, then, the present of Tim-as-writer/narrator, when, already an old man, he sets about recounting his memories of childhood and youth. But the memoirs themselves stop earlier, as they run from the 1920s, that is, from the aftermath of the First World War, to the death of his father and maternal grandparents, which take place within a very short time



span, just a few months before the outbreak of the Second World War, as Tim states in the words that close his retrospective narration:

My grandparents had died in the autumn of 1938, and in the following year all prospects of peace and safety disappeared. I was called up, and did not come back to Upper Harford for another seven years. (399)

The story Tim tells, then, stretches between the two World Wars, with the aftermath of the First marking the beginning of his visionary father's physical and spiritual decay, and his death heralding the outbreak of the Second. The fact that the Second World War is barely mentioned should not prevent readers from seeing its symbolic significance: Tim places it strategically at the end of his memoirs, and he uses it to mark the death of his father and grandparents, thus signalling the end of the world of light they represent. Further, the narrative ellipsis that links the end of these memoirs (1939) with Tim-as-narrator's present (1992) is in keeping with the unutterability of the traumatic experience of war and the difficulty of putting this experience into words. Tim's traumatised condition can be gauged by the fact that, although he was in the army for seven years, he only mentions his participation in the war in a passing remark in the paragraph quoted above. Further still, the framing of the memoirs by the two World Wars is significant in that they bring to the fore yet another related source of anguish that characterises the modern period: the transition from religious belief to historicism. As J. Hillis Miller explains, while the ancient world believed in the possibility of knowing the difference between good and evil, right and wrong, the historical sense that arises in the modern era involves the impossibility of ever discovering the right and true culture, the right and true philosophy or religion. Thus,

Historicism, which begins as an interest in the past, ends by transforming man's sense of the present. As time wears on towards the twentieth century, and especially after the destructive cataclysm of the First World War, this sense of the artificiality of our culture is changed into an even more disquieting certainty that not just the outer form of our civilization, but civilization

itself, is doomed to go the way of all the cultures of the past. [...] Like Babylon, Nineveh, and Elam, our civilization will become mere heaps of broken artifacts, fragments whose very use, it may be, will have been forgotten. (Miller, *The Disappearance of God* 11)

The feeling of anguish and sense of cultural catastrophe that erupted after the First World War continued in a crescendo that reached its climax in the unprecedented horrors of the Second. As is well known, in *Prisms* (originally published 1949), Theodor W. Adorno argued that “[t]o write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric” (34), on the contention that the arrogance of reason had led Nazism to barbarism. As Roger Luckhurst points out, this declaration was subsequently modulated in *Negative Dialectics* (originally published 1966), where Adorno admits that silence is no option either and that the denial of culture is equally barbaric. However, the Jewish philosopher continued to consider all western culture as “contaminated by and complicit with Auschwitz,” so that “Adorno sets art and cultural criticism the severe, and paradoxical, imperative of finding ways of representing the unrepresentable” (Luckhurst 5).

With Miller’s and Adorno’s ideas in mind, the baroque excessiveness, fluidity and unreadability of *English Music* becomes a symptom of the difficulty in representing the events narrated, while the role of Tim as quester for the Grail/Book that would restore fertility to the waste land acquires a further dimension well beyond that of renewing English literature and culture after a period of exhaustion, for what is really at stake is the cleansing and regeneration of western culture after its apocalyptic demise. From this perspective, the fact that Clement’s doubts about his faith-healing capacities begin in the aftermath of the First World War and take him to his death just before the outbreak of the Second has great symbolic significance since, according to the Grail legend, the health of king and land depend on each other.

After the First World War, Clement falls prey to growing feelings of anguish, despair and nihilism, expressed in drunkenness, aimlessness, mutism, aloofness and his transformation from faith-healer into card player and fortune teller (like Madame Sosostriis in *The Waste Land*),

while at the same time the Chemical Theatre and the area of London where he lives with Tim progressively deteriorate, so that Tim is more and more worried about getting lost or abandoned in the dark and labyrinthine streets of London.<sup>14</sup> Though they live in a very poor and bare place, Tim always feels safe in his father's house, with its sunflowers in the garden pointing to the light above. As Clement explains to his son: "they're not wild, Timmy. [...] They're trained to follow the sun. Everything follows the sun in our house" (*English Music* 94). As in *The House of Doctor Dee* (178-79), the rays of sunlight captured by the sunflowers point to the house as an *umbilicus mundi* connecting the two worlds and keeping in check the universal darkness encroaching upon London. It is after this remark that the sad faith-healer decides to take Tim to his maternal grandparents' farm in the country, a place full of kindness, vegetation and light. The child never pardons his father for this separation, which he misinterprets as a sign of lovelessness, where in fact it is prompted by his desire to remove him from London's increasing physical and spiritual barrenness. At this stage, Clement Harcombe is the already sick and ailing last visionary artist/shaman with the capacity to keep open the avenues of communication with the spiritual world and so with the capacity to avoid the impending transformation of the material world into a Dantean *inferno*, or, in Nicholas Dyer's terms, a *mundus tenebrosus* harbouring degenerate nature (Ackroyd, *Hawksmoor* 101). The extinction of western culture associated with the horrors of the Second World War may be said to culminate this evil process of transformation.

In the post-apocalyptic new age of global desolation and collective trauma, the only hope of regeneration and salvation lies in Tim's capacity to resume his father's shamanistic work. This possibility seems to come to a definitive end after his return from the War, seven years after his father's death, when not even Edward Campion, whose health was restored by Clement at the cost of his life, seems to care any longer about the sad mesmerist's visionary wisdom:

By the time I returned Edward had married, and soon I looked upon his children as part of my own family. I had no other now. I told them all about

my mother and father, and about the circus, but to them it seemed from so distant a time that there were occasions when I preferred to say nothing and keep my memories to myself. (399)

After he had given up the role of faith-healer, overpowered by the darkness of the age, Clement had eventually returned to his old job as clown in a travelling circus, working as a “thought-reader” and a “ventriloquist” (396), significantly, like his own father (374). Similarly, Tim, after his father’s death, also remained in the circus and “soon discovered that [he] had an ability to ‘throw’ [his] voice in any direction [he] pleased [...]. Sometimes there were many voices, and the ring [...] amazed the audience, who were as bewildered as if they had heard various spirits haunting the circus” (396).<sup>15</sup> In other words, Tim has become a “monopolylinguist” (Ackroyd, “London Luminaries”), like Dan Leno, the nineteenth-century music-hall comedian who appears in *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem* (1994), and who managed to put an end to another utterly traumatic age of spiritual barrenness through the cathartic ritual of comic laughter.<sup>16</sup>

Needless to say, Tim’s training as a ventriloquist would be priceless for what Susan Ang considers to be his allotted task of finding the Grail/Book that would restore fertility to the waste land, for if Tim is to succeed where his father had failed in the attempt to heal the traumatic split between soul and world initiated by modernity’s lapse of faith in transcendence, he must first absorb the voices and knowledge of every visionary artist/shaman preceding him and recast them in a new form, one capable, as Adorno demands, of representing the unrepresentable. In this sense, the best proof readers can have that Tim eventually overcomes his reluctance to accept his father’s sacrificial role and is ready to continue his mediating task is his own reflection, at the end of the novel, that, he has “inherited the past because [he] ha[s] acknowledged it at last” (399). This recognition is significant in that it involves his realisation that historical determinism is as imaginary as any other human creation:

Edward was wrong when he described the recurring cycles of history: they disappear as soon as you recognize them for what they are. Perhaps that is

why I have written all this down, in a final act of recognition. I do not know what is left for me now, but I feel able to rise to my feet in expectation and walk steadily forward without any burden. (399-400)

Tim's comment may be read as evidence that, by refusing to forget and sitting down to record his memories of childhood and youth, he has indeed succeeded in finding the "fertile" Grail/Book capable of regenerating the waste land of western culture. This interpretation is confirmed by his realisation, after finishing it, that he "no longer need[s] to look back" to remember (399), or "open the old books" (400), as the knowledge his father had so strenuously tried to pass onto him "also belongs with [him]" (399). Thus, he is able to console Edward's granddaughter Cecilia for the death of a bird on the reflection that "[i]t's safe now. Its soul has flown away" (400). It seems, then, that Clement Harcombe's faith-healing wisdom was not completely lost after all, that it is preserved in Tim's book (and soul) and ready for transmission to those readers willing to make the ethical effort of interpretation that J. Hillis Miller demands and *English Music* deserves.

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## NOTES

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<sup>2</sup>For an analysis of the evolution of the theories of authorship that brought about this reversal and its further development in the postmodernist period, see Onega, "Self, Text and World."

<sup>3</sup>Ackroyd plays with this idea once and again in his novels of the 1980s and 1990s. See Onega, *Metafiction and Myth, passim*.

<sup>4</sup>Thus, Hamlet, in his recommendations to the players, famously defined the purpose of play-acting as: "to hold as 'twere the mirror up to Nature to show Virtue her feature, Scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure" (Shakespeare, *Hamlet* 3.2.21-24).

<sup>5</sup>My translations of “todas las posibles combinaciones de los veintitantos símbolos ortográficos” and “todo lo que es dable expresar” (Borges, “La biblioteca de Babel” 89).

<sup>6</sup>My translations of “un laberinto de laberintos” (Borges, “El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan” 102).

<sup>7</sup>As I argued in “The Mythical Impulse,” the same ontological hesitation between the book as closed fictional world and as transcendental labyrinth takes place in British historiographic metafiction in general and in Peter Ackroyd’s novels in particular.

<sup>8</sup>Although Ang includes a reference to Joyce in the title of her essay, she only mentions his work in endnote 3, where she points out that 1922, the year of publication of *The Waste Land*, “also saw the publication of Joyce’s *Ulysses*.” This is followed by the remark that: “*English Music* also plays with the *Ulysses* connection, but to do justice to that connection would require the space of another essay entirely” (Ang 239n3).

<sup>9</sup>For a more detailed account of the main tenets of neo-humanist criticism and post-structuralist theory and the controversy surrounding the return of ethics in literary criticism and philosophy, see Onega, “The Ethics of Fiction” 57-64. See also Ganteau and Onega, Introduction.

<sup>10</sup>More recently, critics like Robert Eaglestone (“One and the Same”), Kathrin Stengel (“Ethics and Style”), James Phelan (“Rhetorical/Literary Ethics”) have offered highly productive developments of this critical approach by arguing that ethics and aesthetics are inseparable and that the ethical value of a literary work resides in its stylistic and formal features. See Michael Eskin’s introduction to the special 2004 issue of *Poetics Today*, for an understanding of the ideological basis of this position.

<sup>11</sup>See also Ganteau’s introduction to *Peter Ackroyd et la musique du passé*.

<sup>12</sup>According to Blake, visionary poet/prophets like Isaiah, Ezekiel, or the titan Los enjoyed “fourfold vision” or enlarged consciousness. Opposed to it is the “Single vision & Newton’s sleep” brought about by the advent of rational materialism (Blake, “Letter to Butts”). “In a lecture entitled ‘Blake and London Radicalism’ (1995), Ackroyd claim[ed] that it was William Blake’s visionary capacity and his allegiance to religious dissent that led him to ‘create a poetry and an art as intricate and as elaborate as anything to be found in Michaelangelo or in Dante.’ Ackroyd’s fascination with these aspects of Blake’s art may be said to lie at the heart of a deeply felt desire to create a similarly intricate and elaborate art, the expression of his own Cockney visionary sensibility” (Onega, *Metafiction and Myth* 99).

<sup>13</sup>This reading of Clement Harcombe’s shamanistic role is in keeping with Evans Lansing Smith’s contention that the most important motif in modernist literature is that of the *nekylia*, or descent to the underworld. As he explains, in the modernist adaptation of the myth, the underworld has three main functions: as “granary,” or repository of the archetypal forms of the imagination revealing “the

fundamental patterns shaping life and art" (Smith 2); as a sacred site of initiatory transformation (*temenos*); or as an *inferno*. In its function as granary, the underworld is the place where the mythic patterns of the imagination are revealed, the place capable of bringing about the transformation from the naturalistic perspective of ego to the psychic perspective of soul, that is, the place of miraculous transition from ego to *eidos*, from the individual to the archetypal (14-15). In its function as crypt of the ancestral dead, the underworld might be compared to Borges' World of Art, as it "contains those great poets of the tradition whose voices haunt the work of Eliot, Joyce and Pound" (Smith 3-4). This crypt is the place where such Ackroydian characters as Oscar Wilde (*The Last Testament*), Chatterton, Meredith and Charles Wychwood (*Chatterton*), as well as Tim's parents and grandparents, travel at the moment of their deaths in order to meet their ancestors. Thus, Tim explains that, after their deaths, he realised that "they were all together at last. My grandparents, with my mother and father, and others besides" (*English Music* 398; my emphasis). For a more nuanced analysis of Ackroyd's recurrent use of this motif, see Onega, "The Descent to the Underworld."

<sup>14</sup>Clement tries to teach Tim how to find his way in this infernal London, by playing at "get[ting] lost," when they are on their way home after the sessions at the Chemical Theatre: "By which he [Clement] meant that we would approach Hackney Square from a different direction" (13). But Tim hates this game and is "possessed by some general dread of being abandoned" (14).

<sup>15</sup>Although Tim never met his mother, since she died in giving birth to him, he learnt music by playing her old records while he was staying in her birthplace with his maternal grandparents. Like the rest of her family, she is associated with the tradition of what Ackroyd calls "London Luminaries and Cockney Visionaries" through her name and religion. Aware of this, Clement called his wife "Bright Cecilia" (*English Music* 98). As Tim explains, she was named after "the patron saint of music. A Catholic saint, of course" (197). On his conception of the English visionary sensibility at large, see also Ackroyd, "The Englishness of English Literature."

<sup>16</sup>See Onega, *Metafiction and Myth* 133-47.

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# Connotations

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