



Dædalus

Journal of the American Academy of Arts & Sciences

Winter 2014

What
Humanists
Do

Denis Donoghue

J. Hillis Miller

Francis Oakley

Rachel Bowlby

Gillian Beer

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The labyrinth designed by Daedalus for King Minos of Crete, on a silver tetradrachma from Cnossos, Crete, c. 350–300 B.C. (35 mm, Cabinet des Médailles, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris). “Such was the work, so intricate the place, / That scarce the workman all its turns cou’d trace; / And Daedalus was puzzled how to find / The secret ways of what himself design’d.” – Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, Book 8

Dædalus was founded in 1955 and established as a quarterly in 1958. The journal’s namesake was renowned in ancient Greece as an inventor, scientist, and unriddler of riddles. Its emblem, a maze seen from above, symbolizes the aspiration of its founders to “lift each of us above his cell in the labyrinth of learning in order that he may see the entire structure as if from above, where each separate part loses its comfortable separateness.”

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Politics & Eternity

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Introduction

Denis Donoghue

It is a minor embarrassment that the words *humanist* and *humanism* are regularly found on the same page of big dictionaries. I should say at once, therefore, that the contributors to this issue of *Dædalus* are humanists because they work on the humanities and teach them, often under conditions that seem unpropitious, in colleges and universities. What they are otherwise, in their personal and social lives, is none of my business. Humanism raises a different issue. The Oxford English Dictionary gives five meanings of it, in notably awkward phrasing. The predominant one refers to a tenet, an axiom, or a prejudice – depending on one’s viewpoint – in the history of philosophy:

A pragmatic system of thought introduced by F. C. S. Schiller and William James which emphasizes that man can only comprehend and investigate what is with the resources of the human mind, and discounts abstract theorizing; so, more generally, implying that technological advance must be guided by awareness of widely understood human needs.

In some contexts, humanism has taken on a more contentious character, often being opposed to scholasticism, or to religion, especially to Christianity. When T. S. Eliot was editor of *The Criterion*, he was sufficiently disturbed by humanism in this character that he solicited several essays and published them in the hope of disposing of it as a mere substitute for religion: as he said, “Humanism is either an alternative to religion, or is ancillary to it.

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Introduction ... You cannot make humanism itself into a religion.”¹ T. E. Hulme also wrote about humanism, even more severely. Happily, this is not our problem.

The O.E.D. also distinguishes five meanings of the word *humanist*. Only the second and third of these recognize, with a certain extension, the concerns of the essays collected here:

2. One devoted to or versed in the literary studies called “the humanities”: a classical scholar; esp. a Latinist, a professor or teacher of Latin. *arch.* (Sometimes by early writers opposed to “divine.”)
3. (In literary history). One of the scholars who, at the Revival of Learning in the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth centuries, devoted themselves to the study of the language, literature, and antiquities of Rome, and afterwards of Greece; hence, applied to later disciples of the same culture.

As an instance of the second, the O.E.D. gives Samuel Johnson’s “*Humanist*, a philologist; a grammarian: a term used in the schools of Scotland.” As an instance of the third, it gives Matthew Arnold’s “Milton was born a humanist, but the Puritan temper mastered him.” I cite, as a closer-to-home example of the third, a passage in *The Conciliarist Tradition* in which our contributor Francis Oakley, referring to the Council of Constance, notes that “it numbered among its participants humanists of the caliber of Pier Paolo Vergerio, Leonardo Bruni, and Poggio Bracciolini, and, by affording an occasion for learned colleagues from Italy and Germany to meet, it played, along with its successor council at Basel, a role of some significance in the diffusion of humanist ideas.”² Those ideas had mainly to do with the recourse to ancient Latin and Greek writers (especially Cicero), Roman and Canon Law, Italian jurisprudence, and history – none

of these in a disinterested spirit, but polemically in relation to civil and ecclesiastical power. It is an easy extension of the O.E.D.’s second and third meanings to say that humanists are engaged in the study not alone of Greek and Latin civilization but of any and every practice of human culture (except that some of these practices are demonstrably the province of scientists, those adepts of the experimental method, techniques of replication, verification, and other procedures). *The Heart of the Matter*, a recent study of the humanities and social sciences published by the American Academy, distinguished “the STEM disciplines” – science, technology, engineering, and mathematics – from the humanities, “including the study of languages, literature, history, film, civics, philosophy, religion, and the arts.” A few pages later the list of humanities was changed: “the study of languages, literature, history, jurisprudence, philosophy, comparative religion, ethics, and the arts.” The social sciences were deemed to include “anthropology, economics, political science and government, sociology, and psychology.”³ It would be easy to conclude from *The Heart of the Matter* that the humanities are indistinguishable from the social sciences and that they have their best chance of survival by being content with membership in that extended family.

It is not necessary to be more specific, except for two considerations. One of them has been expressed by Northrop Frye:

The preoccupation of the humanities with the past is sometimes made a reproach against them by those who forget that we face the past: it may be shadowy, but it is all that is there. Plato draws a gloomy picture of man staring at the flickering shapes made on the wall of the objective world by a fire behind us like the sun. But the analogy breaks down when the shadows are those

of the past, for the only light we can see them by is the Promethean fire within us. The substance of these shadows can only be in ourselves, and the goal of historical criticism, as our metaphors about it often indicate, is a kind of self-resurrection, the vision of a valley of dry bones that takes on the flesh and blood of our own vision.⁴

The second consideration arises from one of Jacques Derrida's lectures, turned not toward the past but toward a possible future of the humanities, attested by his vision and by that alone. The lecture, an extension of an earlier one, "Mochlos, or The Conflict of the Faculties," began straightforwardly as a demand not only for what is conventionally called academic freedom but for "an *unconditional* freedom to question and to assert, or even, going still further, the right to say publicly all that is required by research, knowledge, and thought concerning the *truth*."⁵ Yet there are always conditions: "What is Truth?" said jesting Pilate. But as Derrida's lecture went on and he mentioned subjects normally agreed to belong to the humanities – philosophy and politics, especially – he invoked those not as they are regularly taught but as they might be professed in a possible future of Derrida's bold devising. The teachers, it occurs to me to say, would not love the subjects as they already are but as they would be transformed if practiced under the deconstructive signs of "perhaps," "if," and "as if." They would be deliberately put out of joint, as in a time categorically out of joint. We are not to think that this vision is fraternal with Vaihinger's *Philosophy of the 'As If'*; on the contrary, Derrida distances himself from Vaihinger in a footnote to the lecture as printed. And just when I thought that he would approve of Austin's sociable distinction between constative and performative statements, Derrida insisted on exceeding it:

Well, it is once again in the Humanities that one would have to make arrive, make happen the thinking of this other mode of the "if," this more than difficult, impossible thing, the exceeding of the performative and of the constative/performative opposition. By thinking, *in* the Humanities, this limit of mastery and of performative conventionality, this limit of performative authority, what is one doing? One is acceding to the place where the always necessary context of the performative operation (a context that is, like every convention, an institutional context) can no longer be saturated, delimited, fully determined.⁶

This passage is not the only one in which Derrida, as I labor to construe his sentences, has appeared to pyrrhonize, but it is not necessary for me to claim anything more than that he is encompassing the apparent security of the humanities, as ordinarily practiced, in a future condition with radical doubt as their principle.

Derrida refers to the humanities, and keeps on doing so, as if they might be established at worst for the time being. In another lecture, "The Principle of Reason: The University in the Eyes of its Pupils," he implies that the humanities cannot any longer find stability in their being distinguished from the sciences. Speaking of applied science, or oriented science as he prefers to call it – science directed toward use outside the laboratory or university – he asks what is proposed "in opposition to this concept of oriented research." The answer, not surprisingly, is "basic, 'fundamental' research, disinterested research with aims that would not be pledged in advance to some utilitarian purpose." But lest we take comfort from this answer, he continues:

Once upon a time it was possible to believe that pure mathematics, theoretical physics, philosophy (and within philosophy, especially metaphysics and ontology) were

basic disciplines shielded from power, inaccessible to programming by the pressures of the State or, under cover of the State, by civil society or capital interests. The sole concern of such basic research would be knowledge, truth, the disinterested exercise of reason, under the sole authority of the principle of reason. And yet we know better than ever before what must have been true for all time, that this opposition between the basic and the end-oriented is of real but limited relevance. It is difficult to maintain this opposition with thoroughgoing conceptual as well as practical rigor, especially in the modern fields of the formal sciences, theoretical physics, astrophysics (consider the remarkable example of the science of astronomy, which is becoming useful after having been for so long the paradigm of disinterested contemplation), chemistry, molecular biology, and so forth. Within each of these fields – and they are more interrelated than ever – the so-called basic philosophical questions no longer simply take the form of abstract, sometimes epistemological questions, raised after the fact; they arise at the very heart of scientific research in the widest variety of ways.

This state of affairs is not new, Derrida concedes, “but never before has basic scientific research been so deeply committed to aims that are at the same time military aims.”

This is all too obvious in such areas as physics, biology, medicine, biotechnology, bioprogramming, data processing and telecommunications. We have only to mention telecommunications and data processing to assess the extent of the phenomenon: the “orientation” of research is limitless, everything in these areas proceeds “in view” of technical and instrumental security. At the service of war, of national and international security, research programs have to encompass the entire field of infor-

mation, the stockpiling of knowledge, the workings and thus also the essence of language and of all semiotic systems, translation, coding and decoding, the play of presence and absence, hermeneutics, semantics, structural and generative linguistics, pragmatics, rhetoric.

Listing these disciplines in a haphazard way on purpose, Derrida then says of literature, poetry, the arts and fiction in general that “the theory that has these disciplines as its object may be just as useful in ideological warfare as it is in experimentation with variables in all-too-familiar perversions of the referential function.” From now on, he maintains, “a military budget can invest in anything at all, in view of deferred profits: ‘basic’ scientific theory, the humanities, literary theory and philosophy.” Furthermore, “when certain random consequences of research are taken into account, it is always possible to have in view some eventual benefit that may ensue from an apparently useless research project (in philosophy or the humanities, for example).”⁷

One of the morals to be drawn from Derrida’s sad sentences is that whatever comfort we have derived from the common separation of the humanities from the sciences is specious: the privilege of technology in the service of useful ends is likely to wipe out that distinction, too. If we thought that the humanities were a safe haven, a quiet backwater in which we could live our peaceful lives, we were wrong. It is no wonder that Derrida could appeal only to the university that is to come, like the democracy that is to come, both of them visionary entities. Meanwhile I gather that many Americans are willing to sacrifice at least some privacy for the sake of what they are assured is their domestic security, and to look with equanimity on the secret mining of data in what is declared to be a good cause.

But we should not take lightly what Derrida is obliged to speak of in the future tense, or in a present tense already beset with dire futurity. It is impossible to think of the humanities with equanimity. My next short section is also an admonition.

On October 4, 1957, Russian scientists launched into orbit the first artificial Earth satellite, popularly called Sputnik, an object 23 inches in diameter. A month later, on November 3, they launched a larger object, Sputnik 2. Outside Russia and especially in the United States, these achievements caused mainly consternation. If Russian scientists could send such objects into orbit, they might send a nuclear bomb, next time. Worse still, on January 31, 1958, American scientists tried to emulate the Russian launching, and failed. Hannah Arendt, adding a last-minute prologue to *The Human Condition*, considered Sputnik an event “second in importance to no other, not even to the splitting of the atom.” Its bearing on political life was likely to be woeful:

If we would follow the advice, so frequently urged upon us, to adjust our cultural attitudes to the present status of scientific achievement, we would in all earnest adopt a way of life in which speech is no longer meaningful. For the sciences today have been forced to adopt a “language” of mathematical symbols which, though it was originally meant only as an abbreviation for spoken statements, now contains statements that in no way can be translated back into speech.

The question of maintaining speech, or of rendering it redundant, seemed to Arendt crucial because “speech is what makes man a political being.” Hence:

The reason why it may be wise to distrust the political judgment of scientists *qua* sci-

entists is not primarily their lack of “character” – that they did not refuse to develop atomic weapons – or their naïveté – that they did not understand that once these weapons were developed they would be the last to be consulted about their use – but precisely the fact that they move in a world where speech has lost its power. And whatever men do or know or experience can make sense only to the extent that it can be spoken about.⁸

Arendt did not say, or even hint, that it was now up to humanists to maintain the Florentine power of speech. She did not say that the humanities are the prime form in which human values are described and discussed, talked about, and argued over; that the humanities are predicated upon speech. But she permitted us to think that it might be so.

The humanities are not the arts, they are (many of them) about the arts. Brahms’s Symphony No. 3 is a work of art; Susan McClary’s essay on it is a work of the humanities. Geoffrey Hill’s poem “September Song” is a work of art; his essay “Our Word is Our Bond” is a work of the humanities. Alan Rusbridger’s book on Chopin’s Ballade No. 1, op. 23 is a work of the humanities. The humanities do not lose anything by being separated from the things they are “about.” It does not matter, for present purpose, whether a work of the humanities is written or spoken, an essay, a book, a lecture, a seminar, or a conversation. Speech is implied. We argue about the values we think are in our keeping, especially when we fear that they are not. F. R. Leavis’s commentary, in *The Living Principle*, on Eliot’s *Four Quartets* presupposes an occasion of speech, agreement or disagreement with someone – it might be D. W. Harding – about the poems as Leavis reads them, his critical intelligence alert line by line. He knows that his

Introduction commentary is secondary to the poems; it comes after them, and is indebted to them. There is no competition. But the commentary is not obsequious; it has its rights, the distinctive merit of coming after.

There are passages in Leavis's commentary in which he haggles with the poem – and as a consequence, with the poet – but these passages also presuppose the moral weight and scale of Eliot's undertaking. They offer the poems the supreme tribute of being intelligent and concerned in their presence. The French Revolution happened: it was, and still is, an event. Edmund Burke, Thomas Carlyle, François Furet, and many other sages wrote books with the intention of making sense, or more sense, about it. Those books were work of the humanities. There is such a thing – to call it crudely that – as *language*. Hobbes found it necessary to think about it before thinking about other problems in philosophy; to think about language as a means of transferring “the train of our thoughts into a train of words.”⁹ This thinking, too, was work of the humanities. In *The Sight of Death*, T. J. Clark studies two paintings by Poussin, *Landscape with a Calm* and *Landscape with a Man Killed by a Snake*. I cannot believe that those paintings have ever been looked at, thought about, written about, spoken about, more intensely than by Clark; not even by other scholars of Poussin, including Anthony Blunt, Louis Marin, and Erwin Panofsky. On the few occasions on which Clark lifts his eyes and his mind from the paintings, it is to express a hard-won principle. I quote a few passages to illustrate the seriousness with which humanists go about their business, and often the thorny business of dissenting from their former selves:

My art history has always been reactive. Its enemies have been the various ways in which visual imagining of the world has

been robbed of its true humanity, and conceived of as something less than human, non-human, brilliantly (or dully) mechanical. In the beginning that meant the argument was with certain modes of formalism, and the main effort in my writing went into making the painting fully part of a world of transactions, interests, disputes, beliefs, “politics.” But who now thinks it is not? The enemy now is not the old picture of visual imaging as pursued in a state of trance-like removal from human concerns, but the parody notion we have come to live with of its *belonging to the world*, its incorporation into it, its being “fully part” of a certain image-regime. Being “fully part” means, it turns out in practice, being at any tawdry ideology's service. And this is celebrated. It is the sign of art's coming down from its ivory tower.

This passage, woeful with repentance and irony, leads Clark to another about the relation between a humanist's mind and what it engages:

Here is why the stress has to fall, it seems to me, on the specificity of picturing, and on that specificity's being so closely bound up with the mere materiality of a given practice, and on that materiality's being so often the generator of semantic depth – of true thought, true stilling and shifting of categories. I believe the distance of visual imagery from verbal discourse is the most precious thing about it.

But verbal discourse is what the scholar of art adds to the silent materiality of the paintings. Clark values that silence because it keeps in play at least the possibility of resistance to the common garrulous culture:

It represents one possibility of resistance in a world saturated by slogans, labels, sales pitches, little marketable meaning-motifs. To see the distance narrowed day by day, and intellectuals applauding the narrowing

in the name of some wholly illusory “transition from the world of the word to that of the image” – when what we have is a deadly reconciliation of the two modes, via the utter banalization of both – this is bitter to me.

A final sentence from *The Sight of Death*:

Paintings in a sense ought to disappoint us – disappoint our wish to have them be more than they are, to be fully and endlessly discursive (propositional), to be *serious* in ways we know about.¹⁰

That last phrase might provide a motto for the humanities: to discover the different ways, including ways we have not known about, in which human practices may be serious.

Some of these ways are discovered in performance. András Schiff made some telling discoveries about Bach by playing *The Well-Tempered Clavier* without pedal. Translation is also a work of the humanities. Interpretation covers these tributes to works of art, and appreciates them while allowing them to keep their secrets.

I have been saying that most (but not all) of the humanities are about something at large, some achieved value, some irrefutable event. When T. W. Adorno wrote *Introduction to the Sociology of Music*, he assumed that music was already there and that there was something true and useful he might say to change the general understanding of it. But there is also a category of the humanities that we might call *theory*, in which a mind meditates on something that does not quite exist in the objective sense I have been describing; rather, it is summoned into existence, or into a particular kind of existence, by the meditation. Call it virtual. Heidegger did not invent *being*, but he called into mindful existence or presence a special sense of it. Rawls did not invent *justice*, but he projected his own rationale of it. Similarly

Collingwood on metaphysics and on nature; Balibar on the state; Ernst Bloch on the politics of hope; Bataille (like him or not) on religion; Derrida on language. These and many more are included in what I have been calling the humanities. They correspond to a distinction between instrumental and interior disciplines in the sciences. Instrumental sciences are those that are practiced in response to external or worldly needs. Medicine: people get sick. Engineering, architecture, practical mathematics: we need roads, bridges, apartment blocks, skyscrapers, and hospitals that don't fall down, and some people think we need bombs and drones. Aeronautics: we want aeroplanes. Economics: we need at least a certain amount of government, policies, finance. Interior disciplines arise when a scientist spots a theoretical problem that has not been solved, something internal to the discipline. Such problems are likely to be discerned in logic, particular forms of mathematics and physics, and cosmology: Newton on time. In olden days, we thought these were immune to being appropriated. Derrida makes us fear that they are not.

What then do humanists do? The simplest account of their work is that it does their pupils good. Northrop Frye again:

There is no reason why a great poet should be a wise and good man, or even a tolerable human being, but there is every reason why his reader should be improved in his humanity as a result of reading him. Hence while the production of culture may be, like ritual, a half-involuntary imitation of organic rhythms or processes, the response to culture is, like myth, a revolutionary act of consciousness. The contemporary development of the technical ability to study the arts, represented by reproductions of painting, the recording of music, and mod-

ern libraries, forms part of a cultural revolution which makes the humanities quite as pregnant with new developments as the sciences. For the revolution is not simply in technology, but in spiritual productive power.¹¹

Frye published those sentences in 1957 and delivered them in lectures a few years earlier. I am not sure that his tone is still persuasive. Nearly any passage of the *Anatomy* comes with edifying force and makes me sigh: if only it were so. If what Frye says is true, why has its truth become so endangered? As here:

The ethical purpose of a liberal education is to liberate, which can only mean to make one capable of conceiving society as free, classless, and urbane. No such society exists, which is one reason why a liberal education must be deeply concerned with works of imagination.¹²

Meanwhile, it is clear from the following essays that humanists do many different kinds of things. The duties of a professor of the humanities, especially as J. Hillis Miller describes them, are such that the normal tyranny of days, weeks, and months hardly allows for their observance. Gillian Beer's relation to *The Waves*, the reading and teaching of it, is so comprehensive that only a few novels could be awarded such attention in one scholar's lifetime. Indeed, the experiences described and negotiated in these essays point to a problem that may be more burdensome in the humanities than in the sciences. We have nothing that corresponds to a paradigm – to use the word that Thomas Kuhn ascribed to the sciences in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* – a model of research to be followed, at least for the time being and until it is dislodged by one of more interest to young Turks. Humanists haven't got a paradigm; there is no model or example that indicates what we should be doing, what we should be read-

ing or arguing about. A cynic would say that the reason you don't respect any particular model – the reason you can do whatever you like – is that it doesn't make any difference what you do: you don't cure the sick or build bridges. True. But another way of dealing with the lack of paradigms is to reflect that authority in the humanities is acutely personal: literary scholars take their bearings, should they feel the need, from the major figures, or some few of them, and from these only insofar as one finds a master irresistible. Nobody is irresistible forever. Besides, it is always possible for a strong teacher of the humanities to mind his or her own business, read the books one happens to admire, teach these books, and let the rest of the world go hang.

When I was a student of English at University College Dublin, we were obliged to read three books in our first term to gain some idea of literary and social criticism. These were Aristotle's *Poetics*, Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria*, and Newman's *The Idea of a University*. But they were not prescribed as implying an orthodoxy to be obeyed; we were only obliged to read them as set texts to be thought about. When I became an assistant lecturer at the same university, I taught whatever courses were assigned to me, but I was drawn to one figure of authority who was not assigned to me or to anyone else: T. S. Eliot. I respected Eliot's judgment that "criticism . . . must always profess an end in view, which, roughly speaking, appears to be the elucidation of works of art and the correction of taste."¹³ As a teacher, I set myself to the first part of Eliot's program, under the sign of aesthetics, which I took to be a particular form of perception. A work of art, I learned from Susanne K. Langer's *Feeling and Form*, is made to be perceived. The second part of Eliot's injunction, I mostly assumed might arise from time to time, but I did not think I

was qualified to correct anyone's taste, being doubtful about my own. Eliot's reference in the same essay to "the common pursuit of true judgment" stayed in my mind as a motto, especially when Leavis later called a selection of his own essays *The Common Pursuit* in a further tribute to the master.

One passage of Eliot's prose bewildered me. In "Religion and Literature" (1935) he wrote:

It is simply not true that works of fiction, prose or verse, that is to say works depicting the actions, thoughts and words and passions of imaginary human beings, *directly* extend our knowledge of life. Direct knowledge of life is knowledge directly in relation to ourselves, it is our knowledge of *how* people behave in general, of *what* they are like in general, in so far as that part of life in which we ourselves have participated gives us material for generalization. Knowledge of life obtained through fiction is only possible by another stage of self-consciousness. That is to say, it can only be a knowledge of other people's knowledge of life, not of life itself.

That was hard. As a student and as a young teacher, I had no idea what Eliot meant by "another stage of self-consciousness." I assumed that, reading *Pride and Prejudice*, it was enough if I followed each of the characters, feeling or trying to feel what he or she felt at particular moments; but that did not seem to be what Eliot had in view. He continued:

So far as we are taken up with the happenings in any novel in the same way in which we are taken up with what happens under our eyes, we are acquiring at least as much falsehood as truth. But when we are developed enough to say: "This is the view of life of a person who was a good observer within his limits, Dickens, or Thackeray, or George Eliot, or Balzac; but he looked at it in a different way from me, because he was a dif-

ferent man; he even selected rather different things to look at, or the same things in a different order of importance, because he was a different man; so what I am looking at is the world as seen by a particular mind" – then we are in a position to gain something from reading fiction. We are learning *something* about life from these authors direct, just as we learn something from the reading of history direct; but these authors are only really helping us when we can see, and allow for, their differences from ourselves.¹⁴

This appears to recommend that instead of immersing ourselves in a novel, we should keep our distance from it, until we have developed to the stage of saying the things that Eliot says we should say, notably: "I am different from this author." I could do this only if I had something to help me keep my distance – such as my sense of form, style, narrative progression, the novel's idioms pulling against commonplace.

Over the years, I allowed Eliot's authority to be qualified to some extent by a poet and critic who did not seek to be authoritative in criticism: W. B. Yeats. Or if he was authoritative, it was in an irregular if not disheveled sense. He was learned in his fashion, but not in Eliot's fashion or even in Pound's. Later still, I was enchanted by R. P. Blackmur, mainly by a few of his phrases, which, once I came upon them, could not be shelved. For another while, Kenneth Burke was my master: we exchanged letters for years, but I am sure I disappointed him in the end.

But it was a phrase of Burke's that set me thinking of the lack of paradigm – of impersonal authority, if only for a while – in slightly more acceptable terms. There is a passage in *A Grammar of Motives* where Burke is considering inductive and deductive methods of approach to the reading of, say, a poem. The critic does not start from scratch, but

Introduction “has a more or less systematically organized set of terms by which to distinguish and characterize the elements of the poem he would observe.” One’s observations will not be purely “inductive,” even though “they derive important modifications from the observing of the given poem.”

They will also in part (and in particular as to their grammar, or form) be deduced or derived from the nature of the language or terminology which the critic employs. Such languages are developed prior to the individual observation (though one may adopt the well-known philosophic subterfuge: “Let us begin simply by considering this object in front of us, just as it is.”). . . . [A] given vocabulary coaches us to look for certain kinds of things rather than others.

Ordinarily, as Burke concedes, “we see somewhat beyond the limits of our favorite terms – but the bulk of our critical perceptions are but particular applications of these terms.”

The terms are like “principles,” and the particular observations are like the judicial casuistry involved in the application of principles to cases that are always in some respects unique.¹⁵

The phrase that caught my attention was “judicial casuistry.” The O.E.D. gives a more negative account of it than I would have thought necessary, quoting some anonymous figure as saying that it resolves cases of conscience by quibbling with God. I hope it includes the work of defense counsels in court, doing the best they can for their clients. In literary criticism, the question of casuistry would be: will my principles, honorably applied, cover all I have to say about the poem, or can I stretch my arms beyond them? The further question is: how did I get those principles in the first place, given the lack of an urging paradigm? Did I just subside upon the principles nearest my hand, these

being Eliot’s in my case, as they might well have been Valéry’s or Mallarmé’s or Leavis’s? It is too late for me to answer that question.

To resume: what are the humanities for? When I was a young teacher of English in Dublin, this question never arose in my hearing: it was taken for granted that it was a worthy thing to spend one’s life reading literature and teaching it to large classes of undergraduates. I spent the first three-and-a-half years of my working life as a junior administrative officer in the Department of Finance, a job that had all the merits of security and pension but, to me, no other gratification. It was a moment of great joy when Professor J. J. Hogan offered me a job as an assistant lecturer in his department. There was nothing better I could be doing. I had enjoyed the experience of reading for an arts degree, as it was called. The merit of it was self-evident, and since it was never called into question, there was no need to develop a theory in its favor. We lived by the customs of a liberal education. The word *liberal* did not need to be defined. The distinctive character of a liberal education was that it did not lead to any of the professions – law, medicine, engineering, architecture, and such – and was entirely independent of pragmatic need.

In 1968, we had what was called “the gentle revolution,” in which students demanded a voice in the governance of departments and faculties, and soon lost interest in the meetings they gained the privilege of attending; but they did not challenge the division of the university into departments and faculties, or even the choice of books they were required to read. Even when I came to teach at New York University, I never heard the question raised, why students were obliged to spend some part of their time reading

certain books. Nor has my choice of texts ever been questioned. I have assumed, without being especially intelligent about it, that my aim in teaching English, Irish, and American literature is to put students at least in the vicinity of memorable achievements. Ideally, I would put them in the full presence of such works. I have not been called upon to be more specific. When I included “Song of Myself” in a graduate course on modern poetry, no one disputed the choice. Only recently, I gather, has the teaching of literature ceased to be a self-evident good.

But we are now required to give reason for doing it. It won’t suffice any longer to say: “I read and teach literature because I can, because I like it, I enjoy it, it is my version of intelligent pleasure, like listening to Arturo Benedetti Michelangeli playing Chopin’s Ballade No. 1 in G Minor.” Not enough; these are mere subjectivities, proclaimed. The problem – the trouble – is that we live in a predominantly instrumental culture. Reasons must be given. In our time, the only accredited value is that something leads to something else. We are obliged to show not only cause but consequence. The humanities are vulnerable because they do not lead to anything: they do not cure a disease or build a bomb.

In this predicament there are two attitudes that may be adopted. One is to assert that the humanities train their students to be more alive, more intelligent, more critical than they would otherwise be. Hillis Miller quotes, with approval, the passage in “The Resistance to Theory” in which Paul de Man writes:

What we call ideology is precisely the confusion of linguistic with natural reality, of reference with phenomenism. It follows that, more than any other mode of inquiry, including economics, the linguistics of literariness is a powerful and indispensable

tool in the unmasking of ideological aberrations, as well as a determining factor in accounting for their occurrence.

A sentence further:

Those who reproach literary theory for being oblivious to social and historical (that is to say ideological) reality are merely stating their fear at having their own ideological mystifications exposed by the tool they are trying to discredit.¹⁶

An obvious question: how do we know an aberration when we see one? Aberrant by comparison with what? How is the ground established on which we can remove the masks? If “social” and “historical” are alike “ideological,” how do we adjudicate the ideology or the ideologies? I assume that by an ideology we mean the set of values that at a particular time is taken for granted, without its being known as merely taken for granted. Roland Barthes wrote of ideologies as laws of culture that are quietly enforced as if they were laws of nature. On the theme of bringing to the fore such Bohemian qualities as destroy great practical enterprise, Kenneth Burke said that the motto for this endeavor might be: “when in Rome, do as the Greeks.”¹⁷ Common to these aphorisms is the idea that literature “is no more than an interrogation of the world.”¹⁸ It is the aim of the humanities to consider how the interrogation is effected, and the qualities of mind promoted in the exercise. In brief, we make our students more alert than they were before they took our courses. In Miller’s terms, they become more sensitive to the lies they hear on TV.

The second attitude has more trouble in making its way. I have found the best expressions of it in Lionel Trilling’s *Beyond Culture* and Stanley Fish’s *Save the World on Your Own Time*.

In “On the Teaching of Modern Literature,” Trilling expressed a feeling of exas-

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if perhaps there is not to be found in the past that quiet place at which a young man might stand for a few years, at least a little beyond the competing attitudes and generalizations of the present, at least a little beyond the contemporary problems which he is told he can master only by means of attitudes and generalizations, that quiet place in which he can be silent, in which he can *know* something – in what year the Parthenon was begun, the order of battle at Trafalgar, how Linear B was deciphered: almost anything at all that has nothing to do with the talkative and attitudinizing present, anything at all but variations on the accepted formulations about *anxiety*, and *urban society*, and *alienation*, and *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, all the matter of the academic disciplines which are founded upon the modern self-consciousness and the modern self-pity.¹⁹

Stanley Fish, too, speaks of a student's years at college as an oasis, time-out, years in which to learn new skills, enjoy the experience of being at a distance from the other world. He maintains that "the job of someone who teaches in a college or a university is to (1) introduce students to bodies of knowledge and traditions of inquiry they didn't know much about before; and (2) equip those same students with the analytical skills that will enable them to move confidently within those traditions and to engage in independent research should they choose to do so." Further:

You know the questions: Will it benefit the economy? Will it fashion an informed citizenry? Will it advance the cause of justice? Will it advance anything? Once again the answer is no, no, no, and no. At some level, of course, everything we ultimately do has some relationship to the education we have

received. But if liberal arts education is doing *its* job and not the job assigned to some other institution, it will not have as its aim the bringing about of particular effects in the world. Particular effects may follow, but if they do, it will be as the unintended consequences of an enterprise which, if it is to remain true to itself, must be entirely self-referential, must be stuck on itself, must have no answer whatsoever to the question, "what good is it?"

Why should a society pay good money to support such an institution, "an academy that puts at the center of its operations the asking of questions for their own sake?"²⁰ Why indeed? Fish has no ready answer except to say that professors and administrators, in their dealings with the sources of funding, should explain without apology what they are doing and why. The moneyed people will understand, or not. It remains that a liberal education seeks knowledge for its own sake; that is, independent of any sequel – "desirable though nothing come of it," a phrase I recall from Newman many years ago.

It is not my privilege to adjudicate between de Man and Trilling, or between Hillis Miller and Stanley Fish. I report of my own practice as a teacher. The demand I make of students is implicit, I never say the words. Still, it may be thought reasonable or exorbitant. When I am teaching, say, *Antony and Cleopatra*, I ask the students to pay attention to what is going on and, for the duration of the class, to nothing else. When I quote a passage –

Sometime we see a cloud that's dragonish;
A vapour sometime like a bear or lion,
A tower'd citadel, a pendent rock,
A forked mountain, or blue promontory
With trees upon't, that nod unto the world,
And mock our eyes with air: thou hast seen
these signs;
They are black vesper's pageants
(Act 4, scene 14, lines 2 – 8)

– I want the students to be suffused with it and to follow it as a conductor follows a musical score, a little distant from it but never away, never out of its reach. For the time being, there is nothing in the world but Antony losing himself, Shakespeare’s words making him almost content with his loss, nothing surviving but his appalled sense of what he had been. Outside the classroom, people are living their lives, or being lived by them; inside, only the play, the scene, Antony, Eros listening and answering with a word or two, Antony giving up, Shakespeare letting him loose from himself.

That is what I want as a teacher. Whether or not I can have anything more; whether or not I can ease the students toward that other stage of self-consciousness that Eliot wrote of, in which each of them might say that “what I am looking at is the world as seen by a particular mind,” Shakespeare’s in the event: that, I cannot say. But it would satisfy me if the students could experience, now and again, what Eliot intuited in his essay on John Marston, “a pattern behind the pattern into which the characters deliberately involve themselves; the kind of pattern which we perceive in our own lives only at rare moments of inattention and detachment, drowsing in sunlight.”²¹

A few years ago, I gave the Erasmus lectures at Notre Dame. I was in the University for a month. On the first Saturday, I went into Chicago to visit the Art Institute, not to see anything in particular, but many things in a kind of generality. In the event, I found myself stopped by Constantin Brâncuși’s *Golden Bird*, going further to look at other things, coming back to the Brâncuși, and staying there for twenty minutes or so.

The following Saturday, my daughter Emma was with me, and I brought her to Chicago. I wanted to show her *Golden Bird*.

I hope she was enchanted by it, as I was. I was not inclined to say anything about it, even to Emma. The pleasure was entirely gratuitous, a gift of culture and genius. If I were an art critic, I would be obliged to be expressive in the vicinity of the sculpture, but I am not. My themes in the Erasmus lectures were entirely other. I was content, in the lectures, to speak, to say whatever I had to say about the themes. Standing in front of *Golden Bird*, I was gratified not to have to be expressive, but to accept the gift as it was offered. I wonder, is that what T. J. Clark meant when he said, “I believe the distance of visual imagery from verbal discourse is the most precious thing about it”? Or has Hannah Arendt the better part of the debate, when she comes back to speech that she has never left?

- ¹ T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays* (1932; London: Faber and Faber, 1963), 475.
- ² Francis Oakley, *The Conciliarist Tradition: Constitutionalism in the Catholic Church, 1300 – 1870* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 21.
- ³ Commission on the Humanities and Social Sciences, *The Heart of the Matter: The Humanities and Social Sciences for a Vibrant, Competitive, and Secure Nation* (Cambridge, Mass.: American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2013), 9, 17.
- ⁴ Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (1957; Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1990), 345.
- ⁵ Jacques Derrida, “The University without Condition,” in *Without Alibi*, ed. and trans. Peggy Kamuf (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2002), 202; emphasis in original.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, 235 – 236.
- ⁷ Jacques Derrida, Catherine Porter, and Edward P. Morris, “The Principle of Reason: The University in the Eyes of its Pupils,” *Diacritics* 13 (3) (Autumn 1983): 12 – 13.
- ⁸ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2nd ed. (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 3 – 4.
- ⁹ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Part I, ch. 4, quoted in Ian Hacking, *Why Does Language Matter to Philosophy?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 15.
- ¹⁰ T. J. Clark, *The Sight of Death: An Experiment in Art Writing* (New Haven, Conn., and London: Yale University Press, 2006), 122 – 123, 27; emphasis in original.
- ¹¹ Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, 344.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, 347.
- ¹³ T. S. Eliot, “The Function of Criticism,” in *Selected Essays*, 24.
- ¹⁴ T. S. Eliot, “Religion and Literature,” in *Selected Essays*, 395 – 396; emphasis in original.
- ¹⁵ Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives and A Rhetoric of Motives* (Cleveland: World Publishing Company, 1962), 471 – 472.
- ¹⁶ Paul de Man, *The Resistance to Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 11.
- ¹⁷ Kenneth Burke, *Counter-Statement* (1932; Los Altos, Calif.: Hermes Publications, 1953), 119.
- ¹⁸ Roland Barthes, *Critical Essays*, trans. Richard Howard (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1972), 135.
- ¹⁹ Lionel Trilling, *Beyond Culture: Essays on Literature and Learning* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1965), 5.
- ²⁰ Stanley Fish, *Save the World on Your Own Time* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 18 – 19, 55, 154.
- ²¹ Eliot, *Selected Essays*, 232.

What Ought Humanists To Do?

J. Hillis Miller

I am honored to contribute to this issue of *Dædalus*, “What Humanists Do.”¹ Each contributor was asked by guest editor Denis Donoghue to identify a text that has meant much to her or him, then discuss it. This assignment presupposes that humanists spend much of their time interpreting texts and promoting their circulation among their students, readers of their scholarship, and the general public. It is as though we contributors were asked, “Come on now, account for your activities as humanists. Tell us what you do. Tell us why what humanists do contributes to the public good!” I promise further on to give such an accounting for my own work. First, however, I need to make a few preliminary remarks.

1) Such an issue of *Dædalus* would not be needed if the social utility of what humanists do were not the subject of widespread doubt. That utility used to be taken for granted. It is hardly necessary to rehearse the evidence for this doubt. A high-level administrator at Harvard is reported to have said a few years ago, “The humanities are a lost cause.” Humanities departments around the country are being either abolished or amalgamated, for example into a single department of “Literature and Cultural Studies,” or into a single department of “Foreign Languages.” President Obama, in his eloquent speeches about the need for increased support for education in the United States, always speaks about science and math, never once, to my knowledge, about the need for more and better humanities teaching.

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At the same time, literary studies (my field) paradoxically remain extremely active. The large number of dissertations, books, essays, new journals, and conferences worldwide in the field is evidence of that. A newly advertised university position in literary studies typically has hundreds of highly qualified applicants. Most of these, alas, will remain unemployed, or employed as adjuncts typically teaching three or four composition courses a semester, often at several different colleges, for a poverty wage and often no benefits.

2) A somewhat different answer would need to be given if instead of asking, “What do humanists do?” we humanists were asked, “What did humanists use to do?” or “What should humanists do now?” The latter question is perhaps the most challenging. I have therefore called my essay “What Ought Humanists To Do?”

3) It would be seriously misleading to suggest that a literary scholar spends most of her or his time reading good poems, novels, and plays and then teaching them and writing about them. Relatively little of a literary scholar’s time is spent doing the sort of work I think Denis Donoghue has in mind when he asks, “What do humanists do?” From graduate school until achieving status as a senior professor, literary scholars, like those in most academic fields, spend a great deal of time these days sending and answering email messages; serving on time-consuming departmental and university- or college-wide committees; writing seemingly innumerable letters of recommendation; serving as a departmental or program administrator; participating in reading groups; preparing and giving a multitude of conference papers at home, in the United States, and around the world; hearing and responding to papers given by colleagues or campus visitors; applying for fellowships and postdocs; planning new programs and curricula; evaluating students’ and colleagues’ papers

and book manuscripts; meeting students and colleagues during office hours and in the halls; responding to requests for submissions of essays for special issues of the proliferating multitude of journals around the world, many of which are now online journals; reading the geometrically increasing number of books and essays in one’s fields; not to speak of trying, always unsuccessfully, to keep up with the innumerable (and to a considerable degree incompatible) books on theory; writing commissioned essays like this one that try to justify literary studies as an important part of the humanities divisions in colleges and universities; answering requests to be interviewed, sometimes for podcasts; and yes, looking something up on Wikipedia, blogging or using Twitter or Facebook (the latter two I do not yet do), watching films or television shows, playing video games, listening to any one of the innumerable forms and subforms of popular music by way of CDs or iTunes, surfing the Web, and using iPhones or iPads – in short, doing everything but what many people assume is the main justification of a literary scholar’s existence: reading, interpreting, teaching, and writing about primary literary texts. I forbear even to mention family responsibilities.

No book in literary studies was ever completed and published except in the face of multitudinous professional and personal demands that conspire to keep literary scholars from doing what is, or what it seems ought to be, their primary vocation. Most such work is done in the brief moments snatched from other duties. For a number of years, especially while I was a department chair, I used to get up at five (modeling myself somewhat laughably on Anthony Trollope and Paul Valéry) and do serious writing work until 8 a.m., at which point my time for “literary studies” was over for the day. Others work late at night, when much of the world is sleeping.

I am not saying the other work I have listed is not important. It is essential to the collective work of sustaining that complex bureaucracy we call a “college” or a “university,” or to keeping a given discipline or subdiscipline alive. I mean, however, that you cannot be sitting in a committee meeting evaluating a colleague for tenure and at the same time, as the letter from *Dædalus* requesting this essay put it, be returning yet once more to “a text . . . that inspired and continues to inspire the work [you] do,” or asking yourself, “What text would you want to see passed on to the next generation of scholars and why?”

I turn now to fulfilling my commission to choose a text and to answer the stated questions about it. I have found it impossible, however, to stick to a single text. My work has gone through several phases over the decades. (I don’t mean several theoretical orientations.) I therefore must briefly discuss two texts, not just one, with some other citations thrown in.

Tears, idle tears, I know not what they mean,
Tears from the depth of some divine despair
Rise in the heart, and gather to the eyes,
In looking on the happy autumn-fields,
And thinking of the days that are no more.

Fresh as the first beam glittering on a sail,
That brings our friends up from the
underworld,
Sad as the last which reddens over one
That sinks with all we love below the verge;
So sad, so fresh, the days that are no more.

Ah, sad and strange as in dark summer
dawns
The earliest pipe of half-awaken’d birds
To dying ears, when unto dying eyes

The casement slowly grows a glimmering
square;
So sad, so strange, the days that are no more.

Dear as remembered kisses after death,
And sweet as those by hopeless fancy feign’d
On lips that are for others; deep as love,
Deep as first love, and wild with all regret;
O Death in Life, the days that are no more!

– Alfred, Lord Tennyson,
“Tears, Idle Tears” (1847)²

This is one of the songs from Tennyson’s long narrative poem, *The Princess*, an early poem about women’s liberation. (I have, by the way, downloaded Tennyson’s song from Wikipedia, to save the bother of typing it out and to hint at the way the Internet has transformed literary study.) In *The Princess*, a group of women have withdrawn from men’s society to form a new species of *gynæceum*, a women’s university where men are forbidden to enter. The poem is sung by one of Princess Ida’s maids, in the presence of the male narrator, who, with two friends, has invaded the Princess’s domain. They disguise themselves in drag. (I kid you not! Victorian literature contains many unexpected things.) Tennyson asserted that: “This song came to me on the yellowing autumn-tide at Tintern Abbey, full for me of its bygone memories. It is the sense of the abiding in the transient.”³ You will probably not be surprised to learn that in the end, the Princess and the invading Prince marry and live happily ever after, though the Prince promises to treat his wife as an equal. So much for the limits of women’s liberation in Tennyson’s imagination!

I did not know any of this when I first encountered the poem as a freshman or sophomore at Oberlin College in 1944 or 1945. It was simply given to me, if I remem-

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ber correctly, as one among many poems to read for an introductory course, without any context or background information. Or perhaps I just somehow encountered it. Serendipity plays a big role in anyone's intellectual development. I was at that point a physics major. "Tears, Idle Tears" played a crucial role in my discovery that my true vocation or calling was for literary study.⁴ This was a major turning point in my life. I shifted from physics to English as my major in the middle of my sophomore year, in part so I could follow up the questions posed to me by this poem. I found, and still find, the poem extremely moving and beautiful. I wanted to go on having such pleasures and puzzlements as reading this poem gave me. I wanted, and still want, others to have similar pleasures and to be as puzzled as I was by the question of what the poem "really means," and why it is a good thing to read it interrogatively.

In spite of the good training in English literature I received at Oberlin and thereafter in graduate school at Harvard, I remain to this day puzzled by literary works, including this one. "Tears, Idle Tears" is a wonderful poem. I found it, however, an exceedingly strange, even scandalous, use of language. The word "strange" is, it happens, a key word in Tennyson's poem. In my science courses, I was taught to say the truth straightforwardly, to explain anomalies, and to use language in as uncomplicated a way as possible. Tennyson seemed to me to do no such things. Let me cite again just the first stanza. To do a full reading of the whole poem would take a great many pages:

Tears, idle tears, I know not what they mean,
Tears from the depth of some divine despair
Rise in the heart, and gather to the eyes,
In looking on the happy autumn-fields,
And thinking of the days that are no more.

I asked myself, "What in the world does this mean?" I knew nothing of Ogden and Richards's *The Meaning of Meaning*.⁵ I did not mean anything "theoretical" by the question. I just wanted to be able to identify a straightforward rational meaning. My model was data from the stars that are read to "mean," for example, that such and such a star has a surface temperature of so and so. This assumption was based, by the way, on an incomplete understanding of the relations among hypothesis, data collection, and verification in scientific method. I took for granted, however, and still do, that Tennyson's words and figures are not just emotive blather, but that they have precise meaning that can be identified. I also took for granted, and still do, that the poem cannot be fully explained either by its function in *The Princess* or by other extrinsic factors, such as Tennyson's grief over his friend Arthur Hallam's early death. Hallam is buried near Tintern Abbey, where "Tears, Idle Tears," "came to" Tennyson. What does Tennyson mean by calling his tears idle? In what sense are these tears, or any other tears, idle? Why did he write, "I know not what they mean"? I did not know what they mean either. The poem is very beautiful. There is no doubt about that, but so what? And "tears from the depth of some divine despair"? What does "divine despair" mean? It must mean despair of some god. What god? Gods are not supposed to despair. What is this god in despair about? How could tears from the depth of some divine despair get into the poet's heart anyhow, and how could those tears get from his heart to his eyes? Up the aorta and so on, by a devious route? Why are the autumn-fields paradoxically "happy"? I thought they were just inhuman matter. Why personify them in this contrary-to-fact way?

In short, I had dozens of interrelated questions about just these few lines. Ten-

nyson's own comments, by the way, do not seem to me all that helpful. Just to say, as he did say, that the poem is about what he as a boy called "the passion of the past" and to add, "it is the distance that charms me in the landscape, the picture and the past, and not the immediate to-day in which I move,"⁶ evades more than it explains the question of what Tennyson meant, for example, by "the depth of some divine despair." It seems to me, moreover, that simply to read the poem out loud to students, as teachers often used to do, and to say how beautiful it is, is not enough. Yes, I agree. It is beautiful. But what does it *mean*? I think we are justified in demanding a high degree of "explicability" from literary works and in demanding that our teachers help students in this hermeneutic work. The poem can only correctly "do," performatively,⁷ if we know what it "means." Why, I continued to wonder, should it matter whether I read and understood this poem or not?

I wanted to figure out answers to these questions, to account for the poem in the way astrophysicists account for data from outer space. Decades after my shift from physics to literature, I wrote an essay trying, belatedly, to answer those questions I had about "Tears, Idle Tears."⁸ I say briefly below how I would answer those questions now.

What was wrongheaded about my original project took me some years to discover. I am still discovering it; that is, still trying to come to terms with the irreconcilability, as Paul de Man puts it, of hermeneutics and poetics, meaning and the way meaning is expressed.⁹ A shorthand description of my mistake would be to say that data from the stars and the linguistic "matter" that makes up poems require fundamentally different methodologies of "accounting for." Without intending to do so I had encountered the challenges of interpreting figurative language as used

in literature. I have spent my whole life since that fall of 1945 trying to account for this aspect of various presumptively literary works. That is what I most like to do: reading, teaching, lecturing, and writing about print literature, trying to figure out what a given text or poem really says, and passing that accounting-for to students in my courses and to readers of essays and books that I write. Though I have long been interested in theory, theory is, for me at least, not an end in itself. Theory is ancillary, a handmaid to reading literature. I need just as much theory as is necessary for that, and no more. Writing books and essays has for me, I add, always been indissolubly related to teaching and lecturing. Nothing beats trying out on a class a way of reading a given poem for finding out whether that reading "flies" or not.

I would say now that the first stanza of "Tears, Idle Tears" is a complex but entirely comprehensible extended figure of speech. Tears tend to arise spontaneously, often in ways that forbid knowing their meaning or expressing it rationally. In this case, the speaker of the poem weeps in looking at the happy autumn-fields and thinking of the days that are no more. An oxymoronic combination of presence and absence characterizes both autumn fields (which are still happily verdant but about to die) and the past as remembered. The past is vividly present to memory but is remembered as lost forever, just as the happy autumn-fields will soon be wintry. Both of these are something to weep about, partly because they imply my own mortality. In an analogous way, Gerard Manley Hopkins ends "Spring and Fall: to a young child," a poem about a little girl who weeps at the sight of "Goldengrove unleaving," by asserting that Margaret is, without knowing it or meaning it, weeping for her own mortality and for her share in original sin. The Fall of Adam and Eve was the cause of seasonal changes in the first place.

No seasons pass in the Garden of Eden before the Fall. The resonances between Tennyson's poem and Hopkins's are evident, as well as the differences. Tennyson, for example, says nothing so overtly about original sin as Hopkins does:

Sórrows spríngs áre the same.
Nor mouth had, no nor mind, expressed
What heart heard of, ghost guessed:
It is the blight man was born for,
It is Margaret you mourn for.¹⁰

Like the leaves in autumn, Margaret too will die, as will the speaker of "Tears, Idle Tears." The conflicted internal state of the latter is projected spontaneously as an oxymoronic personification into the "happy autumn-fields." The tears are "idle," the poem implies, because they are ineffective. Nothing will keep those leaves from falling, nor me from dying.

The most difficult part of Tennyson's extended image is those lines that describe the "idle tears" as coming from "the depth of some divine despair" rising in the heart and gathering to the eyes. This beautiful spatial trope is a version of the basic Christian assumption, going back to St. Augustine, and before that to the Bible, that at its depths the human self is grounded in God and continuous with Him. The speaker's tears come from God and move upward through his or her heart, the location of emotions, to his or her eyes. We weep only when we are deeply moved.

Tennyson's twist on this ancient theological trope is to think of God not as a solid rock, ground of the self, but as Himself divided, in a state of despair. God's despair, the rest of the poem makes clear, is over the impossibility, in the created human and natural worlds at least, since the Fall, of healing the fissure of presence and absence in the landscape and in memory. The latter is what Tennyson calls "the passion of the past" as that past is visibly embodied, for example, in

autumn-fields, or, later in the poem, in a ship disappearing below the horizon or rising above it once more.

The figurative interplay in the first five lines of "Tears, Idle Tears" is "complex" because it expresses triple substitutions among three regions: the landscape, the speaker's mind and feelings, and the relation between subjectivity and God. Each defined in terms of the others, in a perpetually shifting reciprocal interchange.

If you set your mind to it, with minimal knowledge of the Western tradition and of the way figurative language works, it is not all that difficult to "figure out" what Tennyson's poem "means." What is remarkable, however, is the complexity of the poetic or tropological thought that is compressed within these five lines that are so beautiful in rhythm, diction, and alliteration ("depth of some *divine despair*"). That beauty is evident even before you begin asking yourself what the words mean. If they were not so beautiful, who would care so much what they mean? Figuring out that meaning adds a strong surplus of pleasure, an "aha! moment" of comprehension or illumination, to the initial pleasure of the words' "music," as one might call it. My vocation or calling has remained, ever since those long ago days at Oberlin, to pass, as best I can, that double pleasure on to my students and readers.

Suddenly I saw the cold and rook-delighting
heaven
That seemed as though ice burned and was
but the more ice,
And thereupon imagination and heart were
driven
So wild that every casual thought of that
and this

Vanished, and left but memories, that
 should be out of season
 With the hot blood of youth, of love crossed
 long ago;
 And I took all the blame out of all sense and
 reason,
 Until I cried and trembled and rocked to
 and fro,
 Riddled with light. Ah! when the ghost
 begins to quicken,
 Confusion of the death-bed over, is it sent
 Out naked on the roads, as the books say,
 and stricken
 By the injustice of the skies for punishment?

–W. B. Yeats, “The Cold Heaven” (1916)¹¹

More and more, as the years have gone by, and though my vocation for literary study has remained steadfast, I have found myself, in rapidly changing university conditions, including the increasing globalization of literary study (study of so-called World Literature), being invited to conferences all over the world where I am asked to give lectures defending literary study.¹² One example is the International Conference on Literature Reading and Research that I attended in Guangzhou (once called Canton), China, in September 2010, held at the Guangdong University of Foreign Studies. (Guangdong is the name of the province.) I chose in my lecture to take Yeats’s “The Cold Heaven” as a paradigmatic example of the difficulties of deciding whether or not we should read or teach literature now. The poem also exemplifies the difficulties of explaining such a text to students at home and globally. The poem comes from Yeats’s volume of 1916, *Responsibilities*.

I greatly admire this poem. It moves me immensely. It moves me so much that I want not only to read it but also to teach it and talk about it to anyone who will listen. I wish I could read it out loud now to

all my readers, with special stresses on “Suddenly” at the beginning and on the extraordinary long drawn-out “Ah!” that is the turning point of the poem. Poetry, after all, is an oral art, or should still be.

Well, should I read or teach this poem now, or not? I answer initially that there is no *should* about it, no compelling obligation or responsibility. I can read or teach it if I like, but that decision cannot easily be justified by anything beyond the call the poem itself makes on me to read it and to teach it. Least of all do I think I can tell students, colleagues, or administrators with a straight face that reading the poem or hearing me teach it is going to help them find a job, or help them mitigate climate change. Reading the poem with care might possibly, however, help students resist the lies told by the media, as I shall argue for literature in general below.

Reading “The Cold Heaven” or teaching it is, first and foremost, a good in itself, an end in itself, as Kant said all art is. The mystical poet Angelus Silesius (1624 – 1677) affirmed, in *The Cherubinic Wanderer*, that “The rose is without why; it blooms because it blooms.”¹³ Like that rose, “The Cold Heaven” is without why. The poem, like a rose, has no reason for being beyond itself. You can read it or not read it, as you like. It is its own end. Young people these days who watch films or television shows, or play video games, or listen to popular music do not, for the most part, attempt to justify what they do. They do it because they like to do it and because it gives them pleasure. An academic friend of mine from Bergen in Norway did not try to justify his pleasure and excitement in hearing at great expense the same Stevie Wonder concert twice, once in Rotterdam and once again in Bergen. He just emailed me his enthusiasm about the experience. It was a big deal for him, just as reading, talking, or writing about Yeats’s “The Cold Heaven” is a big deal for me. That importance, how-

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ever, is something I should not try to justify primarily by its practical or social utility.

A natural response when I see a film I like or hear a concert that moves me is to want to tell other people about it, as my correspondent in Bergen wanted to tell everybody about those Stevie Wonder concerts. These tellings most often take the form, “Wow! I saw a wonderful movie last night. Let me tell you about it.” I suggest that my desire to teach Yeats’s “The Cold Heaven” takes much the same form: “Wow! I have just read a wonderful poem by Yeats. Let me read it to you and tell you about it.” That telling, naturally enough, takes the form of wanting to pass on what I think other readers might find helpful to lead them to respond to the poem as enthusiastically as I do.

I list, in an order following that of the poem, some of the things that might need to be explained not only, for example, to a young Chinese reader, but also, no doubt, to a video-game-playing Western young person ignorant of European poetry. Literary scholar David Damrosch, in his book on world literature, presupposes with equanimity, as do I, that when a given piece of literature circulates into a different culture from that of its origin, it will be read differently.¹⁴ I am not talking here, however, about a high-level culturally embedded reading, but just about making sense of Yeats’s poem. This need to make sense might arise, for example, in trying to decide how to translate this or that phrase into Chinese or some other non-English language.

Here are some things, in the form of truncated notations, that it might be good to know when trying to understand “The Cold Heaven”:

1) Something about Yeats’s life and works.

2) An explanation of the verse form used: three iambic hexameter quatrains rhyming abab. Is it an odd sort of sonnet

in hexameters rather than pentameters, and missing the last couplet? How does this form contribute to the poem’s force and meaning?

3) Knowledge of the recurrent use of “sudden” or “suddenly” in Yeats’s lyrics, as in the opening of “Leda and the Swan” – “A sudden blow . . .” (VP, 441) – or in the fourth section of “Vacillation”: “While on the shop and street I gazed / My body of a sudden blazed; / And twenty minutes more or less / It seemed, so great my happiness, / That I was blessed and could bless” (VP, 501). In Yeats’s poetry, insight tends to happen abruptly, unforeseeably, making a sharp break between before and after.

4) What sort of bird a rook is and why rooks are delighted by cold weather.

5) The double meaning of “heaven,” as “skies” and as the supernatural realm beyond the skies, as in the opening of the Lord’s Prayer, said daily by millions of Christians: “Our Father who art in heaven”; compare “skies” at the end of “The Cold Heaven”: “the injustice of the skies for punishment.”

6) An explanation of oxymorons (burning ice) and of the history in Western poetry of this particular one.

7) Attempt to explain the semantic difference between “imagination” and “heart,” as well as the nuances of each word.

8) Explanation of “crossed” in “memories . . . of love crossed long ago,” both the allusion to Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet as “star-crossed lovers,” that is, as fated by the stars to disaster in love, and the reference to the biographical fact of Yeats’s disastrous love for Maud Gonne. She rejected his proposals of marriage repeatedly, though they had slept together twice, so it is to some degree absurd for him to take responsibility for the failure of their love. He did his best to persuade her to marry him.

9) Account of the difference between “sense” and “reason” in “I took the blame out of all sense and reason,” or is this just tautological? Yeats scholar A. Norman Jeffares cites T. R. Henn’s explanation that “‘out of all sense’ is an Irish (and ambiguous) expression meaning both ‘to an extent far beyond what common sense could justify’ and ‘beyond the reach of sensation.’”¹⁵

10) Explanation of the double meaning of the verb “riddle” in the marvelous phrase, “riddled with light”: “riddle” meaning punctured with holes, and “riddle” as having a perhaps unanswered riddle or conundrum posed to one. Being riddled with light is paradoxical because light is supposed to be illuminating, not obscuring.

11) Unsnarling of the lines centering on “quicken” in “when the ghost [meaning disembodied soul] begins to quicken, / Confusion of the death bed over.” “Quickening” usually refers to the coming to life of the fertilized egg in the womb. An erotic love-bed scene is superimposed on the death-bed one.

12) “As the books say”: which books? Those books in esoteric philosophy and folklore that Yeats read.

13) Relate “injustice of the skies for punishment” to the usual assumption that heaven only punishes justly, gives us our just deserts after death. Why and how can the skies be unjust? By blaming him for something that was not his fault? Connect this to Greek and later tragedy. It is not Oedipus’s fault that he has killed his father and fathered children with his mother, or is it? After all, he did commit parricide and incest, even though unintentionally.

14) Why is the last sentence a question? Is it a real question or a merely rhetorical one? Would the answer find its place if the blank that follows the twelve lines of this defective sonnet were filled? The poem seems both too much in line lengths and too little in number of lines.

15) Finally, Chinese readers, as well as Western ones, might like to know, or might even observe on their own, that Yeats, like other European poets of his generation, was influenced in this poem and elsewhere by what he knew, or thought he knew, through translations, of Chinese poetry and Chinese ways of thinking. The volume *Responsibilities*, which contains “The Cold Heaven,” has an epigraph from someone Yeats calls, somewhat pretentiously, “Khong-fou-Tseu,” presumably Confucius: “How am I fallen from myself, for a long time now / I have not seen the Prince of Chang in my dreams” (VP, 269). Chinese readers and readers generally might have a lot to say about this Chinese connection and about how it makes “The Cold Heaven” a work of world literature.

All this information would be given to my hearers or readers, however, not to “expand their minds,” but in the hope that it might help them admire the poem as much as I do and be moved by it as much as I am. Being moved in the right way, I argue, depends on understanding, or should do so. The affect is a performative effect of comprehending the words rightly. Yeats’s poem can hardly be described as “uplifting,” since its thematic climax is a claim that the skies are unjust and punish people for things of which they are not guilty. That is a terrifying wisdom. Telling others about this poem is not something I *should* do but something I cannot help doing, something the poem urgently calls on me to do.

I end by asserting the irreplaceable value of literature and literary studies. First the bad news, then the good. Most people know that enrollments in literature courses have gone down and that people nowadays read less print literature. This diminishing of literary studies has been brought about partly by the gradual turning of our colleges and universities in the direction

of becoming trade schools, preparation for getting a job. Such institutions have less and less place for the humanities in the old sense of their essential role in a liberal arts education.¹⁶

Perhaps even more threatening to old-fashioned literary studies, however, has been the amazingly rapid development of new teletechnologies that are fast making printed book literature obsolete, a thing of the past. Even many of those who could teach literature, who were hired to do so, choose rather, for good reasons, to teach other topics instead: the history of Western imperialism, or film, or video games, or some one among the multitude of race, gender, or performance studies, or another of those myriad and still-proliferating other interests that have replaced or subordinated literature for many humanists. More and more courses are being offered not in a classroom, but as MOOCs, massive open online courses, circulating on the Internet. A large proportion of these are in math, science, and economics, but some are in the humanities.¹⁷ Millions of students already use them. MOOCs are on the face of it problematic and controversial, but I doubt if that will stop their proliferation, nor their rapid transformation of higher education. If a new telecommunication technology exists, its widespread use seems for some reason irresistible. Who would have thought that iPhones, Google, Facebook, and Twitter would so quickly become indispensable to so many millions worldwide?

Our present-day humanists can hardly be blamed for wanting to teach what interests them, what has shaped their lives and those of their students. Though an immense number of books, essays, and courses about print literature are still being produced or taught each year, enrollment in courses on such old-fashioned topics as “The Victorian Novel” is considerably down in most colleges and universities.

New monographs about print literature, however sophisticated they may be about narrative theory and literary history, typically sell only a few hundred copies at most, whereas a successful video game sells millions of copies and does really have a big cultural effect on a lot of people, for better or worse. If Shakespeare were to return today, he would most likely not write plays but film or television scripts or, perhaps, employ the latest technology and “write” video games.

The new digital devices – computers, iPhones, iPads, Facebook, Twitter, video games, and the like – are rapidly diminishing the role literature plays in many people’s lives. A lot of people these days play video games or watch films on Netflix or surf the net instead of reading printed literature. That is a big loss, but it is not the end of civilization, any more than was the shift from manuscript culture to print culture.

Now the good news: The reading, study, and teaching of literature is surviving more strongly than one might expect even in the midst of an exceedingly rapid and no doubt irreversible global change from one dominant medium (print) to another (digital). A lot of people continue to read literature, but in digital form – on Kindles and the like. I walked down an airplane aisle not long ago and spotted ten people reading what looked like novels, but eight of them were doing that on an e-reader. At least they were reading literature, not playing video games. An amazing number of literary works (in the old-fashioned sense of printed novels, poems, and plays) are now available online either for free or for a few dollars. These digital versions are usually searchable, which is a great help in certain kinds of literary study. It is no longer necessary to be near a big university library to have access to a vast array of literary works. That is a strong force for democracy. I was able not long

ago to see for the first time, in its Kindle version, the first edition of Trollope's *The Last Chronicle of Barset*, complete with the illustrations. Few libraries have that book, and the illustrations, so far as I know, have not been reprinted. Through the Internet I was granted access to the original multimedia version of Trollope's novel. Wikipedia, used with the skepticism any encyclopedia requires, puts a huge amount of factual information at one's fingertips. "Digitalization" has transformed the way I do literary study: that is, read literature, write about it, and talk about it.

Multitudes of teachers in the United States and globally, moreover, both young ones and old ones, are every day quietly teaching their students as best they can a love of literature and how best to read it. Many of these are brilliant teachers of literature. They are my unsung heroes and heroines. Though the "one size fits all" aspect of the Common Core in math, science, writing, and reading that is now being officially adopted by many U.S. states makes me a little anxious, nevertheless the actual Common Core document does include learning to read literature, and it shows some flexibility in identifying what sorts of literary works should be taught, and how.

In addition, an increasing number of thoughtful books and essays asking "Why Literature?" are beginning to appear these days. These are quite different from those hand-wringing books and essays about the "corporatization" of the university and the decline of the humanities, useful as such works are. The works I have in mind also differ from the studies based on cognitive science that report what part of my brain lights up when I read "Tears, Idle Tears," "The Cold Heaven," or *Middlemarch* – something also useful to know.

I shall identify five works in the "Why Literature?" genre. They are based on hands-on experience in the classroom.

Teachers with such experience are perhaps a more trustworthy source of information, along with students themselves, about why we should read literature and how best to teach it than department chairs, deans, and administrators, anxious as the latter often are to preserve literature as a social and personal force. The books and essays I have in mind are, significantly, written by teachers at both ends of the spectrum of academic status. One of the best of these, Cristina Vischer Bruns's *Why Literature? The Value of Literary Reading and What It Means for Teaching*,¹⁸ is by a brilliant and dedicated young scholar-teacher. She has nevertheless remained in adjunct status at a good but less well-known university, Chapman University, in Orange County, California. Bruns speaks eloquently, on the basis of what it is like to teach literature at Chapman, in favor of what she calls "immersive" reading. Such reading, she holds, should only later on be augmented by theoretical reflection.

Two additional examples of such books are by Mark Edmundson, a University Professor at the University of Virginia. His is a very different life-situation from Bruns's. One of Edmundson's books is called *Why Teach? In Defense of a Real Education*, the other is *Why Read?*¹⁹

My fourth example is another brilliant young scholar who has published a number of excellent books and articles but has yet to find a permanent university teaching position. He is Éamonn Dunne, an Irishman and schoolteacher whose first doctorate was from University College Dublin. Dunne is now returning to Trinity College Dublin to earn a second doctorate in education. His thesis proposal, "Unlearning to Read: Towards a New Pedagogy of Ignorance," is a fascinating proposal throughout; but for my purposes here it is important because of Dunne's intention to undertake empirical studies, using his own students, about what actu-

ally goes on in the classroom and in the minds and feelings of students when they read literature.

My final example is a forthcoming special issue of the journal *SubStance*, edited by Ranjan Ghosh of the University of North Bengal.²⁰ Under the title “Does Literature Matter?” the issue gathers essays on this topic by a wide range of scholars.

I cite these five titles to indicate that those who love literature and want to teach it are turning thoughtfully to its defense in the context of the global shift to digital media and on the basis of their actual teaching experience.

I end now by naming several uses reading literature and teaching it can have even in our radically new social, cultural, and technological situation.

No doubt the real world is transformed by being turned into literature, but I see no reason to deny that we learn a lot about that real world now and in the past by reading literature. Two examples among almost innumerable ones are: 1) we can learn about Victorian class structure and courtship/marriage conventions by reading Anthony Trollope’s novels; and 2) we can learn a lot about the nineteenth-century city of London by reading Dickens’s novels. Such learning is of great value.

In addition, we can learn from literary works the way what might be called “ideological mistakes” often come to be made, namely by taking figurative language literally. “We all of us, grave or light, get our thoughts entangled in metaphors, and act fatally on the strength of them,” says George Eliot’s narrator in *Middlemarch*.²¹ The novel gives a striking example of this in the way the intelligent and sensitive heroine, Dorothea Brooke, thinks the dry-as-dust scholar, Edward Casaubon, is like Augustine, Milton, Bossuet, Oberlin, or Pascal. Therefore, marrying Casaubon would be like marrying one or another of these worthies. I do not think George Eliot

makes in this section of *Middlemarch*, or in the novel generally, a sharp distinction between metaphorical identity and the comparisons of simile. “Metaphor” is for her a generic term for tropological displacements. Much fiction deals thematically with imaginary characters who, like Dorothea Brooke, are wrong in their readings of others: for example, Elizabeth Bennett in her misreading of Darcy in Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*, or Isabel Archer’s misreading of Gilbert Osmond in Henry James’s *The Portrait of a Lady*, or the disastrous effect on Conrad’s Lord Jim of reading too many adventure stories. Flaubert’s Emma Bovary and Cervantes’s Don Quixote are Jim’s predecessors in making that mistake. All three think life is really going to be like the romances they have read.

Getting students to see this aspect of fictions might possibly lead them to keep a sharper eye out for the lies politicians, advertising, and mass media tell by manipulation of false figurative transfers. Paul de Man’s claim, in “The Resistance to Theory,” that “the linguistics of literariness is a powerful and indispensable tool in the unmasking of ideological aberrations, as well as a determining factor in accounting for their occurrence,”²² seems blatantly counterintuitive. What de Man says might seem more plausible if we understand that what he means by “the linguistics of literariness” is not something unique to literature as such but a dismaying feature of language in general, including the language of politicians and admen. Those admirable op-ed writers for *The New York Times*, Paul Krugman and Maureen Dowd, use “the linguistics of literariness” as one of their major tools in the unmasking of ideological aberrations. Dowd uses irony to devastating effect in her unmasking, and Krugman has repeatedly pointed out that conservatives’ propaganda for austerity depends on a false

analogy between household finances and spending by the federal government. Believing that is like Dorothea believing that Casaubon is like Milton or Pascal. Politicians whose policies are modeled on Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged* are making the same mistake Lord Jim did when he thought reality was going to be like (or ought to be like) the children's romances he had read. If we learn about the real world by reading literature, the danger of taking figures of speech literally is one of the major things we can learn.

Even more important, as an indispensable function of reading literary works, is the sheer pleasure of entering an alternative imaginary world. We do this by way of the words on the page. Every work opens a different and unique world. This pleasure of entering a new world is a good in itself, as I have claimed for my pleasure in reading Yeats's "The Cold Heaven." It needs no further justification. The need for the imaginary seems to be a basic feature of human nature. A slow immersive reading of *Middlemarch* does not just teach you about "the linguistics of literariness." It also allows you to dwell for a prolonged period in a wonderfully vivid fictitious world peopled by characters that seem as real as real people and are better known than our real neighbors.

The other pleasure of dwelling in an imaginary world is a kind of surplus joy. This is the sheer delight of felicitous and unexpected language. Roland Barthes, in *The Pleasure of the Text*, named this pleasure with the more or less untranslatable French word *jouissance*.²³ The word means "joy," but also has an erotic overtone. This bodily and mental delight is usually caused by some shimmering of word play, as in George Eliot's image of thoughts *entangled* in metaphors or Yeats's marvelous phrase, "*riddled with light*."

The pleasure caused by felicitous and surprising language is the hardest aspect

of literature to carry over into the new media. Films, video games, and television sitcoms are no doubt also alternative worlds, but they cannot easily match the pleasurable linguistic complexity of literary works, as the relative thinness of language in films made from classic novels attests. The narrative voice and the characters' interior thoughts and feelings vanish, to be replaced by faces on the screen and dialogue. Those faces and their talk have their own power, but it is a different sort of power from the words on the page. It is only partly linguistic. One often waits in vain to hear in a film version some piece of wordplay that has caused *jouissance* in reading the print text original.

Helping students share in my joy of the text is what I do as a humanist and feel I ought to do. As you can see, I have not come all that far from my initial desire to account, to myself and to others, for the strange ways Tennyson uses language and for my delight in this strangeness. The contexts in which I go on performing that work have, however, changed considerably, to say the least.

- ¹ Sections of this essay have been given in earlier form as lectures in the United States, Europe, and China.
- ² Text copied from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tears,_Idle_Tears (accessed December 27, 2012).
- ³ Cited in *The Poems of Tennyson*, 3 vols., ed. Christopher Ricks, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), vol. 2, 232.
- ⁴ I might also have cited in this essay Dostoyevsky's *Notes from the Underground*, which I read at about that time, with its striking opening lines: "I am a sick man. . . . I am a spiteful man. I am an unattractive man. I believe my liver is diseased." (I quote the Project Gutenberg e-text.) This novel, too, is "a text . . . that inspired and continues to inspire the work [I] do." When I read those opening words, I said to myself (remember, I was a sophomore), "Aha! Here at last is someone like me." The recognition of such kinships is one of the important things that reading literature can do.
- ⁵ C. K. Ogden, I. A. Richards, et al., *The Meaning of Meaning: A Study of the Influence of Language upon Thought and of the Science of Symbolism* (London: K. Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co.; New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1923).
- ⁶ Cited in *The Poems of Tennyson*, ed. Ricks, vol. 2, 232.
- ⁷ See J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, ed. J. O. Urmson and Marina Sbisa, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980). See also J. Hillis Miller, *Speech Acts in Literature* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2001).
- ⁸ J. Hillis Miller, "Temporal Topographies: Tennyson's Tears," *Victorian Poetry* 30 (3–4) (Autumn/Winter 1992): 277–289; also included in J. Hillis Miller, *Topographies* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1995), 134–149.
- ⁹ Paul de Man, "The Task of the Translator," in *The Resistance to Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 87–88.
- ¹⁰ Gerard Manley Hopkins, *Poems*, ed. W. H. Gardner and N. H. Mackenzie, 4th ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), 88–89.
- ¹¹ W. B. Yeats, *The Variorum Edition of the Poems*, ed. Peter Allt and Russell K. Alspach (New York: Macmillan, 1977), 316; henceforth noted parenthetically as VP, followed by the page number. "The Cold Heaven" was first published in *The Green Helmet and Other Poems* (1912). The poem is available online at, among other sites, <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/172059> (accessed January 15, 2013). Poem reprinted here by permission of United Agents on behalf of Grainne Yeats.
- ¹² Denis Donoghue reminds me that literary scholar Kathleen Woodward, in a 2009 issue of *Dædalus* devoted to "Reflecting on the Humanities," asserted that although in 1990 the ACLS's *Report from the National Task Force on Scholarship and the Public Humanities* could confidently affirm that the humanities "are valuable for their own sake and that the nation must assert and sustain scholarship because that enriches the common fund of knowledge," "today," in Woodward's words, "the notion of the intrinsic good of the humanities is definitely not a part of what is generally referred to as 'making the case' for the humanities"; see Kathleen Woodward, "The Future of the Humanities – in the Present & in Public," *Dædalus* 138 (1) (Winter 2009): 110–111. Professor Woodward ought to know, since she has served as president of the Consortium of Humanities Centers and Institutes (1995–2001) and has organized or attended innumerable humanities conferences, as well as helping write many "reports" about the humanities. Because her essay is about the need for what she calls "public scholarship," I suppose she means that the humanities must justify themselves nowadays by their public utility, not as ends in themselves. At one point in her essay, Woodward laments that literary scholars are more or less out of the loop of such discussions: "it is a fact that literary criticism is read virtually *only* by other literary critics (and perhaps not that many). . . . What

would public literary criticism look like?" (120). I would hardly dare to claim that this present essay is an example of "public literary criticism," but it is an attempt to write as plainly as I can about two actual examples of literature. Another essay in that same issue of *Dædalus*, literary critic Michael Wood's "A World without Literature?" (pp. 58 – 67), is an eloquent defense of reading literature and of writing and reading criticism of literary works. Citing Coetzee and Calvino, Wood asserts that a "classic" is "the work or story through which we think our lives, and without which our lives are not quite thinkable. Both writers [Coetzee and Calvino], notably, associate thought and endurance with criticism" (65).

- ¹³ See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Angelus_Silesius (accessed January 15, 2013), where the saying is cited from an essay by Jorge Luis Borges, *Die Rose ist ohne warum; sie blühet weil sie blühet*. See <http://www.amazon.com/Angelus-Silesius-Cherubinic.../dp/0809127687> (accessed June 6, 2013) for a reference to an English translation of *The Cherubinic Wanderer*.
- ¹⁴ See David Damrosch, *What is World Literature?* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2003).
- ¹⁵ A. Norman Jeffares, *A Commentary on the Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1968), 146.
- ¹⁶ Recent articles have put forth more information and opinion about the current state of the humanities and of literary study within the humanities. David Brooks, in an op-ed piece in *The New York Times*, laments – I think to some degree wrongheadedly – the growing failure in humanities teaching "to cultivate the human core, the part of the person we might call the spirit, the soul, or, in D. H. Lawrence's phrase, 'the dark vast forest'" ; see David Brooks, "The Humanist Vocation," *The New York Times*, June 20, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/21/opinion/brooks-the-humanist-vocation.html?hp&_r=2&. These days the humanities, says Brooks, are "less about the old notions of truth, beauty and goodness and more about political and social categories like race, class and gender." I think a lot of truth, beauty, and goodness is still taught in courses that may nevertheless be about race, class, and gender. The two sets of categories are not incompatible. As for declining enrollments in humanities courses, a forceful essay in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* by Michael Bérubé, who has just finished his term as president of the Modern Language Association, demonstrates, with a lot of statistics, that enrollments in humanities courses have remained at a steady 7 percent for decades; see Michael Bérubé, "The Humanities Declining? Not According to the Numbers," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, July 1, 2013, http://chronicle.com/article/The-Humanities-Declining-Not/140093/?utm_content=buffer19e54&utm_source=buffer&utm_medium=twitter&utm_campaign=Buffer. My topic, however, is literary study, not the humanities in general. Statistics confirm that studying literature has declined substantially, at least in some colleges and universities. This has perhaps happened to some degree not by an increase in business and science majors but by a migration of students from literature courses to film studies, creative writing, women's studies, cultural studies, media studies, visual and performing arts, and so on. These are all worthy subjects of study, but they are not the same as literary study. According to writer Verlyn Klinkenborg, "In 1991, 165 students graduated from Yale with a B.A. in English literature. By 2012, that number was 62"; see Verlyn Klinkenborg, "The Decline and Fall of the English Major," *The New York Times*, June 22, 2013. That is an amazing reduction, even if the average percentage of English majors nationwide has remained approximately the same (1.1 percent of the college-age population in 2011, as against 1.3 percent in 1991). Since this essay was first drafted, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences has published a forceful defense of the humanities and social sciences developed by its Commission on the Humanities and Social Sciences, a group of more than fifty distinguished experts from university administration, the professoriate, the performing arts, public and cultural institutions, and private corporations; see *The Heart of the Matter: The Humanities and Social Sciences for a Vibrant, Competitive, and Secure Nation* (Cambridge, Mass.: American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2013). This cogent and detailed report suggests that the Academy believes the humanities are at present in need of stronger defense and more support, including financial support as well as legitimization support.

- ¹⁷ For two recent discussions of MOOCs, see Ramin Rahimian, “Virtual U.,” *The New York Times*, January 6, 2013; and Nathan Heller, “Laptop U: Has the Future of College Moved Online?” *The New Yorker*, May 20, 2013, 80–91.
- ¹⁸ Cristina Vischer Bruns, *Why Literature? The Value of Literary Reading and What It Means for Teaching* (New York: Continuum, 2011).
- ¹⁹ Mark Edmundson, *Why Read?* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2004); and Mark Edmundson, *Why Teach? In Defense of a Real Education* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013).
- ²⁰ Special issue of *SubStance*, “Does Literature Matter?” ed. Ranjan Ghosh, 42 (2) (2013).
- ²¹ George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, ed. Rosemary Ashton (London: Penguin, 1994), 85.
- ²² Paul de Man, “The Resistance to Theory,” in *The Resistance to Theory*, 11.
- ²³ Roland Barthes, *Le plaisir du texte* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1973); *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller, with a note by Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975). Though I have great respect for Barthes’s influential book, I cannot follow him in the sharp distinction he makes between literary texts that give pleasure by reaffirming ideological presuppositions we already have (Proust) and those that give the *jouissance* of something that upsets those presuppositions (Robbe-Grillet). Proust’s ways with language, like Dickens’s and Trollope’s, for example, give me ideology-challenging *jouissance* even more than does Robbe-Grillet, who seems a little old hat and artificial these days, in spite of his striking narrative innovations.

Politics & Eternity

Francis Oakley

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“The *Leviathan* is the greatest, perhaps the sole, masterpiece of political philosophy written in the English language. And the history of our civilization can provide only a few works of similar scope and achievement to set beside it. Consequently, it must be judged by none but the highest standards and must be considered only in the widest context. The masterpiece supplies a standard and a context for the second-rate, which indeed is but a gloss; but the context of the masterpiece itself, the setting in which its meaning is revealed, can in the nature of things be nothing narrower than the history of political philosophy.

“Reflection about political life may take place at a variety of levels. It may remain on the level of the determination of means, or it may strike out for the consideration of ends. Its inspiration may be directly practical, the modification of the arrangements of a political order in accordance with the perception of an immediate benefit; or it may be practical, but less directly so, guided by general ideas. Or again, springing from an experience of political life, it may seek a generalization of that experience in a doctrine. And reflection is apt to flow from one level to another in an unbroken movement, following the mood of the thinker. Political philosophy may be understood to be what occurs when this movement of reflection takes a certain direction and achieves a certain level, its characteristic being the relation of political life, and the values and purposes pertaining to it, to the entire conception of the world that be-

longs to a civilization. . . . Any man who holds in his mind the conceptions of the natural world, of God, of human activity and human destiny which belong to his civilization, will scarcely be able to prevent an endeavour to assimilate these to the ideas that distinguish the political order in which he lives, and failing to do so he will become a philosopher (of a simple sort) unawares.

“But, though we may stumble over the frontier of philosophy unwittingly and by doing nothing more demonstrative than refusing to draw rein, to achieve significant reflection, of course, requires more than inadvertence and more than the mere acceptance of the two worlds of ideas. The whole impetus of the enterprise is the perception that what really exists is a single world of ideas, which comes to us divided by the abstracting force of circumstances; is the perception that our political ideas and what may be called the rest of our ideas are not in fact two independent worlds, and that though they may come to us as separate text and context, the *meaning* lies, as it always must lie, in a unity in which the separate existence of text and context is resolved. We may begin, probably we must begin, with an independent valuation of the text and the context; but the impetus of reflection is not spent until we have restored in detail the unity of which we had a prevision. And, so far, philosophical reflection about politics will be nothing other than the intellectual restoration of a unity damaged and impaired by the normal negligence of human partiality.

“To establish the connections, in principle and in detail, directly or mediately, between politics and eternity is a project that has never been without its followers. Indeed, the pursuit of this project is only a special arrangement of the whole intellectual life of our civilization; it is the whole intellectual history organized and exhibited from a particular angle of vision.

Probably there has been no theory of the nature of the world, of the activity of man, of the destiny of mankind, no theology or cosmology, perhaps even no metaphysics, that has not sought a reflection of itself in the mirror of political philosophy; certainly there has been no fully considered politics that has not looked for its reflection in eternity. This history of political philosophy is, then, the context of the masterpiece, for the masterpiece, at least, is always the revelation of the universal predicament in the local and transitory mischief.

“If the unity of the history of political philosophy lies in a pervading sense of human life as a predicament and in the continuous reflection of the changing climate of the European intellectual scene, its significant variety will be found in three great traditions of thought. The singularities of political philosophies (like most singularities) are not unique, but follow one of three main patterns which philosophical reflection about politics has impressed upon the intellectual history of Europe. These I call traditions because it belongs to the nature of a tradition to tolerate and unite an internal variety, not insisting upon conformity to a single character, and because, further, it has the ability to change without losing its identity. The first of these traditions is distinguished by the master-conceptions of Reason and Nature. It is coeval with our civilization; it has an unbroken history into the modern world; and it has survived by a matchless power of adaptability all the changes of the European consciousness. The master-conceptions of the second are Will and Artifice. It too springs from the soil of Greece, and has drawn inspiration from many sources, not least from Israel and Islam. The third tradition is of later birth, not appearing until the eighteenth century. The cosmology it reflects in its still unsettled surface is the

world seen on the analogy of human history. Its master-conception is the Rational Will, and its followers may be excused the belief that in it the truths of the first two traditions are fulfilled and their errors find a happy release. The masterpiece of political philosophy has for its context, not only the history of political philosophy as the elucidation of the predicament and deliverance of mankind, but also, normally, a particular tradition in that history; generally speaking, it is the supreme expression of its own tradition. And, as Plato's *Republic* might be chosen as the representative of the first tradition, and Hegel's *Philosophie des Rechts* of the third, so the *Leviathan* is the head and crown of the second."

—From Michael Oakeshott, ed., *Leviathan, or the Matter, Forme and Power of a Commonwealth Ecclesiasticall and Civil* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1946), viii – xii. Used by permission of Oliver Letwin, the Literary Representative of the Estate of Michael Oakeshott.

June 1953, and the dread summons to the Examination Schools at Oxford, through the grim portals of which we dutifully trooped, attired in regulation subfusc and doing our best to maintain, in the teeth of the undergraduate trump of doom, a requisitely stiff upper lip. In common with those others who had been reading for a degree in the Honours School of Modern History, one of the battery of examination papers I had to tackle over the course of the coming week was one on "political theory." Though the History School in its wisdom had seen fit to make it a required subject, it was in my day unpopular with dons and students alike, and it was destined later on to be dropped. Part of the

reason for that unpopularity was the fact that it was structured around three formidable set-texts that formed a sort of Procrustean bed on which the minds of students were to be stretched – or narrowed: Aristotle's *Politics* (in merciful translation), Hobbes's *Leviathan* (or, rather, a selection from that great work tendentious enough to come close to mandating a particular interpretation), and Rousseau's *Du contrat social* (in French). But part of the reason, too, or so I sense, was the epiphenomenal way in which the subject tended to be taught: a bit too exclusively, to use Michael Oakeshott's terms, as the mere generalization in a doctrine of a particular experience of political life in a given era.

At my own college, however, we had been spared the dreariness of that approach. Instead, the subject had been treated as political philosophy *tout court*, not excluding at least a few dim reflections in the Oakeshottian mirror of eternity. And imagining myself at that time to be a fellow of thwarted philosophical temperament for which the course of study mandated in history afforded no other outlet, I had embraced the subject with alacrity. For me, indeed, it turned out to be something of a life-changer, a moment of modest epiphany on the road to a personal intellectual Damascus. From my close encounter with those required classic texts I took away a great deal, and especially so from Rousseau. But in retrospect at least, I conclude that in the long haul, and perhaps oddly, I may have taken away more from my anxious wrestling with Michael Oakeshott's lengthy introductory essay to the Blackwell's edition of the *Leviathan*, the edition we had all been instructed to purchase. It is from that brilliant essay, then, that I have selected the above excerpt as one that has resonated powerfully in my own thinking down through the years, and one that deserves to endure.

If Oakeshott's essay is indeed a brilliant one, it is also one, when I first encountered it as a nineteen-year-old, that I found great difficulty in understanding. My first, somewhat breathless take on it probably amounted, in fact, to little more than an instance of what Arthur O. Lovejoy once derided as "metaphysical pathos," that is, an instinctive, emotional response to "the loveliness of the incomprehensible" that, he wryly noted, has "stood many a philosopher in good stead with his public." "The reader doesn't know exactly what they [such philosophers] mean, but they have [for him] all the more on that account an air of sublimity, [and] an agreeable feeling of awe and exaltation comes over him as he contemplates thoughts of so immensurable a profundity."¹ With time, of course, that feeling of awe and exaltation eventually evaporated. But as I began to grasp more clearly what Oakeshott was really about, it was replaced by an intellectual impetus that, along with related promptings deriving from my rather eclectic extracurricular browsing in other philosophers, nudged me, at a time when the field was trending in a very different direction, toward the somewhat unfashionable pursuit of what is usually characterized as the "internalist" approach to the history of ideas. That is to say, I became fascinated less with external contextual issues of one sort or another than with the internal interconnections and affinities of sympathy among ideas, and with what Lovejoy called their "particular go," the logical pressure they are capable of exerting on the minds of those that think them.

That preoccupation was fueled by the strength of Oakeshott's insight into what may be called the *ecology of ideas*. It was generated, that is to say, by the firmness of his insistence that we should not succumb to the partiality of vision that would lead us to sunder our thinking about pol-

itics from "the single world of ideas," "the entire conception of the world that belongs to a [given] civilization," by his emphasis, accordingly, on the subtle network of affiliations that link political philosophy with seemingly disparate realms of intellectual discourse: with ethics, with epistemology, with natural philosophy, even with metaphysics and theology, for "there has been no fully considered politics that has not looked for its reflection in eternity." That same preoccupation was intensified, moreover, by Oakeshott's related and more specific claim that while "the unity of the history of political philosophy lies in a prevailing sense of human life as a predicament from which human-kind must seek deliverance," its "significant variety" is reflected in the fact that within its overarching unity can be discerned three great, discrete "traditions" or principal "patterns" into which philosophical reflection about politics has fallen, each distinguished by its own "master conceptions," and each possessed of its own great masterpiece standing boldly forth as its supreme expression. And it is, he says, to the tradition distinguished by the master-conceptions of "Will and Artifice" that *Leviathan* belongs, standing to it indeed as its very "head and crown."

All of this is framed, of course, in highly schematic fashion, and it would be fair to say that it has not gone down all that well with historians of political thought at large. Their eyes fixed demurely on the gritty specificities of historical documentation, they have tended to view Oakeshott's traditions as at best "analytic exercises" or "ideal characterizations" imposed on the past, rather than formations that are "self-evidently historical" or reflecting features appearing in "genuinely historical narratives."² Oakeshott himself, moreover, appears to have experienced his own seepage of doubt on the

matter. In the late 1950s, responding to a query of mine, he noted that he had not chosen to develop elsewhere the all too brief delineation of three traditions given in his introduction to *Leviathan* “because I have come to recognize . . . [that triadic pattern] as an over-bold generalization which would have to be qualified in all sorts of ways in order to be made to stand up satisfactorily.” At the same time, nevertheless, he affirmed that he had not come “to doubt the usefulness *at a certain level*, of this way of speaking about the history of political philosophy.”³

This latter reassurance was enough for me. By then, I had hooked into the “certain level” to which he alluded. For me, it was nothing less than “my America! my new-found-land,” the seductive level at which the subtle interconnections between political thinking and other realms of philosophical discourse can often stand out in bold relief, beckoning one to stray further and to tease out the intellectual affinities linking such disparate modes of thought as those pertaining to moral philosophy, natural philosophy, and natural theology. Having identified the *Leviathan* as the head and crown of the tradition distinguished by the master-conceptions of Will and Artifice, Oakeshott went on to identify the roots of that tradition as lying in “the politico-theological ideas of Judaism,” as having drawn its inspiration from the “Judeo-Christian conception of will and creation,” and as having “crystallized into a living tradition” as a result of the pioneering work of the school of late-medieval scholastic theology usually labeled as “nominalist.” That tradition of thinking had been launched in its fullness by the great English philosopher-theologian William of Ockham. And, on the advice of Étienne Gilson, at that time the leading historian of medieval philosophy, I had come to focus my doctoral research on one of Ockham’s leading nom-

inalist followers, Pierre d’Ailly, and was moving on to explore the trail laid down on into the sixteenth century by such affiliated late-scholastic figures as Jacques Almain and John Mair.

By the late 1950s, then, whatever Oakeshott’s second thoughts, I myself had little or none, and was happily engaged in tracking and fleshing out the implications of his original intuition for the late-medieval and early-modern thinkers with whom I was concerned. My appetite for so doing had been whetted by the dyspeptic witness to the endurance of the tradition of Will and Artifice into his own day, afforded by the seventeenth-century Cambridge Platonist Ralph Cudworth. Pointing a hostile finger at Ockham, d’Ailly, and Descartes, he lamented the contemporary reemergence of the voluntarist ethic “promoted and advanced by such as think nothing so essential to the Deity as uncontrollable power and arbitrary will.” He linked it also (and interestingly) with the contemporaneous revival of “the physiological hypotheses of Democritus and Epicurus” (that is, atomism), and with their successful application “to the solving of some of the phenomena of the visible world” (contemporary scientific endeavor).⁴ That last suggestion helped lead me to move on to probe the arguments of such early-modern scientific thinkers as Mersenne, Gassendi, Charleton, Boyle, and the great Newton himself. I came to be concerned especially with their distinctive conceptualizing of the uniformities of nature as “laws” of a quite specific type, an enterprise in which I was further encouraged by my encounter with the explorations of the relationship between natural philosophy and natural theology, ideas of nature and notions of the divine, pursued in their differing but congruent ways by such modern philosophers as A. N. Whitehead, R. G. Collingwood, and Michael Foster, as well as by the related broodings of biochemist

and sinologist Joseph Needham – in his great multi-volume *Science and Civilization in China* – about the failure of the Chinese to develop a natural science comparable with that of the early-modern West. For that failure he linked with their prior failure to develop a comparable concept of laws imposed upon nature, and that, in turn, with the lack in the dominant Chinese intellectual traditions of any clear notion of a personal, legislating creator-God.

In the context of focusing on differing ways of understanding the (physical) laws of nature, Whitehead had pointed out the crucial contrast between laws of nature perceived as immanent in the structure of reality itself, and such laws as imposed on the universe, as it were, from the outside. He was specifically concerned, it is true, with the analysis of cosmological assumptions; but from my own work on the late-medieval nominalist thinkers, it was by then clear to me that the distinction he was drawing was as valid and relevant in the juridical and ethical sphere as it was in the scientific.⁵ The theory of law as immanent, he said, involves the assumption that things are interdependent in such a way that when we know the nature of things, we also know their mutual relations one with another: “Some partial identity of pattern in the various characters of natural things issues in some partial identity of pattern in the mutual relations of these things.” The laws of nature are the formulations of these identities of pattern. Thus, it can be adduced as a law of nature that animals unite to produce offspring, or that stones released in midair strive to reach the ground. This view of the laws of nature involves, he concludes, “some doctrine of Internal Relations,” some notion that the characters of things are the outcome of their interconnections, and the interconnections of things the outcome of their characters.⁶

The doctrine of imposed law, on the other hand, adopts the alternative metaphysi-

cal theory of *External Relations*. Individual existents are regarded as the ultimate constituents of nature, and those ultimate constituents are conceived to possess no inherent connection one with another but to be comprehensible each in complete isolation from the rest. The relations into which they enter are imposed on them from without, and these imposed behavior patterns are the laws of nature. It therefore follows that these laws cannot be discovered by a scrutiny of the characters of the related things (no amount of study of bodies at rest, for example, will tell us anything about their possible motion), but can only become known through the painstaking empirical charting of regularities. Nor, conversely, can the nature of the related things be deduced from the laws governing their relations.

Had I cherished any lingering doubt about the fact that the notion of law as immanent aligned with Oakeshott’s tradition of Reason and Nature and the alternative notion of law as imposed with his tradition of Will and Artifice, and I cannot recall if I did, it had to have been dissipated by what I then encountered when I read R. G. Collingwood’s *Idea of Nature*. For in that lucid little book, he argued that “in the history of European thought there have been three periods of constructive cosmological thinking,” by which he meant three periods

when the idea of nature has come into the focus of thought, become the subject of intense and protracted reflection, and consequently acquired new characteristics which in their turn have given a new aspect to the detailed science of nature that has been based upon it.⁷

He calls the three ideas of nature that these periods have produced “the Greek,” “the Renaissance” – by which, in fact, he really means “early modern”⁸ – and “the mod-

ern.” With the last we will not be concerned; suffice it to say that he regards it as based upon the analogy between the processes of the natural world as studied by natural scientists and the vicissitudes of human affairs as studied by historians. But so far as the two earlier “ideas” go, he argues that whereas the Greek view of nature as an intelligent organism was based on an analogy between the world of nature and the individual human being, the Renaissance or early-modern view conceived the world analogically as a machine. Instead of being regarded as capable of ordering its own movements in a rational manner and in accordance with its own immanent laws, the movements it exhibits are imposed from without, and “their regularity . . . due to ‘laws of nature’ likewise imposed from without.”⁹ Collingwood therefore concludes that this view presupposes both “the human experience of designing and constructing machines and the Christian idea of a creative and omnipotent God.”

This was doubtless one cogent way of characterizing the profound change in viewpoint that eventuated in the development of the classical or Newtonian science, emphasizing the role played in that development both by the Christian idea of omnipotent God and by the concomitant idea of divinely imposed laws of nature. But it had the effect of riveting my attention not only because of that, but also because, just as Whitehead’s conception of laws of nature as immanent and imposed aligned with Oakeshott’s first two traditions, so, too, did Collingwood’s three ideas of nature map with great precision onto all three of Oakeshott’s traditions. This was striking and exhilarating stuff, the more so in that Oakeshott’s traditions had been formulated not only independently of Collingwood’s ideas of nature (though around the same time), but also with an eye to the history of theories of

knowledge, rather than to the history of natural philosophy or cosmological assumptions.¹⁰

My mounting excitement about the apparent alignment between various conceptual schemata arrived at by philosophers working independently of one another and used to categorize phenomena belonging to areas of discourse as various as natural theology, philosophy of nature, theories of knowledge, and theories of natural law (both physical/scientific and moral/juridical) came to something of a peak around 1960. For around that time, while browsing in back issues of *Mind*, the English philosophical journal, I came upon three extraordinary and powerfully – if eccentrically – argued articles written in the mid-1930s by Michael Foster.¹¹ Foster had been a philosophy don of no great prominence at Oxford but, unlike most of his colleagues at the time, had completed a doctorate, and at a German university, no less. He marched, accordingly, to the beat of a very different and, for his day, discordant philosophical drum.¹² These articles were surrounded incongruously in the pages of *Mind* by articles that were technical or highly specialized in nature and almost always of very different philosophical inspiration. One, indeed, was a piece by A. J. Ayer purporting to demonstrate the “impossibility of Metaphysics” and the pseudo-propositional status of any attempt “to describe . . . the existence of something beyond the realm of empirical observation.” Foster’s contributions stand out, then, in bold relief, almost as aliens from a different intellectual planet. Part of their eccentricity, at least in that improbable context, stems from the fact that they are explicitly theistic in inspiration and putatively historical in aspiration; part stems also from the countervailing fact that the historicity of their argument can only be described as deductive *a priori*, dependent upon extrapola-

tion from the internal logic of ideas and largely bereft of the density of documentary evidence with which even the most theoretical of intellectual historians are prone to fortifying their case.

It is Foster's explicit purpose in these articles to argue that the rise of the early-modern science of nature is in many ways to be understood as an ultimate deliverance of the penetration into philosophic modes of thought of the biblical notion of God and the affiliated Christian doctrine of creation, the relationship of that God to the universe. And that specific argument is embedded in a set of assumptions about the complex of interconnections existing among natural theology, natural philosophy, and scientific methodology. Whether it is the Greek philosophical assumption of divine immanence or the biblical notion of divine transcendence and omnipotence that is in play, there "can be," he explains, "no doctrine of God which does not contain or imply a doctrine of the world," and no doctrine of the world or natural philosophy, in turn, that does not imply the particular sort of method to be employed in the scientific study of that world.¹³ And he sees those implications to be "necessary." That is to say, he portrays the interconnections in question as involving nothing less than logical entailment.

From Oakeshott's original intuition, then, along with what I had encountered in the late-medieval and early-modern philosophico-theological texts themselves, enriched and informed by my readings in these modern philosophers, there came eventually to crystallize in my mind a certain, powerful conviction. The conviction, in effect, that in any systematic, coherent, and comprehensive body of philosophical thought, one should be able to recognize and chart the sinuous linkages that must necessarily exist between the notion of the divine one arrived at or started from and

the philosophy of nature and affiliated scientific method one espoused, as well as between that philosophy of nature and the congruent epistemology, moral philosophy, and vision of political society that should properly go with it. I saw those interconnections as involving, at their strongest, direct logical entailment and, at their weakest, a measure of intellectual affinity. And I concluded, thinking especially of Oakeshott's tradition of Will and Artifice, which it had been my concern to explore and/or flesh out, that a historian would do well to keep a weather-eye cocked for the cognate others whenever *any* of the following turned out to be present in a body of thought: First, a biblical (or Koranic) view of God that stresses above all his freedom, transcendence, and omnipotence. Second, a natural philosophy of mechanistic sympathies that stresses the conditional nature of all knowledge based on observation in a created and contingent world that could have been other than it is. Third, a nominalist epistemology congruent with a world composed of autonomous singular entities, an understanding of the uniformities of nature as (natural) laws grounded in the mandate of a legislating divine will, a similarly voluntaristic understanding of the (moral/judicial) natural law and, by analogy, of human positive law. And finally, an essentially "mechanistic" understanding of political society as an artifice ultimately based on a specific type of consent, the creation, in effect, of a concatenation of individual (atomistic) acts of human willing.

As Oakeshott pointed out, this was the intellectual configuration characteristic of Hobbes's own thinking, for he elaborated "a comprehensive system where before there were only scattered aphorisms," and I suppose that for any philosopher of systematic leanings, the conclusion I had arrived at would amount to little more than an obvious truism. Systematic philoso-

phers, however, seem to be in short supply these days, and most philosophers seem to be as specialized in their focus and as partial in their vision as are the rest of us in other fields. Not being a philosopher myself, moreover, I had arrived at my conclusion the hard and indirect way, after slogging through the dense undergrowth of sometimes inconsistent argumentation in the later-medieval and early-modern thinkers on whom I had been pursuing my research. Truism or no, that conclusion, when I finally arrived at it, was for me (however naively) something of an energizing epiphany. It came, accordingly, to shape the further direction of my research in one of the two fields in which I was engaged, as it also came to inform the perspective from which I approached it. In particular, and at a time when social history was in vogue and, with it, in the history of ideas, a species of social and linguistic contextualism, it encouraged me to swim against the tide and to commit instead to a protracted effort to excavate the occluded history and probe the obscure meaning of a somewhat recondite but really quite crucial scholastic distinction that had come to enjoy wide currency and great longevity.

Having surfaced at the turn of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries in the realm of the theology of redemption, that distinction had quickly made its way into natural or philosophical theology, moral philosophy, epistemology, natural philosophy, and legal philosophy. It had come to play an important (if perhaps unexpected) role in the realm of early-modern scientific thinking, as well as in the thinking of the French, English, and Spanish prerogative lawyers of the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries. This foray into the archaeology of ideas eventuated in a book entitled *Omnipotence, Covenant, and Order*, in which I emphasized the truly profound influence exerted by the distinction in question on

the course of European intellectual development, and pondered the implications of its apparent absence from the theological and philosophical traditions of medieval Islam. Discriminating between God's power considered as absolute and as ordained (or ordinary) – *potentia dei absoluta et ordinata (seu ordinaria)* – this distinction was used to vindicate the biblical idea of the divine freedom and omnipotence while still protecting the Greek philosophical intuition that the world was stable, rational, and intelligible, open to penetration in some degree by the human intellect. But, in so doing, it helped promote a shift to a vision or understanding of the underlying order of things – natural, moral, legal, salvational – vastly different from what had come before. That vision was not, that is to say, one of a quasi-necessary order infused with or reflective of the immanent presence of the divine, embedded in a Lovejoyesque great chain of being and emanating from the very natures or essences of things. Instead, it involved a notion of order that was radically contingent, possessed in itself of no luminous intelligibility, grounded in divine will, covenant and promise and, so far at least as the natural order is concerned, discernible only via empirical induction.¹⁴ This latter vision, unlike the former, which resonated to Oakeshott's tradition of Reason and Nature, possessed a strong intellectual affinity with his tradition of Will and Artifice.

Of course, given the stupefying scramble of events that characterizes it, the past wages its own stubborn war of attrition against the neatness and force of all such abstract schemata. Inconsistencies and contradictions are present in the work of even the most powerful of thinkers. One would be wise, accordingly, to keep firmly in focus the fact that people in the past did their thinking (as, perforce, do we today) not necessarily as, logically speaking, they *should*, or even as in an ideal philosophical

world they *would*; but rather (within their own intellectual limits, and given the customs, challenges, complexities, and confusions of their time), simply as they *could*.

But that duly conceded, having in my own historical work drawn inspiration from the philosophico-historical promptings of such as Oakeshott, Whitehead, Collingwood, and Foster, perhaps I might be permitted to indulge, and by way of conclusion, a robustly *internalist* hope that the history of ideas, currently so preoccupied as a discipline with linguistic and contextual issues of one sort or another, will not contrive somehow to shortchange or ignore the context that is the most intimate and immediate of them all: that constituted by the totality of a given author's thinking and conveying the "single 'passionate thought' that pervades its parts."¹⁵ It is the hope, in effect, that as a discipline it may prove in the end to be a big enough tent or sufficiently broad church in its sensibilities to accommodate the type of creative, intuitive insight that such philosophers generated in so stimulating a profusion.

Even in their more "historical" moments, rather than proceeding in more

sublunary, evidence-based, historical fashion, they often moved deductively to assert what in terms of the internal logic of ideas *must* have been the case. But we should not miss the fact that their intuitions not infrequently turned out to have been (historically speaking) very much on target, and their emphasis on the internal interconnections and affinities among ideas almost always illuminating. One of the great contributions, after all, that the pursuit of humanistic studies can make to our understanding of the profoundly mysterious world in which we dwell is the degree to which it attunes us to the presence of such interconnections and prompts us to discern, in what may well appear to be nothing more than a "transitory mischief," the chastening intimations of a woe more universal and a misery more enduring. Certainly, to return to the text that so energized me as a student, and so far as the history of political thought is concerned, it remains my belief that we would do well to be alert to its linkages with other realms of discourse and, if only as in a glass darkly, to look hopefully for its reflection in the Oakeshottian mirror of eternity.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1936), 11.
- ² Thus David Boucher, *Texts in Context: Revisionist Methods for Studying the History of Ideas* (Dordrecht, Netherlands: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1985), 137.
- ³ In a private letter sent to me, dated 23 April 1959. Emphasis appears in original.
- ⁴ Ralph Cudworth, *Treatise Concerning Immutable Morality* (New York and Andover, Mass.: Gould & Newman, 1838), 9 – 11, 18.
- ⁵ A. N. Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas* (New York: Macmillan, 1937), 142 – 147.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, 142, 144.
- ⁷ R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of Nature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1945), 1.
- ⁸ As Collingwood himself concedes (*ibid.*, 4): "The name is not a good one, because the word 'Renaissance' is applied to an earlier phase in the history of thought, beginning in Italy with the humanism of the fourteenth century and continuing, in the same country, with the Platonic and Aristotelian cosmologies of that century and the fifteenth century. The cosmology I now

have to describe was in principle a reaction against these and might, perhaps, be more accurately called post-Renaissance.”

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Oakley

⁹ Ibid., 6.

¹⁰ I owe this information to Oakeshott in a private letter he sent to me, dated 23 April 1959.

¹¹ They are Michael Foster, “The Christian Doctrine of Creation and the Rise of Modern Natural Science,” *Mind* 43 (October 1934): 445 – 468; Michael Foster, “Christian Theology and Modern Science of Nature (i),” *Mind* 44 (October 1935): 439 – 466; and Michael Foster, “Christian Theology and Modern Science of Nature (ii),” *Mind* 45 (January 1936): 1 – 27.

¹² Perhaps not surprisingly, the articles in question neither inspired support in the immediate aftermath of their publication nor generated opposition. Instead, they slipped quietly down some sort of Orwellian memory hole. In the event, it was to be thirty years and more before they began to attract any attention, and almost sixty years before they were gathered together and republished along with a series of commentaries and critiques. That republishing event signaled the fact that, having for long years enjoyed no more than “cult” status, Foster’s arguments were finally beginning to gain some sort of intellectual traction. See Cameron Wybrow, ed., *Creation, Nature, and Political Order in the Philosophy of Michael Foster (1907 – 1959): The Classic “Mind” Articles and Others, with Modern Critical Essays* (Lewiston, N.Y.: E. Mellen Press, 1992).

¹³ Thus Foster, “Christian Theology and Modern Science of Nature (i),” 440.

¹⁴ Francis Oakley, *Omnipotence, Covenant, and Order: An Excursion in the History of Ideas from Abelard to Leibniz* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1984).

¹⁵ Michael Oakeshott, “Introduction,” in Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan, or the Matter, Forme and Power of a Commonwealth Ecclesiasticall and Civil*, ed. Michael Oakeshott (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1946), vii – lxvi.

“Half Art”: Baudelaire’s *Le Peintre de la vie moderne*

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In this piece, I look at an essay that I have probably read too often not to find in it the key to all matters aesthetic, historical, philosophical, and more. The essay is Charles Baudelaire’s *Le Peintre de la vie moderne* (*The Painter of Modern Life*), first published in 1863 and written, most probably, around 1859 to 1860. Baudelaire’s exhilarating innovation is to downplay the significance of eternal value in art, in favor of what he designates as its other half, the fleeting presentness that is modernity. My essay is unapologetically an appreciation – for the most part – of a text that, in focusing on another artist, itself appears to be just that.¹ For Baudelaire develops his arguments through a mock-anonymous celebration of the artist Constantin Guys, referred to as M. G. (Monsieur G.). Guys’s prolific sketches, done at speed, for rapid journal publication, chart the smallest of day-by-day changes and typical scenes in contemporary life. Guys’s pictures – the art of modernity – give to the day a second life, and “translate” into a different medium – from sight to (mental) impression to its “rebirth” as a sketch – that which would otherwise be lost with its passing.

At one level, then, *The Painter of Modern Life* is a celebration of the work (and the lifestyle) of Guys, whose subjects ranged from fashion to war, and whose images were reproduced in widely circulated magazines such as the *Illustrated London News*.² Guys is not named directly by Baudelaire; there is a coy pretense of secrecy, on the grounds that this is what the mysterious M. G. himself would prefer,

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but he is readily and intentionally identifiable. The “fiction,” as Baudelaire calls it, of his subject’s “incognito” is essential to the elevation of a form of art that, in conventional terms, is not proper art at all. This “painter of modern life” is pointedly not a singular, named genius whose work conforms to classical conventions and is confined for tasteful inspection within the precincts of a museum. Artists, in the usual sense, are debunked as “village minds [*des intelligences de village*],” or, just to make the point quite plain, as “hamlet heads [*des cervelles de hameau*]”³; whereas M. G. is “cosmopolitan,” a “man of the world,” someone who spends his time in “the capital cities of the modern world” (VIII, 558).

Guys makes his appearance in the essay not exactly in his own right, but in the role of illustration or elaboration of a manifesto. Starting on aesthetic and art-historical, as opposed to urban or modern grounds, Baudelaire rejects art’s confinement to established, and would-be permanent, media and modes of display:

This is a perfect opportunity, in truth, to establish a rational and historical theory of the beautiful, in opposition to the theory of a unique and absolute beautiful; to show that the beautiful is always, necessarily of a double composition, even though the impression it produces is unified. . . . The beautiful is made of an eternal, invariable element, whose quantity is excessively difficult to determine, and of a relative, circumstantial element that will be, if we want, in turn or all together, the period, fashion, morality, passion. . . . I challenge anyone to discover some sample of beauty that does not contain these two elements. (I, 549 – 550)

Later on, this grand theory is stated from the other direction, starting from the historical rather than from the eternal, in what may well be the most famous sentence of Baudelaire’s essay:

Modernity is the transitory, the fleeting [*le fugitif*], the contingent, half of art [*la moitié de l’art*], the other half of which is the eternal and the unchangeable. (IV, 553; emphasis added)

At a stroke, or a couple of strokes, Baudelaire transforms, or claims to, both the likely subject matter and the evaluative criteria for art. The whole field of contemporary life and manners is opened up as worth representing, worth making into art – as having its own beauty. But Baudelaire is not simply making a claim for a new art that will do justice to the beauties of the present – the mid-nineteenth-century present in particular. He is also affirming that all art, always, has “contain[ed] these two elements”; and that there is a pleasure in the art of the present *as such*. The art of past times can be seen, in this light, to have been representing its own present; one polemical thrust of the essay is Baudelaire’s contempt for artists who insist on draping their subjects in “historical” costumes, rather than showing them in the fashions of their own moment: “The pleasure we take from the representation of the present derives not only from the beauty that may clothe it, but also from its essential quality of presentness [*sa qualité essentielle de présent*]” (I, 547).⁴

“The pleasure we take” draws everyone into an appreciation of a world out there now that is already and always half art, awaiting its completion or visibility in the form of the artist’s representation. It is also perpetually changing, with the observer or artist enjoying and noting what Baudelaire calls, in a lovely phrase, *la métamorphose journalière des choses extérieures*, “the daily metamorphosis of external things” (II, 550) – a formulation that seems to be poised halfway, mythically and historically, between Ovidian transformations and the tiny but perpetual changes of *The Origin of Species*, which is exactly contemporary.⁵

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The scene is set far from the natural variations of seasons, landscapes, or living things; nature is neither an image of stability against the confusions of social change, nor in itself a model of constant growth and change. Unlike either of these, though, Baudelaire's changing world is proudly urban and man-made – and woman-made: his paradigm of daily change and proto-art is fashion. Woman may be the first spectacle, inseparable, says Baudelaire, from her costume, her *toilette*; she is also, by implication, the primary artist, who knows that nature stands in need of embellishment.

The chapter entitled "Eloge du maquillage" ("In Praise of Makeup") draws Baudelaire's most scathing remarks against the idealization of nature in both an aesthetic and a moral sense. This leads him to yoke together two seemingly quite disparate halves. Fashion and makeup, emblemized by the woman, are joined to the civilizing necessity of collective morality that has to be added on. Just as nature is to be improved, or beautified, by makeup and dress, so morality is founded not on following but in departing from a nature which, if left to itself, would be violent: "Crime is originally natural; the human animal drank in the taste for it in its mother's womb. Virtue, in contrast, is *artificial*, supernatural, because in all times and for all nations there have had to be gods and prophets to teach it to animalized humanity and because *on his own*, man would have been powerless to discover it" (XI, 562; emphasis in original). This is how Baudelaire slips an ethical half in alongside his theory of art: morality is like art, in that both of them seek to improve on a nature that is originally flawed.

Baudelaire's half-and-half theory of art is not itself presented as belonging to any particular time. Implicitly, it is transhistorical or even quasi-eternal. For any given work of art – and the earliest example he

offers is pretty early: primitive religious art – there is and was a circumstantial, cultural present, discernible in retrospect as distinctive and often now as ancient. Some past presents, though, are evidently more worthwhile than others. Baudelaire has little time for what he sees as the falsely historicizing or pseudo-simple self-representations of the eighteenth century – just as early-twentieth-century modernists would routinely debunk the benighted aesthetics and values of the nineteenth century. But it might also seem that the idea Baudelaire is promoting about both the significance and the perpetual change of the present could only have come up in the modern period in which he was writing: in other words, in a world conscious in a new way of change, rapid change, as the normal condition of life. This does not invalidate the theory; but it might suggest that only in the modern period, the period in which both the constancy and the rapidity of visible change are taken for granted, could artistic images come to be viewed in this way: as the remains of modernities past.

In this connection, we might also wonder about the almost arithmetical division of art into two halves – with nothing apparently in between these mutually defining, separate-but-united extremes of historical time, the eternal and the momentary. It makes for a neat dialectic and for a perhaps too easy complementarity of form and content: "Without this second element" – that is, the second element of the present age – "which is like the amusing, titillating, *apéritif* envelope of the divine gâteau, the first element would be indigestible, unappreciable, unadapted and not appropriate to human nature" (I, 550). For the consumer of art, this sounds like a way of having your cake and eating it – of doubling, not halving, a pleasure which, in perfectly Baudelairean fashion, is both digestive and divine.

Guys, as the exemplary observer and reporter of daily changes, appears in various guises, all of them associated with a post-Romantic protean self. He is said to be like a child: curious, and seeking and finding everywhere evidence of novelty. Or, like a convalescent, he is an adult whose childish curiosity is revived, so that he always sees the world as new. Here Baudelaire appeals to Edgar Allan Poe's short story "The Man of the Crowd" (1840), but omits the tyrannous fascination exercised by the figure whom the narrator cannot help but pursue. In this Baudelairean world are no mysteries, no threats or unreadable signs; the pleasure is all in a visible image that is its own present, given to the curious eye. Following this line, Guys is also a casual *flâneur*, one quite unthreatened by any imagined enemy or alien figure within the crowd. On the contrary, he plunges into it, becoming a "mirror" or a "kaleidoscope endowed with consciousness" (III, 552); he is even a self who can't get enough of non-self – a "*moi insatiable du non-moi*" (III, 552; emphasis in original).

Alongside this immersion a counter-movement makes M. G. the artist into a restless, tireless worker whose job is never done. Things are changing all the time, new sights coming into view, and M. G.'s task, by definition impossible and endless, is to get them all down, all represented, before it is too late. But first, his day job is to see – when he wakes in the morning he rushes off in regret that he's already missed so many hours of the light and of "*lit-up* things I could have seen and I haven't seen!" (III, 552; emphasis in original). Baudelaire's highlights of Guys's typical day show him swooping down from the panoramic "landscapes of the big city," all the way to the details of a minutely modified way of buckling a belt or tying a bonnet. "All this enters into him, jumbled up; and in a few minutes,

the poem that results from it will be virtually composed" (III, 553). Until finally: "But evening has come!" Everyone else is in bed, the gaslights are out, but M. G. is at his work, "fighting it out with his pencil, his pen, his paintbrush, making the water spurt up from the glass to the ceiling, wiping his pen dry on his shirt, in a hurry, violent, active, as if he was afraid of the images escaping him. . . . And the things are reborn on the paper, natural and more than natural, beautiful and more than beautiful" (III, 553). There is real work here, part of an idiosyncratic daily pattern, involving excesses of energy and haste – there is no time to lose but somehow, from the material mess of the workshop, the magical rebirth occurs. The fleeting present, temporarily stored as mental images, must and can be saved, re-presented, re-materialized, to give it a second life.

The notion of rebirth is crucial here: "And the things are reborn [*renaissent*] on the paper." Phrases like "the representation of the present" or "the memory of the present" highlight the disjunction inherent in this present that is always moving past, that is separated from itself the second it is seen and registered as such. But the painter can bring about a miracle of resurrection, through what Baudelaire calls "a memory that says to each thing, 'Lazarus, arise!'" which is all the time contending with "a fire, a pencil-drunkenness, almost like a madness. It is the fear of not going fast enough, of letting the phantom escape before the synthesis has been extracted and seized" (V, 555).⁶ The stress is not on something that must be lost in the change of form, the movement away from reality, but on the energy and passion that brings about a new life. And the life belongs not to the subject, the artist-observer, but to the things themselves. This is not, in other words, an elegiac version of *carpe diem*, mourning the predicament of a subject condemned to make the most of his

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transitory existence before it is too late for him; rather, it is the external, contingent things of the world that must be grasped and revived in a form in which they can begin and continue to matter.

Baudelaire more than once uses the image of fencing, the "duel" that is set up between "the will to see everything, to forget nothing, and the faculty of memory," which takes in the general contours of what is seen (V, 555). But he also has another metaphor for Guys's working practice: translation. For the most part, Baudelaire insists, Guys does not and should not draw from nature; he gains or takes *impressions*, which are then, in a subsequent stage, set down. In all there are three image-stages: the image first seen, then the image in the memory, and finally the image that is actually drawn on the paper. Baudelaire calls what Guys does "translating his own impressions," the impressions – much more plainly a printing term in French – being the image in the mind of the image out there; spelling it out a few sentences later, he says: "The spectator is here the translator of a translation" (V, 555). In the choice of this word, we can glimpse the first hints of some other kinds of translation that may be taking place, more or less surreptitiously, throughout the essay. Any art criticism must, by definition, put pictures into words, must represent the image in a different, verbal medium. Baudelaire takes this process right back to the artist's own practice, so that a visual representation of what is seen is already being conceptualized in the destination medium of its present representation in words – as a series of translations.

In other ways, too, Baudelaire's transposition of Guys's art into the terms of his own theory of modernity clinches or subtly affirms its own argument. At various points, Guys's work is actually described as a "poem" – as in, "the poem that results from it will be virtually composed" (III,

553). The effect is to make it seem as if Guys's art was from the outset awaiting this final translation in and into words; his consecration is granted by, and also entirely dependent on the words of the critic. Baudelaire emphasizes, and praises, the provisional, half-art condition of Guys's works. His method "has this incomparable advantage, that at any point in its progress, every drawing looks finished enough; you may call that a sketch [*ébauche*] if you like, but a perfect sketch" (V, 555). Baudelaire admires Guys's casual, dispersed and dispersing, attitude. He works on several pictures at once; now and then he goes through them and picks out a few to touch up a bit more; he is always giving them away or throwing them out. In its very practice, Guys's work illustrates the perpetually ongoing external changes that are the ephemeral side of art's subject. But it needs the writer to finish off the image of Guys himself as the artist of modern life. So Guys himself is brought alive or reborn in a new, Baudelairean way: raised up to embody that role.

Over the years, critics of Baudelaire have often speculated about alternative artists who might have been chosen instead to take Guys's exalted place. Why this minor figure, little known at the time – and today, ironically, known best as the artist who figures in Baudelaire's *Le Peintre de la vie moderne*? But I think this misses the point of the essay, which positively requires a half-artist to exemplify the uneternal, uncanonical half of art that is said to be excluded by traditional aesthetic values. Guys's type of art is not to be found in museums, or not primarily; instead it is scattered in modern media that are themselves both actual – of today – and ephemeral. Guys was not a poster artist, but that would have been an equally pertinent choice, since posters at the time were themselves a ubiquitous feature of the always changing street views of big cities.

Half art *par excellence*, they were part of the present reality that the art of the modern should represent.⁷

But still, there is a sense in which Baudelaire's radical add-on to the paradigm of art can be seen as a device for having it both ways. The second, new half of art is supposed to differ from the first by its transitoriness of both subject matter and artistic medium. The art of modern life is characterized by its impermanence, valued as such. And yet a wish for continuance is present, too, from the start. The present is present, says Baudelaire, in all art, not just the art which is avowedly the art of the everyday, ephemeral in its subjects and its media. But the present thereby hitches a ride to eternity, which has the effect of downgrading its own opposite value – as fleeting, as passing – that the essay is promoting. Guys is differentiated from an ordinary *flâneur* because he is not interested only in “the fleeting pleasure of circumstance,” of what's around. Rather, Baudelaire goes on, “it is a matter of disengaging from fashion the poetical in the historical that it may contain, of pulling out [*tirer*] the eternal from the transitory” (IV, 553). In this and other formulations, the value of the transitory lies in its having an extractable element of the other half, the eternal, which continues to predominate or to be the ultimate form or matter of art.

It is interesting, with regard to the representation of the transitory, that Baudelaire was not interested in the artistic and representational possibilities of the then new medium of photography; in fact, he loved to hate it, describing what he called “the photographic industry” as “the refuge of all the would-be painters too little gifted or too lazy to finish their studies.” The incompleteness of the sketch is not a virtue here, nor does photography appear as a means of capturing the momentary or infinitesimal modifications of the day that

are his focus in *Le Peintre de la vie moderne*.⁸ And yet, in speaking of Guys's visual dispatches from the Crimea, Baudelaire singles out one image to which the artist has added (in English) the phrase “Taken on the spot” (VI, 556). What could be more of an advertisement for photography as a mode of eyewitness reporting? Present at the Crimean War of the mid-1850s were not only artists such as Guys but also a photographer, Roger Fenton.

In one way, it is ironic that this essay about the importance of the ephemeral should have acquired an extended history and thus a kind of proto-immortality. In one of its recent incarnations, it finds a place in the monumental *Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*.⁹ Several brief extracts are distilled as the portions fit for a place in the canons of criticism; the longest are the chapters on modernity and makeup (“Eloge du maquillage,” here translated as “In Praise of Cosmetics”). From all the passages chosen, but the one on makeup in particular, Baudelaire's essay emerges as a manifesto for the postmodern – as celebrating the images and surfaces of everyday fashions and beauties without the backing of a substantive, foundational authenticity, and as insisting on the necessity but also the contingency of ethics. It is a selection and slanting that is designed to highlight Baudelaire's continuing modernity – and to show him as a precursor of contemporary philosophical theories. In its new digest, Baudelaire's essay on modern life and art is brought back to life for new readers – half, or less than half, chosen to represent the whole of it in the terms of a primarily playful and pleasurable post-modernity.

In this connection, it is interesting that while the essay on Guys stresses the historicity of both art and daily life, it is not concerned with how future cultural changes might bring about new versions

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or new understandings of past times, in such a way that the art of the past would be constantly made to matter in new ways by being reinterpreted or re-presented in relation to altered norms or possibilities of engagement. Yet Baudelaire's essay itself, like any enduring work of art or criticism,

has continued to be retranslated or transplanted into new contexts and idioms. Such retranslation, it could be argued, is the very condition of the survival or perpetual renaissance of any work of art or criticism; it is how, if not why, art comes or continues to matter.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ An earlier version of this essay, written originally for a one-day conference on the subject of "Why Art Matters," in honor of Malcolm Bowie, was published in the journal *Paragraph* 34 (1) (March 2011): 1–11; used here by permission of Edinburgh University Press.
- ² The weekly *Illustrated London News* had a circulation of 300,000 in 1863; the figure for the (daily) *Times*, which was the dominant serious British newspaper, was just 70,000.
- ³ Charles Baudelaire, *Le Peintre de la vie moderne* (1863), in *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Marcel A. Ruff (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1968), ch. III, 551. All further chapter and page citations are to this edition, and will be noted parenthetically in the main text; translations are mine.
- ⁴ There is a related complaint against a false historicism in art in Henry Fielding's 1749 novel *Tom Jones*: "Vanbrugh and Congreve copied nature; but they who copy them draw as unlike the present age as Hogarth would do if he was to paint a rout or a drum in the dresses of Titian and of Vandyke. In short, imitation here will not do the business. The picture must be after nature herself. A true knowledge of the world is gained only by conversation, and the manners of every rank must be seen in order to be known"; quoted from John Bender and Simon Stern's edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 648–649. Unlike Baudelaire, however, Fielding's primary target is not those who consider the present an unfit subject for art, but those who write about the upper classes without having any personal familiarity with them; from this he makes the analogy with a hypothetical picture of a fashionable contemporary social event in the costume of a previous age. That art should be open to the authentic representation of present-day scenes, à la Hogarth, is here taken for granted; it is not the subject of special advocacy.

More directly in the French literary line as a precursor to Baudelaire is Stendhal's argument for a literature suited to its own time in *Racine et Shakespeare* (1823). Shakespeare, for Stendhal, stands for a responsiveness to contemporary culture that is absent from the French persistence in following literary models and rules that have long ceased to have any vitality in the present. One style may be the right one for the time it emerges, but dated and quite inappropriate for a later period or society. Stendhal uses the terms *classicism* and *romanticism* to differentiate between the two attitudes to literary production:

Sophocles and Euripides were eminently romantic; they gave the Greeks assembled in the theatre at Athens the tragedies which were bound to procure the greatest possible pleasure for this people, based on their moral habits, their religion, and their prejudices.

To imitate Sophocles and Euripides today, and to make out that these imitations will not produce yawns in a nineteenth-century French person, is classicism.

See Stendhal, "Racine et Shakespeare," in *Racine et Shakespeare (1818–1825) et autres textes de théorie romantique*, ed. Michel Crouzet (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2006), 295; my translation.

Whereas Baudelaire insists that the eternal and the present are two sides or halves of the same artistic coin, Stendhal makes a much clearer demarcation such that works will fall into one or the other category, unequivocally. But the binary mode of manifesto argument is the same, as is the emphasis on the value of presently relevant artistic practice (and the mocking dismissal of the perpetuation, in contemporary work, of modes of writing whose time has long since passed).

There is also in Stendhal, as in Baudelaire, an appeal to the speed of change – which Stendhal specifically associates with recent history: “In historical memory, no people has ever experienced a more rapid or total change in its customs and its pleasures than the change from 1780 to 1823; and they want to give us still the same literature!” (302).

- ⁵ The first edition of Darwin’s book was published in 1859. Its running evolutionary argument is directed against the idea of natural history proceeding by means of sudden leaps or shifts or obliterations, and in favor of a countermodel of constant, infinitesimal change, without a clear teleology of development – what Darwin calls “a slowly changing drama.” Without large or decisive events, this drama is anti-tragic: “The old notion of all the inhabitants of the earth having been swept away at successive periods by catastrophes is very generally given up. . . . On the contrary, we have every reason to believe . . . that species and groups of species gradually disappear, one after another, first from one spot, then from another, and finally from the world.” See Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species*, ed. Gillian Beer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 254, 256.
- ⁶ Another reference to Lazarus’s resurrection occurs in Baudelaire’s poem “Le Flacon.” In his moment of reemergence into life, Lazarus appears with the stench of a corpse several days old: “Lazare odorant déchirant son suaire.” In this poem concentrated on a power of smell that is stronger than either matter or death, the odorous Lazarus comes over very differently from the Lazarus of *Le Peintre de la vie moderne*. The reawakening of “Lazare, lève-toi” is clean by comparison; it is aural and visual, to do with response and recognition. (In the analogy, the dead man hears the words; the figure who rises again can be seen to be the image of Lazarus.)
- ⁷ At the time of Baudelaire’s writing, posters were far more prominent on city streets than they are now: this was their heyday, before the regulation that kept and keeps them off many external surfaces. In Paris, the words “Défense d’Afficher: Loi du 29 juillet 1881” (“No Bill Posting: Law of 29 July 1881”) may still be read, inscribed into the walls of many buildings around the city: as though ephemeral images and writing could only be prevented by permanent writing in the very place from which they have been prohibited.
- ⁸ Baudelaire, “Le Public moderne et la photographie” (from “Salon de 1859”), in *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Ruff, 395 – 396.
- ⁹ See *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. Vincent B. Leitch et al. (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001), 792 – 802.

Excerpts from *The Waves*, by Virginia Woolf

with discussion by Gillian Beer

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“Here is a hall where one pays money and goes in, where one hears music among somnolent people who have come here after lunch on a hot afternoon. We have eaten beef and pudding enough to live for a week without tasting food. Therefore we cluster like maggots on the back of something that will carry us on. Decorous, portly – we have white hair waved under our hats; slim shoes; little bags; clean-shaven cheeks; here and there a military moustache, not a speck of dust has been allowed to settle anywhere on our broadcloth. Swaying and opening programmes, with a few words of greeting to friends, we settle down, like walruses stranded on rocks, like heavy bodies incapable of waddling to the sea, hoping for a wave to lift us, but we are too heavy, and too much dry shingle lies between us and the sea. We lie gorged with food, torpid in the heat. Then, swollen but contained in slippery satin, the sea-green woman comes to our rescue. She sucks in her lips, assumes an air of intensity, inflates herself and hurls herself precisely at the right moment as if she saw an apple and her voice was the arrow into the note, ‘Ah!’

“An axe has split a tree to the core; the core is warm; sound quivers within the bark. ‘Ah,’ cried a woman to her lover, leaning from her window in Venice, ‘Ah, Ah!’ she cried, and again she cries ‘Ah!’ She has provided us with a cry. But only a cry. And what is a cry? Then the beetle-shaped men come with their violins; wait; count; nod; down come their bows. And there is ripple and laughter like the dance of olive trees and their myriad-tongued grey

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leaves when a seafarer, biting a twig between his lips where the many-backed steep hills come down, leaps on shore.

“‘Like’ and ‘like’ and ‘like’ – but what is the thing that lies beneath the semblance of the thing? Now that lightning has gashed the tree and the flowering branch has fallen and Percival, by his death, has made me this gift, let me see the thing. There is a square; there is an oblong. The players take the square and place it upon the oblong. They place it very accurately; they make a perfect dwelling-place. Very little is left outside. The structure is now visible; what is inchoate is here stated; we are not so various or so mean; we have made oblongs and stood them upon squares. This is our triumph; this is our consolation.

“The sweetness of this content overflowing runs down the walls of my mind, and liberates understanding. Wander no more, I say; this is the end. The oblong has been set upon the square; the spiral is on top. We have been hauled over the shingle, down to the sea. The players come again. But they are mopping their faces. They are no longer so spruce or so debonair. I will go. I will set aside this afternoon. I will make a pilgrimage. I will go to Greenwich. I will fling myself fearlessly into trams, into omnibuses. As we lurch down Regent Street, and I am flung upon this woman, upon this man, I am not injured, I am not outraged by the collision. A square stands upon an oblong. Here are mean streets where chaffering goes on in street markets, and every sort of iron rod, bolt and screw is laid out, and people swarm off the pavement, pinching raw meat with thick fingers. The structure is visible. We have made a dwelling-place.”

[...]

“Should this be the end of the story? a kind of sigh? a last ripple of the wave? A trickle of water to some gutter where, burbling, it dies away? Let me touch the

table – so – and thus recover my sense of the moment. A sideboard covered with cruets; a basket full of rolls; a plate of bananas – these are comfortable sights. But if there are no stories, what end can there be, or what beginning? Life is not susceptible perhaps to the treatment we give it when we try to tell it. Sitting up late at night it seems strange not to have more control. Pigeon-holes are not then very useful. It is strange how force ebbs away and away into some dry creek. Sitting alone, it seems we are spent; our waters can only just surround feebly that spike of seaholly; we cannot reach that further pebble so as to wet it. It is over, we are ended. But wait – I sat all night waiting – an impulse again runs through us; we rise, we toss back a mane of white spray; we pound on the shore; we are not to be confined. That is, I shaved and washed; did not wake my wife, and had breakfast; put on my hat, and went out to earn my living. After Monday, Tuesday comes.

“Yet some doubt remained, some note of interrogation. I was surprised, opening a door, to find people thus occupied; I hesitated, taking a cup of tea, whether one said milk or sugar. And the light of the stars falling, as it falls now, on my hand after travelling for millions upon millions of years – I could get a cold shock from that for a moment – not more, my imagination is too feeble. But some doubt remained.”

–Excerpts from *The Waves* by Virginia Woolf. Copyright 1931 by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company. Copyright © renewed 1959 by Leonard Woolf. Use by permission of Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company. All rights reserved. Used by permission of The Society of Authors as the Literary Representative of the Estate of Virginia Woolf.

Virginia Woolf imagined and wrote *The Waves* through numerous drafts and versions over four years of intense emotional, political, and social involvement.¹ Her association with the Working Women's Guild was time- and thought-consuming, her love affair with Vita Sackville-West was at its height, her health was uncertain. During this period, from September 1926 to February 1931, she also published her magical mock-biography *Orlando* (1928), with its playful and disruptive challenges to class, gender, and death, and *A Room of One's Own* (1929), her first major polemic against the current ordering of society with its disadvantaging of women. *The Waves* (1931) was mused on in the midst of all this other activity and not sequestered from it, though it moved in other directions. It was to be radically innovative, even, and boundless. It sought new ways to tell life-stories. But it also wanted to tell life itself. Writing against the grain of the novel genre was hard and compelling work. The luminous sentences, precise and flagrant, fell into rhythms of repetition and accretion.

Woolf told her friend the composer Ethel Smyth that she wrote the book to a rhythm not a plot,² but behind it lie two inevitable orders: each day the sun rises, reaches its zenith, and declines; each person moves from childhood through maturity toward old age and death. The sun is single, its effects multiple, colossal and minute. But the individual life is never single – rather, lateral, overlapping, recoiling. The singleton motion of the life span is warped, enriched, and embroiled in the lives of others. The insistent present is iridescent with the multiple past. That past reaches through personal history into the cold dark of the universe as well as the antiquity of Egypt and primeval creatures. The body is *now*, in all its richness and absurdity from the childhood bath on into old age:

Water pours down the runnel of my spine. Bright arrows of sensation shoot on either side. I am covered with warm flesh. My dry crannies are wetted; my cold body is warmed; it is sluiced and gleaming. Water descends and sheets me like an eel. (19)

These varying motions dapple the surface of Woolf's language in *The Waves*. The book explores the intimate individualities of six people – three women, three men – who know each other across their shared lifetimes but come together only infrequently once they are adults. We see them in childhood, at school, at university and in youth, out to dinner together, visiting Hampton Park, and in the case of Bernard, in old age: their thoughts range across time and tangle together events, images, and repeated emotions. They are very different from each other in their sexualities and sensibilities though close in social class. The method of representing each person's consciousness is through direct reported present-tense utterance. The last vestige of the conventional narrator is held in the unvarying past-tense and inexpressive speech tag, "said Bernard," "said Jinny," "said Neville," "said Rhoda," "said Susan," "said Louis." In this book, the effect is of quiet ritual rather than presiding narrative presence. Moreover, utterance here does not imply speech but rather a threshold voice, heard in the reader's ear alone and following the skeins of thought, passion, senses, and feeling within the mind. Neither spoken aloud nor sealed within consciousness these utterances can be received by the other people in the book as well as the reader, but seem to dwell on a threshold between thought and speech.

I have come to love the book partly for what it can make happen in a group. It is integral to several of my most poignant experiences as a teacher, and as a listener. It is a book about the everyday, forthright

and mysterious. It embraces the ridiculous and does not seek to smooth out incongruity. It is a merciful book, and a book for all times of life. I first read it in my early twenties and now I'm in my seventies – as old as is Bernard at the book's end. Some works wane, but in the course of time, for me, *The Waves* has gathered. Recently I sat above the sea and heard the thump and withdrawal of the waves, *hors* meaning, restful, powerful, their systems invisible, their forms fleeting and manifest: unstoppable. Reading *The Waves* we must trust its process from page to page with some of the same quiescence and alertness that sea-sound induces in us. The book assuages narrative anxiety once we follow its rhythms. But it is also the vehicle of passion and ferocity.

The Waves, moreover, is a work of extraordinary sensory directness, with sentences that make your finger-ends fizz.

Neville: "Yet that crimson must have burnt in Titian's gizzard." (129)

The fizz of this sentence comes through your ears as well as your eyes: those clustered Rs and Ms and Ns siphon down toward the assonance of "Titian's gizzard," which is an exercise for the tongue even when silently voiced. And the false trigger of the earlier S in "crimson" summons "burst," behind "burnt." Taste becomes violence, becomes color. All our senses commingle as we read. And this is just one sentence in the midst of a paragraph in a fluid procession of lapsed and recovered moments.

My first encounter with the work was almost accidental. I was invited to teach a summer course at a small liberal arts college in the Midwest. It was my first visit to the United States. The syllabus had already been set before I was involved, and I felt a slight pang of dismay when I saw *The Waves* on the list, particularly because I had been

told that the participants weren't university students. They included the owner of the town's gas station, a beset housewife with four young children at home, a man angry with his job as a counter-clerk, a young girl just out of education, and a retired man whose previous job I never discovered. How they all contrived to be there impressed me at the start.

At the first meeting they told me how much they hated this book. They couldn't read it. It was obscure, aloof, nothing like real life. I wasn't sure how much I liked it either. We set to work, reading passages aloud, watching the stories accumulate and unspool, puzzling over the difference and likeness of the people, listening to the uncensored run of thoughts and images set just below the level of speech. That was what first caught people's interest: it was how we habitually live, articulate and unwary, at ease in the unuttered, thinking things we would never own aloud. And this book didn't blame us for that process; it didn't chastise or judge. Here we could enter through a blatant silence into six persons' heads and experience a new kind of intimacy.

Woolf thought that she had done away with characters and was puzzled by reviews that emphasised the individuals.³ What emerged in the summer group was a fascination with the six individuals and the way they gradually resolved into known people – in the way indeed that known people resolve, after time, but never quite securely. It became clear that when dipping into the book, the particular voices could be recognized at once, partly because of their preoccupations but also because of the shape of their sentences, their adversarial relations to each other's identity. Yet their reactions could not always be foreseen, as when the devoted wife and mother Susan suddenly thinks, "I am sick of my own craft, industry and cunning, of the unscrupulous ways of the mother who

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protects, who collects under her own jealous eyes at one long table her own children, always her own" (159). So the characters became food for ordinary gossip, an unexpected development, rousing a good deal of laughter, animation, and scorn. The events that are ordinarily foregrounded were here merely stated in the midst of a wider flow: Bernard married and had a son; Rhoda committed suicide; Louis made good in the city and was secretly a poet. A flood of speculation and intimate knowledge crowded into the group's conversation. What Woolf would have made of this I don't like to think, but she wasn't there. Her book was, and it engaged everyone in thinking about their own lives and the lives of others in new ways.

So this was my first encounter with the power of the work. Much later, I prepared an edition with an introduction and notes for Oxford World's Classics when Woolf briefly emerged from copyright in Britain in 1992.⁴ Editing always compels immersion and slow reading, reading even at the pace of composition. You become part of the writing, marking the pauses between sentences, the fissures between paragraphs, the pressure of syntax on sense, the drag and the rapture of the writing hand. I was moved in quite new ways as I uncovered the traces of thought that led out to Woolf's life and to other writing in the book's rich allusive texture: Shelley, Catullus, and the fin in a waste of waters, her dead brother Thoby and the streets of London and its historic places open to everyone – St. Paul's (just then reopened after several years), the National Gallery, Hampton Court – the city's flow of people:

"Here I stand," said Jinny, "in the tube station where everything that is desirable meets – Piccadilly South Side, Piccadilly North Side, Regent Street and the Haymarket. I

stand for a moment under the pavement in the heart of London. Innumerable wheels rush and feet press just over my head." (160)

Immediately after these sentences Jinny, the flagrant metropolitan, so intoxicated with her own beauty and sex, suddenly sees herself as old: "I shall look into faces and see them seek some other face." The Lethean descent of bodies on the escalators momentarily makes her cower:

I admit, for one moment the soundless flight of upright bodies down the moving stairs like the pinioned and terrible descent of some army of the dead downwards and the churning of the great engines remorselessly forwarding us, all of us, onwards, made me cower and run for shelter. (161)

Death haunts life; but Jinny revives. Repeatedly in this novel the humdrum becomes colossal and then reduces again to its ordinary scale: that pulse, expansion and contraction of emotional and physical scale, is attentive to ordinary experience in a way that is rarely registered in writing. (Sebald does it, too.) The rhythmic intensity of the characters' self-awareness, their shared and heightened language, their skeptic readings of each other's personalities, all answer to the unacknowledged fullness of the everyday. That recognition of the sheer scope of common experience is one of the gifts that Woolf gives the reader.

She gives it despite the narrow social range of the main participants. Woolf distrusted her own ability to capture working-class speech without caricature, and so she gradually abandoned, over the rewriting, her original intention to include a broad range of people: not only Roger who "of course, was among those who would have nurses"; but Albert, "the cowman's son," later "apprenticed to a linen-draper"; and also "Flora and Dorothy": "They would be going to schools in Switzerland about the same time that Florrie had went out

for the first time as kitchenmaid.” Florrie cried all night after “being spoke to very severely by the cook” and “was then dismissed with a scolding.” The narrator in the first version muses uneasily:

No one could follow lives ~~which~~ like that; ~~witho~~ – without the intention (wandering on, the) which makes the eye squint & see only a ~~profile~~, an outline, an edge, of drawing comparisons & treating these rounded & entire figures as if they were ~~silhouettes~~ ~~cut out~~ fragments merely; one being half obscured by the other.⁵

Woolf knew something of these less privileged lives. While she was writing *The Waves* she was also writing an introductory letter for Margaret Llewelyn Davies’s collection of letters written by Co-operative Working Women, *Life as We Have Known It*, which the Hogarth Press (owned by Woolf and her husband, Leonard) published in 1930.⁶ There working women wrote first-person accounts of the difficulties and achievements of their lives. It may well have been reading those letters in direct address that made Woolf fully aware of the impossibility for her of rendering working-class speech so as to show the people as the “rounded and entire figures” they were. Instead of describing individuals, she includes everyone together propelled by “the churning of the great engines remorselessly forwarding us, all of us, onwards” (161).

A decade later a colleague and I ran a seminar on “speaking poetry,” encouraging undergraduates to trust their voices, to pay attention to line ending and rhyme, and not to feel embarrassed by the rhythms of poetry. At the end of the course some of them wanted the class to continue informally, so I told them that I’d long had a fantasy of hearing the whole of *The Waves* read aloud. Six of them volunteered; three women, three men, a variety of voices,

from Liverpool, from Kolkata, from Canada and Denmark, Great Yarmouth and Cambridge. Instead of the imagined sounds of 1930s upper-middle-class speakers, we had a gallimaufry of accents that opened the text out again to wider experience, as Woolf had initially wanted to do when she described it on the title page of the first draft as “The Moths or the life of anybody.” I read the interludes. Each of the speakers read one of the characters. We sat in a shallow arc, and the only dramatization was that as each speaker rose to read, the previous speaker sat down. The effect was of waves moving. We read, with breaks between the sections, from ten in the morning until just before nine in the evening. The event was open, and people came in and out to listen; a few stayed through the entire sequence. The sun reached its zenith and declined and we ended with lamps and darkness, accompanying Bernard through his solitary meal while he ruminates on the body and time, and merges his own life with the lives of all his friends. What I gained above all from this group’s work was the humor of these lives pressing against each other and swaying apart, the book’s incongruities of mood and hope and desire. Absurdity is beautiful here, and sharply – sometimes sardonically – observed as well.

What we all experienced together was living through ages of ourselves that we had not yet encountered. One person said, “Now I know what it feels like to be middle-aged, to be old.” And the students talked about learning how friendship survives through an arc of time and absences and estrangements: “Our friends – how distant, how mute, how seldom visited and little known” (229). We also experienced death, which comes at intervals all the way through life and not only at its end. The dead and the living are contiguous, not discontinuous: “It is strange how the dead leap out on us at street corners, or in

dreams" (229). The one silent character in *The Waves* is Percival, beloved of them all in different ways, an impermeable presence whose death halfway through the work marks the beginning of the end of old ways of being, of old empires.

Looking back on that experience of hearing the work read aloud, I realize that for me it also opened out analytically and emotionally its complex form, its affinity with chamber music.

As she worked on "the moths," her first imagining of what proved to be *The Waves*, Woolf wrote in her diary on 27 June 1927, thinking about how to set the scene:

France: near the sea; at night; a garden under the window. I do a little work on it in the evening when the gramophone is playing late Beethoven sonatas. (The windows fidget at their fastenings as if we were at sea.)⁷

Late Beethoven and the windows bump and rasp, the sound of the sea evoked: this is a new kind of music, merging instruments and natural sounds. Much later in the process of composition she muses: "It occurred to me last night while listening to a Beethoven quartet that I would merge all the interjected passages into Bernard's final speech."⁸ The four instruments playing the quartet on the gramophone also interject and merge, each carrying its own voice and timbre in a complex colloquy that forms an enormous conversation. Woolf is seeking a prose that will move "as prose has never moved before: from the chuckle & the babble to the rhapsody."⁹ Bernard in the last section of the book longs for a music "painful, guttural, visceral, also soaring, lark-like pealing song" to replace the "flagging, foolish transcripts" (209). In a string quartet, the voices of the instruments entwine, all active, so that the music is more than each, each intent and listening. Though the recurrence, chase, and overlap of the voices in *The Waves* may

suggest fugal form, the intricacies of quartet structure and performance are more outward reaching than fugue alone.¹⁰ Music, and particularly the innovations and challenges of late Beethoven, are part of the process of composition in this work. So also is the start of Woolf's intense and difficult friendship with Ethel Smyth, that rarity for the time: a woman composer of large-scale music.

The scenes I've invited you to read bring music to the center of meaning and also ask questions about story. It is hard to disengage any passage from the rest of the book since so many of its effects are produced by the long-dispersed whispers and echoes and shouts that mesh the whole immense sequence together. Moreover, mood in this writing shifts so fast that an extract risks seeming fixed or portentous when in its full setting it is fleeting and contingent. This passage is, I hope, long enough to hear the limber writing ripple across moods.

This is the situation. Percival has died, far away in India. The "I" in this passage is Rhoda. From childhood on, Rhoda is the most isolated and chagrined of the group of friends. She is disgusted by the human, by the pressure of other people's bodies and presences. Here, grieving for Percival, she walks in Oxford Street among the crowds and then turns aside and enters what is clearly the Wigmore Hall, the intimate chamber-music hall. Woolf is always alert to how experience is charged by where it happens: in Southampton Row or Fleet Street, in the Strand or St. James's Park. Each lends a different timbre. So does Wigmore Hall, its quiet art-nouveau space recessed behind Oxford Street. It is a place of cultural privilege as well as of contemplation.

The passage opens as savage comedy. The "decorous, portly" audience are somnolent and overfed, outwardly refined, yet

their excess of “beef and pudding” brings on the thought of maggots and they transform, in the speed of a simile, into “walruses stranded on rocks,” too heavy to reach the sea. They have entered the hall as respite from the heat and mainly to greet their friends. The “sea-green” singer, herself grotesque in slippery satin, “assumes an air of intensity,” but the sound she makes abruptly reaches the core: “the core is warm; sound quivers within the bark.” The repeated “Ah” becomes the sound of love, a primal sound, but not enough for rescue. Next come the “beetle-shaped men,” the string players, the “ripple and laughter” of their harmonies evoking the seafarer, perhaps Odysseus on his return. Then Rhoda’s language turns away from all these similes and their surface comforts: “‘Like’ and ‘like’ and ‘like’ – but what is the thing that lies beneath the semblance of the thing?” The fierce humor of excess despised is replaced by something lean, pure, fell, as the string quartet proceeds.

As a child Rhoda, left in the classroom to finish the sums she cannot understand, has experienced zero:

Look, the loop of the figure is beginning to fill with time; it holds the world in it. I begin to draw a figure and the world is looped in it, and I myself am outside the loop; which I now join – so – and seal up, and make entire. The world is entire, and I am outside of it, crying, “Oh save me, from being blown for ever outside the loop of time!” (15)

Now, listening to the musicians in the face of death, she is at last included and finds a dwelling-place in the absolute geometry of meaning without language:

There is a square; there is an oblong. The players take the square and place it upon the oblong. They place it very accurately; they make a perfect dwelling-place. Very

little is left outside. . . . Wander no more, I say; this is the end. The oblong has been set upon the square; the spiral is on top. We have been hauled over the shingle, down to the sea. Gillian Beer

Like the sweep of Lily Briscoe’s line and triangle in her picture achieved at last at the end of *To the Lighthouse*, the musicians resolve experience into an abstraction so extreme that it is all-encompassing, and comforting. Strikingly, though, the zero – the “o” that terrified Rhoda as a child – is here absent from the visual forms (square, oblong, spiral) and present only in the letters of the word “oblong.”

Even this liberation and sweetness cannot last for Rhoda untainted by the imperfection of bodies. The paragraph continues: “The players come again. But they are mopping their faces. They are no longer so spruce or so debonair. I will go.” But she goes, “fearlessly”:

As we lurch down Regent Street, and I am flung upon this woman, upon this man, I am not injured. I am not outraged by the collision. A square stands upon an oblong.

Strengthened by the music, Rhoda declares: “I will at last free the checked, the jerked-back desire to be spent, to be consumed.” Her drive toward death is a drive toward completeness. The hidden image of the bitted horse comes to its fullness in the work’s final paragraphs, where Bernard, facing his own death, imagines himself as a horseman spurring his steed onward. The grandiloquence of his assertion “Against you I will fling myself, unvanquished and unyielding, O Death!” is followed only by the italicized, neutralizing sentence: *The waves broke on the shore* (248).

Bernard’s grandiloquence makes me uneasy, and perhaps is meant to do so. It harks back to the imperial vocabulary that surrounds Percival. No empire lasts, and yet death remains imperious. Bernard, the

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storymaker and storyteller among the group, is always seeking ways of moving beyond the "phrases and fragments" with which he feeds his craft. He makes his friends into stories and deeply distrusts his own making. His incontinent curiosity discomfits him and makes him feel himself second-rate. He carries some of Woolf's technical burdens for her: "But if there are no stories, what end can there be, or what beginning? Life is not susceptible perhaps to the treatment we give it when we try to tell it" (223). The physical world is essential to his and to her creativity:

Let me touch the table – so – and thus recover my sense of the moment. A side-board covered with cruets; a basket full of rolls; a plate of bananas – these are comfortable sights.

He relishes the comedy and grand guignol of the animal body:

There is the old brute, too, the savage, the hairy man who dabbles his fingers in the ropes of entrails; and gobbles and belches; whose speech is guttural, visceral – well, he is here. He squats in me. Tonight he has been feasted on quails, salad, and sweetbread. (241)

Both Bernard and Woolf value routine as precious and as fundamental to living: "After Monday, Tuesday comes." Routine allows recovery and reminiscence. But always within and beyond those easeful stories with their pretended precision lies another realm, which discountenances the baleful continuity of narrative:

There is always deep below it, even when we arrive punctually at our appointed time with our white waistcoats and polite formalities, a rushing stream of broken dreams, nursery rhymes, street cries, half-finished sentences and sights. (213)

These ways of being and of writing cannot be reconciled but they can coexist.

Behind them lies the actuality of oceans whose waves cover more than half the globe and whose action never ceases. Woolf's encompassing metaphor of the waves is more than metaphor. It turns human eyes and ears upon the world we inhabit and cannot control.

This is a book that draws you back over time and takes you forward further than you could have imagined, into and beyond your own life. There is always more to discover than you had noticed. And each group of readers finds something else. I am grateful to the people with whom I have read the book: there is shared revelation in the experience. *The Waves* has a way of breeding friends across generations and of whispering questions that continue to disquiet.

- ¹ Virginia Woolf, *The Waves: The Two Holograph Drafts*, trans. and ed. J. W. Graham (Toronto and Buffalo: Toronto University Press, 1976). *The Waves* in the excellent recent *Cambridge Edition of the Works of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Michael Herbert and Susan Sellers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), includes a full chronology of the composition of the novel; see pp. ci–cxvii. *The Waves* was first published in the United Kingdom and United States in 1931 by the Hogarth Press. Page references in this essay (noted parenthetically) are to the edition I prepared for World's Classics (Oxford University Press, 1992), reissued as an Oxford World's Classic (1998, 2008).
- ² *The Letters of Virginia Woolf, 1888–1941*, ed. Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann, 6 vols. (London: Hogarth, 1975–1980), vol. 4, 204.
- ³ “Odd that they [*The Times*] shd. praise my characters when I meant to have none”; *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Anne Olivier Bell and Andrew McNeillie, 5 vols. (London: Penguin, 1979–1985), vol. 4, 47. Woolf is rebelling against the practice of Arnold Bennett and other “realist” authors of the time who provided long descriptions of their characters and their surroundings.
- ⁴ The introduction I wrote for that edition is collected together with essays on the other novels in *Virginia Woolf: The Common Ground: Essays by Gillian Beer* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996). *The Waves* is now out of copyright again after the end of the seventy-year copyright period, which had been extended from fifty years in 1992.
- ⁵ Quotations in this paragraph are from the J. W. Graham edition, pp. 67–68.
- ⁶ For further discussion, see the introduction to the Herbert and Sellers edition, pp. xlix–li. See also, *passim*, Alison Light's brilliant study, *Mrs. Woolf and the Servants* (London: Fig Tree, 2007).
- ⁷ *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, vol. 3, 139.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, vol. 3, 336.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, vol. 4, 4.
- ¹⁰ In the preface to her 1937 translation of *The Waves*, French novelist Marguerite Yourcenar writes briefly but compellingly about the fugue-like nature of the book's organization and its Mozartian allegros and andantes; see *Les Vagues* (Paris: Stock, 1937), v. The new study by Emma Sutton, *Virginia Woolf and Classical Music: Politics, Aesthetics, Form* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), will greatly extend our understanding of Woolf's interweaving of music in her work.

The Power of *Middlemarch*

Patricia Meyer Spacks

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Dorothea's eyes followed her husband anxiously, while he sank down wearily at the end of a sofa, and resting his elbow supported his head and looked on the floor. A little flushed, and with bright eyes, she seated herself beside him, and said –

“Forgive me for speaking so hastily to you this morning. I was wrong. I fear I hurt you and made the day more burdensome.”

“I am glad that you feel that, my dear,” said Mr. Casaubon. He spoke quietly and bowed his head a little, but there was still an uneasy feeling in his eyes as he looked at her.

“But you do forgive me?” said Dorothea, with a quick sob. In her need for some manifestation of feeling she was ready to exaggerate her own fault. Would not love see returning penitence afar off, and fall on its neck and kiss it?

“My dear Dorothea – ‘who with repentance is not satisfied, is not of heaven nor earth:’ – you do not think me worthy to be banished by that severe sentence,” said Mr. Casaubon, exerting himself to make a strong statement, and also to smile faintly.

Dorothea was silent, but a tear which had come up with the sob would insist on falling.

“You are excited, my dear. And I also am feeling some unpleasant consequences of too much mental disturbance,” said Mr. Casaubon. In fact, he had it in his thought to tell her that she ought not to have received young Ladislaw in his absence: but he abstained, partly from the sense that it would be ungracious to bring a new complaint in the moment

of her penitent acknowledgment, partly because he wanted to avoid further agitation of himself by speech, and partly because he was too proud to betray that jealousy of disposition which was not so exhausted on his scholarly compeers that there was none to spare in other directions. There is a sort of jealousy which needs very little fire: it is hardly a passion, but a blight bred in the cloudy, damp despondency of uneasy egoism.

“I think it is time for us to dress,” he added, looking at his watch. They both rose, and there was never any further allusion between them to what had passed on this day.

But Dorothea remembered it to the last with the vividness with which we all remember epochs in our experience when some dear expectation dies, or some new motive is born. Today she had begun to see that she had been under a wild illusion in expecting a response to her feeling from Mr. Casaubon, and she had felt the waking of a presentiment that there might be a sad consciousness in his life which made as great a need on his side as on her own.

We are all of us born in moral stupidity, taking the world as an udder to feed our supreme selves: Dorothea had early begun to emerge from that stupidity, but yet it had been easier to her to imagine how she would devote herself to Mr. Casaubon, and become wise and strong in his strength and wisdom, than to conceive with that distinctness which is no longer reflection but feeling – an idea wrought back to the directness of sense, like the solidity of objects – that he had an equivalent centre of self, whence the lights and shadows must always fall with a certain difference.

–George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, Chapter 21

I first read George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* (1872) at around the age of fifteen. From its opening pages on, I knew that it would powerfully affect me. Obsessed in those days with the idea of being *good*, I found the novel thrilling because it initially struck me as offering a model of female goodness in its central character, Dorothea Brooke. Dorothea was noble and spiritual and self-sacrificing. She wanted, I thought, only to devote herself to others. When, occasionally, she had a moment of anger, she promptly repented. I wasn’t much like that myself, except in aspiration. As I now realize, I wanted to be a Victorian heroine, only I was never willing to pay the price in repression and limitation.

Middlemarch was indeed destined to influence me strongly, but it urged me toward more than moral virtue; it helped determine my vocation. I have spent almost sixty adult years pondering imaginative literature. *Reading* imaginative literature provided impetus and shape for such a career. Eliot’s novel helped me to realize – more accurately, to begin a long process of realization – that productive reading demands not only close attention, but also active intellectual and emotional engagement. The intricacies of plot and attitude that mark the mammoth work (more than 800 pages in the closely printed Penguin edition that I read most recently) teach the reader how to read, or at least how to start reading. They also educate that reader about the nature of responsibility, and of vocation.

Middlemarch did not stand alone in this process of teaching, which depended on my reading of numerous imaginative works, each providing new nuances of instruction as it raised individual interpretive problems. I use Eliot’s novel here partly to represent many other novels and their functions in my professional development, but partly as the uniquely powerful construction that it is.

George Eliot was 50 years old when she began writing *Middlemarch*, which progressed slowly, partly because the son of her companion, George Henry Lewes, was dying from tuberculosis during the first months of composition. Published first in eight installments during 1872, the novel won immediate popularity and has remained popular ever since, ardently praised by other writers, including Emily Dickinson and Virginia Woolf, as well as by less specialized readers. I read *Middlemarch* for the second time only a few months after my first encounter with it, and I have subsequently read it many times more. I single it out as an important influence on my academic career because its power over me has continued to enlarge throughout my adult life, taking different form in every new reading. To focus on a passage that caught my attention from the beginning and that continues to seem crucial to me will enable me at least to suggest shapes that my understanding has taken and why they matter to my endeavors as teacher and writer about literature.

One of the narrator's many metaphorical interventions, the sequence that first attracted my puzzled contemplation at fifteen turned on the grotesque and unexpected image of the world as an udder. "We are all of us born in moral stupidity, taking the world as an udder to feed our supreme selves." I thought I understood the point of the sentence: everyone is an ego-maniac. I even understood that Eliot had made the issue of self-absorption central to the novel. But why that peculiar figure of the udder? It's impossible to visualize the world as an udder and difficult to imagine the sense in which "we . . . all" use it thus or just what vital fluid "we" expect from the world. In my first reading, I left the sentence as an enigma. Yet it had begun its influence: it remained in my mind.

When I returned to it, its puzzles multiplied. If we "take" the world as an udder,

are we taking it with our minds, *thinking* the world an udder designed for our use? In that case, our stupidity consists in considering the world what it is not. Or are we imagined as taking in a physical sense, grasping the metaphorical udder? If so, we might be stupid only in believing that we can hold onto it forever. For a time, perhaps, hanging onto the udder actually gives us what we seek. Only after we learn to believe in the fact of other people do we realize that the world must nourish more than us; indeed, that it might not have enough to supply the needs of insatiable ego.

Despite the positive association between udders and milk, this solitary udder has a repellent aspect. Does it belong to some gigantic symbolic cow, or to some yet more monstrous creature? To provide nourishment, it must form part of an animal; and an animal offering milk almost automatically becomes a figure of maternity. Yet no idea of maternity imbues Eliot's representation. The udder doesn't give; "we" take. The sentence suggests not nurturing, but demand. Our moral stupidity appears to produce instant ugliness.

This strange sentence appears toward the end of an episode from Dorothea's honeymoon trip to Rome. Nineteen-year-old Dorothea, burning with spiritual ardor, wishes to devote herself to some great cause. She chooses to marry Edward Casaubon, a clergyman about thirty years older than she, because she imagines him as a source of learning and wisdom and imagines herself as helping him in the composition of his great work, a "key to all mythologies." Even on the wedding trip, actuality fails to match expectation: Casaubon provides no wisdom, and Dorothea can fill no helpful role. The narrated day that ends shortly after the udder comment has begun with Casaubon reproaching his bride for what he takes as a hint that he should proceed more quickly

toward publication. Dorothea responds angrily, and the newlyweds leave their quarrel unresolved when Casaubon departs for a day of research.

At his return, Dorothea apologizes for “speaking so hastily” and declares herself wrong, because “I fear I hurt you and made the day more burdensome.” She does not apologize for what she has said, only for its possible effect. Casaubon responds, quietly, “I am glad that you feel that, my dear.” He does not explicitly accept her apology, and “there was still an uneasy feeling in his eyes as he looked at her.” The reader must interpret what has not been said, as well as the actual utterances, wondering, and perhaps tentatively deciding, why Casaubon continues to feel uneasy.

In a first reading – particularly the first reading of a teenager – it is easy to attribute Casaubon’s uneasiness to his inability to endure the slightest shadow of criticism, and to conclude that this sensitivity stems from the man’s moral insufficiencies. Our sympathy readily goes out to Dorothea, attractive, admirable, trying hard, and only a teenager herself. Later readings, however, complicate the matter – partly because of the retroactive effect of the *udder* sentence. Even in my first reading, I think, I believed (as I still believe) that Dorothea fails to apologize for the substance, as opposed to the effect, of what she has said because her commitment to truth equals her commitment to the marriage. She indeed suspects that Casaubon’s failure to publish significant results from his prolonged, massive note-taking signals timidity about exposing his work to public view. (Casaubon has been a nightmare figure for many academics, with his combination of impossibly large ambition and ridiculously small production.) As her husband fears, Dorothea is already beginning to judge him. She does not give him the uncritical

adoration that he wants. And how could she, how could anyone, adore such a man? Casaubon initially struck me as a villain (not willfully evil, but effectively destructive) and Dorothea as unquestionably a hero. It was easy to take sides.

Easy, but not adequate. Dorothea persists in begging for forgiveness. She sobs as she asks again, in “need for some manifestation of feeling.” She wants love, demonstrated love. She gets an indirect statement of Casaubon’s satisfaction with what she has said, a statement incorporating an erudite quotation and delivered with a “faint smile.” In response, Dorothea says nothing, but a tear falls from her eye. Casaubon suggests that they are both disturbed. He refrains from rebuking her for welcoming his young cousin, Will Ladislaw, when her husband was away. The narrator explains Casaubon’s motives for self-restraint: he realizes the ungraciousness of scolding his wife when she has just apologized; he doesn’t want to agitate himself further; and he is too proud to betray his jealousy, “a blight bred in the cloudy, damp despondency of uneasy egoism.” Neither he nor Dorothea ever mentions their exchange again.

This sequence invites psychological interpretation that may advance the reader’s understanding of both participants in the dialogue. Only indirectly, however, does such interpretation contribute to the kind of influence I wish to claim for Eliot’s novel. The detail about Dorothea’s attempt at apology and its aftermath bears on the mysterious sentence about the *udder*, hence on the novel’s moral design; and that design contributes powerfully to the book’s continuing influence on my understanding of literary responsibility.

By “literary responsibility,” I mean the responsibility of one who teaches and writes about literary texts: responsibility to students and to readers and to the texts themselves. “Responsibility” is a moral

term. *Middlemarch* does not concern itself directly with literary responsibility, yet its treatment of its characters' moral dilemmas has illuminated for me what such a concept entails.

In the passage we have been pondering, another paragraph intervenes between the account of the marital dialogue and the udder sentence. Its elevated tone and abstract language signal an important shift. We move here from particularized narrative to reflective meditation. First we learn that Dorothea (who, as we already know, never speaks again of what has happened) always remembers the episode, and remembers it vividly, in the way "we all remember epochs in our experience when some dear expectation dies, or some new motive is born." That first person plural pronoun, intensified by the "all" that follows it, appears also in the sentence about the udder, emphasizing that the history of Dorothea duplicates in important respects that of every other human being. With that pronoun, the narrator claims to be telling us, her readers, something about ourselves. Expectations die, motives arise, for everyone. Thus our inner worlds, as well as our outer ones, continue to change.

In Dorothea's case, the expectation of emotional response from her husband has died. She sees, indeed, that such an expectation was delusional in the first place: she has "been under a wild illusion." More important than the death, however, is the birth that accompanies it: Dorothea feels "the waking of a presentiment that there might be a sad consciousness in his life which made as great a need on his side as on her own."

So we come to the udder, having been reminded of Casaubon's "uneasy egoism," the cause of his jealousy and of its concealment, and having learned of Dorothea's relinquishment of expectation. We may

expect that the figure, newly considered, will shed light especially on Casaubon, whose "egoism" has more than once been the subject of narratorial comment. Thus, more than 100 pages earlier, the narrator has observed, "Mr. Casaubon, too, was the center of his own world; if he was liable to think that others were providentially made for him, and especially to consider them in the light of their fitness for the author of a *Key to all Mythologies*, this trait is not quite alien to us, and, like the other mendicant hopes of mortals, claims some of our pity" (Chapter 7). The comment, with its edge of irony directed at "us," although it lacks the disturbing quality of the apparitional udder, like that udder bears on the human tendency to consider the world (specifically the world of other people) in relation to our own needs and desires.

Yet the immediate context that evokes the udder image concerns not Casaubon, but Dorothea, who has for the first time begun to realize that her husband may feel as needy as she. It is easy to criticize Casaubon for excessive self-concern, since the self in question appears so unattractive. Celia, Dorothea's sister, deplores her brother-in-law's moles and his blinking; the reader can readily see his narrowness of mind and heart and his inadvertent cruelties; Dorothea already realizes that she has married a severely limited man. The reader receives repeated invitations from other characters in the novel to judge Casaubon harshly. In contrast, Dorothea, full of spiritual devotion, yearns to do good. It is correspondingly easy to judge her generously.

But when the narrator observes that we *all* are born in moral stupidity, that "all" includes Dorothea, who has newly glimpsed the meaning of sharing the moral universe with others. Dorothea is beautiful, innocent, earnest. She doesn't blink all the time, and she has no moles.

She asks eager questions and makes no pedantic observations. Yet her needs do not necessarily exceed her husband's in importance. Although she has early begun to emerge from the universal stupidity, as the narrator tells us, it is easier for her to fantasize devotion to a strong, wise mate than to accept the knowledge "that he had an equivalent centre of self, whence the light and shadows must always fall with a certain difference."

This is a complicated piece of knowledge, both in its nature and in its substance. Dorothea needs to, and begins to, conceive her husband's unique selfhood "with that distinctness which is no longer reflection but feeling—an idea wrought back to the directness of sense, like the solidity of objects." *Wrought back to the directness of sense*: the action is difficult to comprehend. The final achievement of thought in moral matters, it seems, is to disappear, transmuted into feeling. Starting with reflection, with theoretical realization that others possess consciousness as pressing as our own, we move to knowledge that feels inevitable and innate. We may kick a stone to prove the solidity, thus the reality, of objects. How do we prove the absolute reality of another consciousness?

But proving is not the problem. The problem is *knowing*, in the way that Dorothea now begins to know. She has not known earlier, and for that ignorance the udder sentence indicts her. Like the rest of us, Dorothea has been born into moral stupidity. Moreover, she has tended to believe in her spiritual/moral superiority to others—to her sister Celia, for example, who, openly concerned with relatively frivolous matters, nonetheless perceives Dorothea's self-deceptions and minor hypocrisies. Dorothea remains a heroic figure, but the novel takes pains to disabuse its readers of the idea I began with, of her as a flawless model of goodness.

The moral insufficiency that Dorothea demonstrates resembles that of every other character that the novel has thus far discussed in some detail; it consists in what Eliot—well before Freud—calls "egoism." As the paragraph we have been considering suggests, egoism involves a failure of the imagination: inability to comprehend imaginatively the feelings or needs of others. Thus Fred Vincy, another *Middlemarch* character, thinks he understands his uncle, but sees in that uncle only the reflection of his own wishes. His sister, Rosamond, fancying herself in love with the young doctor, Lydgate, occupies herself, the narrator tells us, not exactly with Lydgate, but with her relation to him. Lydgate, far more intellectual than Rosamond, understands the young woman no better than she understands him: he thinks only of what he wants her to be. Dorothea has imagined her husband as answering, or failing to answer, her needs, rather than as someone with needs of his own.

The paragraph that describes Dorothea as rising above her egoism provides no clue about what alternative ways of being might substitute for it. Dorothea has yearned to devote herself to a great thinker partly because of her fantasy that she will partake of his wisdom and learn from him what and how to think. Given the melancholy tone of the narrator's summary of the human condition, it seems possible that what now awaits the young bride is utter subordination to a narrow, weak, unfeeling man. Now that she realizes her husband's neediness, must she strive to satisfy his ego at the expense of her own? At this point in the novel, roughly a quarter of the way through, the text has provided no clear models of behavior not centered on self-imagining. Practical-minded folk like Sir James Chettam, Dorothea's sister Celia, and Mrs. Cadwallader already see Dorothea as a

kind of human sacrifice to an unworthy man. Perhaps the rest of *Middlemarch* will explore the consequences of willed self-sacrifice.

The issues raised in the scene between Dorothea and her husband, particularly those articulated in the final paragraph, which introduces the figure of the udder, reverberate throughout the novel and delineate several of its central concerns. All conclusions are subject to change: what I think I know after pondering a paragraph or a page frequently turns into quite a different judgment as the narrator reveals more. The sequence of different judgments generates the process of enlightenment that one experiences in reading.

HAVING read only to the scene where Dorothea realizes her husband's independent needs, we still have much to learn about the intricate structure of moral possibility that Eliot creates. Already, though, the novel has established some imperatives for adequate reading. Most obviously, it has reinforced the urgency of paying attention—in the first instance, paying attention to words. By means of strategic recurrences of key terms, provocative metaphors (like that udder), and radical shifts in diction (not only from one character to another, but, strikingly, in the narrator's discourse), Eliot urges us to be puzzled or excited or engaged or repelled. Her uses of language often call attention to themselves.

Thus, in the middle of the brief, but momentous, conversation between Dorothea and Casaubon, an odd sentence occurs. Dorothea has just asked for reassurance, inquiring whether her husband really forgives her. A "quick sob" attends her question. The narrator comments that she needs some manifestation of feeling so badly that "she was ready to exaggerate her own fault." Then comes the strange sentence: "Would not love see returning pen-

itence afar off, and fall on its neck and kiss it?" The strangeness comes first from the shift in tone. This question essentially rephrases the point of the preceding observation about Dorothea's need for emotional response from her husband. But its phrasing belongs to a different linguistic universe from its predecessor. The sentence about Dorothea's willingness to exaggerate her own fault is personal and specific. The question about love and penitence employs personifications—"love" seeing in the distance "penitence" returning from somewhere (where? why?) and greeting him or her (but the text says "its") with an enthusiastic kiss. The phrasing of the question sounds vaguely antiquated ("afar off"), possibly biblical. Is it intended to dignify, or to universalize, the marital exchange? To evoke the narrator's generalizing perspective? The substance of the sentence belongs to Dorothea's consciousness, but the language does not appear to emanate from Dorothea. Does it create a pause in the narrative flow to draw the reader's attention to the significance of Dorothea's need? We can only wonder, trying out possibilities.

Such moments abound in this dense novel, always demanding and rewarding attention, never quite yielding up their full meaning. The poet John Keats, in a letter to his brothers, George and Thomas (21 December 1817), spoke of a quality he called "negative capability": "when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason." *Middlemarch* often encourages such a state, making its reader aware of possibilities and of the impossibility of deciding among them all. In creating such awareness, it compels us to think about how language works. It thus provided for me early instruction in the discipline of attentiveness. As one who gobbled stories for the sake of story, I needed to slow down, to recognize fiction

as not only a texture of action, but also one of language. What could be more obvious than the fact that the life of fiction inheres in words? I tended, however, to treat words as the medium of story – not also as themselves part of story’s meaning. *Middlemarch* revealed to me pleasures concealed in words: pleasures of recognition, discrimination, and surprise.

And pleasure in the figurative resources of common nouns. A few chapters after the udder illuminates the nature of egoism, the novel returns to the same subject with a new figure. Now it invites us to contemplate a pier glass (a tall mirror). The glass, the narrator reminds us, or, alternately, a large surface of polished steel, “will be minutely and multitudinously scratched in all directions; but place now against it a lighted candle as a centre of illumination, and lo! the scratches will seem to arrange themselves in a fine series of concentric circles round that little sun” (Chapter 27). The next sentence insists on the point: the scratches go in all directions; it’s only the candle that “produces the flattering illusion of a concentric arrangement.” Then the narrator names the figure of speech that she is using, calling it a parable, and equating the scratches with events and the candle with “the egoism of any person now absent.” “Now absent” is a little joke: only by remaining on the scene, it appears, can one avoid the danger of being criticized.

The metaphor itself, however, conveys no immediate criticism of anyone at all. The candle, a “little sun,” creates apparent order, as well as warmth and beauty. The “parable” conveys none of the greed or selfishness of the egoism figured by converting the world into an udder to grasp. Maybe this is somehow a good kind of egoism, as opposed to the disagreeable kind that previous allusions have suggested? No: it turns out that the narrator is thinking of Rosamond Vincy, who sees

her brother’s serious illness and his doctor’s serious mistake about it as providential means of bringing her and Lydgate into proximity, and who self-righteously refuses to leave papa and mama when the younger children are sent away because of the danger of infection. She performs this apparent act of self-sacrifice not because of her courage or her devotion to her parents, but because staying with them will enable frequent encounters with Lydgate.

The novel takes its time enforcing full realization of Rosamond’s moral monstrosity, but the seeds of that realization lie in the candle metaphor, despite its benign associations. The figure of the udder that focuses the earlier discussion of egoism applies specifically to “all,” locating the greed and selfishness native to the human animal. Equally specific, the candle image applies to “anyone now absent,” a more limited set. The image applies, however, with special aptness to Rosamond, calling attention to her capacity to make her own actions seem innocent or even virtuous – as when she remains in the house with her contagious brother – although they invariably issue from focused, powerful, unmixed self-interest. Such self-interest indeed, like the candle flame, provides an organizing force, creating a governing pattern for Rosamond’s life. The candle seems to reveal an order previously imperceptible, but that order depends on illusion. It hides a chaos of scratches. Just so with Rosamond, who successfully conceals even from herself the intensity of her altogether selfish purpose.

This truth about Rosamond, as I’ve already suggested, emerges only gradually. The candle metaphor marks an opening stage of emergence. Never merely decorative, metaphor in *Middlemarch* often directs narrative development. To pay attention to it clarifies movements of plot, as well as aspects of character. The novel

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demands attention as well to many other aspects of language: to repetition and variation, to levels of diction, to implications of tone. One must attend also to patterns of action. *Middlemarch* is a good read; it tells several compelling stories, moving among them in unexpected ways. If you don't pay attention, you get lost. You might fail, for example, to notice the parallels, as well as the differentiations, between one story and another. Lydgate marries a frivolous woman (to be sure, a woman deeply serious about her frivolity); Dorothea marries a pedantic, humorless man. Both marriages prove unhappy. Narrative details reveal that their unhappiness issues not only from the problems implicit in characters of opposed nature, but from the similar failings of the young doctor who considers it women's duty to be lovely and soothing and the young woman who yearns to undertake elevated forms of duty. To remain unaware of this fact is to miss crucial subtleties in Eliot's storytelling.

Paying attention, that first imperative of criticism, undergirds literary perception. *Middlemarch* helped teach me a discipline of attention that enabled my own study of literature and that I have tried to inculcate in my students and to demonstrate and encourage by my writing. The point is relatively simple, but the process is complicated. Yet to formulate the novel's influence in this way risks trivializing a profound experience. Yes, *Middlemarch* demanded attentive reading, and its intricacies instructed me in ways of paying attention. But in singling it out as an important influence, I am not primarily thinking about pedagogical or critical techniques. I am responding, rather, to a conviction that this book changed my life and impelled me to want to change other lives.

Much as I admired, from the beginning, Eliot's use of language, what overwhelmed me was the import of that language: the

wisdom of *Middlemarch*. That wisdom issues not from moral pronouncements, but from implications of the novel's linguistic choices as well as its action and structure. The accumulated metaphors, for instance, carry a heavy weight of suggestion. The mysteries of the udder image, lingering in readers' minds, make memorable the ravaging demands of ego, which the characters' patterns of action reiterate in realistic terms. The metaphor of the pier glass not only penetrates the screens of Rosamond's self-construction. It also provides a lasting reminder, useful throughout the book, that things are not necessarily what they seem. Skillful sentences slow down and speed up our course through the novel's intricacies, urging us to reflect on human nature or to indulge in the sheer pleasure of witnessing it in action.

The pattern of action that makes the plot also imparts wisdom. By constructing a fiction around the individual life courses of multiple characters, Eliot creates a moral matrix embodying the possibilities and dangers of connection. The novel's title (like that of Elizabeth Gaskell's *Cranford*, published two decades earlier) calls attention to its creator's primary concern with the life of a community: not people in isolation, not careers of will triumphant over circumstance or external disaster, but experiences of often inadvertent, often life-changing ways that individuals impinge on one another. Exploring such impingements, *Middlemarch* incrementally defines the nature of universal human responsibility, thus helping to clarify for me the demands of literary responsibility.

The udder image and its context do not receive full clarification until the novel's conclusion. Although Eliot never returns to the odd metaphor itself, the issues raised by it and by the little scene between Dorothea and Casaubon remain at the fiction's heart. The potentially insatiable

demands of one ego collide with those of another. How can we imagine resolution for such a clash?

Dorothea's husband dies, leaving her a large sum of money on the humiliating condition that she not marry Will Ladislaw. Meanwhile, around Dorothea various love relations have bloomed and faded. Fred Vincy, under the tutelage of Mary Garth's father, has made himself worthy of Mary, and she has accepted him. Lydgate has come to realize his wife's relentless self-concern and the degree of unwitting sacrifice he has made for his marriage. Dorothea, compelled by erotic feeling and by romantic fantasy, agrees to marry Will, giving up Casaubon's wealth, which she has felt as a burden. She bears children, and she lives a life "filled with emotion, and . . . filled also with a beneficent activity which she had not the doubtful pains of discovering and marking out for herself" ("Finale"). That activity centers on caring for children and husband and helping Will, who, despite his earlier fecklessness, has become "an ardent public man," and finally a Member of Parliament.

In the last paragraph of *Middlemarch*, the narrator groups Dorothea's two marriages as "determining acts of her life" and characterizes both as "not ideally beautiful." Her marital choices differ from each other in many respects, most notably in the erotic component of the match with Will, in his initial lack of vocation (as opposed to Casaubon's claim of a high calling), and in the emotional responsiveness he supplies. The novel's concluding comments make Dorothea's happiness apparent, yet a rueful tone dominates. Happy and productive though this heroine becomes, she has had no opportunity to fulfill a public role. She has not achieved sainthood. She remains subordinate to a man, in the eyes of the world, although the man to whom she is helpmeet proves far more satisfying to her than his predecessor.

Contemplating this resolution in relation to the udder metaphor, we might see in it an answer to the conundrum posed by the conflicting needs of insatiable egos. Perhaps the novel suggests that a female ego differs from a male one in its capacity for finding gratification through another. I myself consider Will Ladislaw unappealing, in Eliot's rendition of the character. Through many readings of *Middlemarch*, I declared the book's ending unsatisfactory, though I felt the challenge of the narrator's biting comment: "no one stated exactly what else that was in [Dorothea's] power she ought rather to have done" ("Finale"). Disliking the suggestion that female egos are uniquely suited to self-subordination, I wanted Eliot to work out some nobler resolution for Dorothea's life. But what else that was in her power ought the novelist to have done, given the social circumstances she chose to represent?

Over the years, I have come to believe that the novel's conclusion offers a more comprehensive challenge than I had previously seen. My readiness as a twenty-first-century feminist to see Dorothea as accepting subordination because of her gender does not actually correspond to the implications of *Middlemarch*. The book also represents a self-subordinating male character. The Reverend Camden Farebrother appears rarely in the text, yet he plays a crucial role in the action. In love with Mary Garth, and knowing that Fred Vincy also loves her, he deliberately warns the younger man away from a course by which Fred would lose Mary's respect and any chance of winning her. Farebrother sacrifices his own interest in full awareness that by keeping quiet he might win the opportunity of wooing Mary himself. He has lived a financially stringent and socially narrow life largely because he has long accepted the obligation to care for his mother, his elder sister, and his aunt, all of whom live with him. In short, he

consistently subordinates himself, by acts of will, to others.

Recalling that Dorothea's realization of another's consciousness, the needs of another ego, involved "an idea wrought back to the directness of sense," we may better understand Mr. Farebrother's importance. Like Dorothea's compassion for her disagreeable husband, like her reaching out to Rosamond, like her role of domestic helpmeet, Farebrother's intervention in Fred's life appears to come from an almost instinctual movement of heart and mind. Farebrother embodies the moral position that Dorothea achieves, one far removed from that entailed in taking the world as udder. He accepts the responsibilities inherent in human connectedness. And he is not a woman.

Farebrother and Dorothea demonstrate a crucial moral possibility. Neither is a paragon. We see Dorothea's capacity for self-congratulation even as we witness also her self-castigation. Her initial desire to link herself to an accomplished man has at least as much to do with her yearning to gain from him as with her desire to help. Her need for appreciation sometimes seems to weaken her. Farebrother has more conspicuous weaknesses, indulging in gambling, despite his clerical status, because of his wish to increase his financial resources. Both at their best, however, show that the ego's universal dominance can be set aside, at least for a time, in the service of others.

"Service" is not quite the right word, though. *Middlemarch* concerns itself with community not only in its official social sense (the town as an organized unit) but also in its wider, vaguer meaning designating the social state in which human beings participate by virtue of being human, the linkages that, according to many eighteenth- and nineteenth-century thinkers, naturally bind people to one another. A long tradition asserted the innateness

both of self-love and of human sympathy. *Middlemarch*, with its depiction of how even small human actions impinge on other people in unpredictable and often invisible ways, treats sympathy as a moral achievement rather than an innate virtue, pointedly providing an account of Rosamond Vincy, who appears devoid of the quality (as do two male characters, Featherstone and Raffles).

"Sympathy" comes closer than "service" to characterizing Dorothea's lightly sketched relationship to her second husband and her children. Over the novel's long course, we watch Dorothea develop generous imaginative comprehension of other people's burdens and yearnings. To comprehend in this way, and to act on the comprehension, entails not self-subordination, but self-expansion: the enlargement of understanding, compassion, and imaginative breadth. Like all "realistic" novels, *Middlemarch* concerns ways that people live in a world of other people. Going beyond this common topic, it confronts also the question of how they might live best. Primarily through the figures of Caleb and Mary Garth, Camden Farebrother, and Dorothea, it suggests answers. Everyone needs a vocation: a calling that directs its possessor's attention to some form of action in the world. The world will not supply us with perfect mates or ideal occupations, but it offers abundant opportunities for work and for love, through which we flourish.

A vocation – a form of work embraced for its own sake – is almost by definition a moral calling, best exemplified in *Middlemarch* by Caleb Garth, whose passion for what he calls "business" focuses on a desire to cherish and to improve his physical environment. When the narrator speaks of having "our consciousness rapturously transformed into the vividness of a thought, the ardour of a passion, the en-

ergy of an action,” as she does in relation to Casaubon, who lacks such experience (Chapter 29), she implicitly speaks of vocation. To teach literature, in the classroom and on the page, provides the vividness, ardor, and energy of thought, passion, and action. It also partakes of the moral, inasmuch as it actively seeks to enlighten others about the nature of the human, as revealed in the writing of the past and the present.

Teaching is a vocation that supplies space for work and love alike. *Middlemarch* made me want to enable others to duplicate my own profound and joyous experience of the book. To accomplish such an end requires encouraging students and other readers to see that books are indeed in themselves forms of experience – a fact that the young often do not know, and that literary scholars often forget. Representing life in language, novels (to focus on the genre I started with) permit imaginative reenactment not only of the actions of others, but also of the actions’ consequences and the mental and emotional processes that precede, accompany, and follow them. Eighteenth-century literary critics worried about the possibility that young women, imaginatively experiencing the pleasures of romance, might too hastily seek to find equivalent expression in real life. They worried also that sentimental fiction could exhaust a reader’s capacity to feel for others in actuality. They thus took seriously the kind of power I want current readers to acknowledge, and to feel – even though the specific concerns of those earlier critics may seem foolish now.

I have come to believe that the demands implicit in the calling of teacher/scholar parallel the kinds of moral responsibility that Dorothea accepts: to make and reinforce human connections; to imagine and acknowledge and respond to the needs of others; to use her own experience to help recognize and alleviate pressures on her

fellow mortals. For the teacher, responsibility begins in imaginative comprehension of her students and loyalty to the integrity of the literary work. It entails the obligation to emphasize, clarify, and challenge connections between the written record and the life it represents in order to enable students to comprehend literature as language with designs on its readers, words intended to make them think and feel, and to convey a sense of life.

We rise, ideally, from moral stupidity to moral clarity, *Middlemarch* tells us. Moral learning consists in the perception and development of relationships and the experience of their obligations. The study of literature, which renders relationship in all its multitudinous and complicated aspects, contributes to such learning – not by providing precepts; often by making problems of responsibility more perplexing than ever (as when Eliot compels us to ponder that udder).

In Chapters 10 and 11 of Samuel Johnson’s *Rasselas* (1759), Imlac, the wise guide of the young prince, Rasselas, holds forth on the vocation – his own vocation – of writing poetry. The poet, he explains, must study and record the minutiae of nature and of all modes of life. “He must divest himself of the prejudices of his age or country; he must consider right and wrong in their abstracted and invariable state. . . . He must write as the interpreter of nature, and the legislator of mankind, and consider himself as presiding over the thoughts and manners of future generations; as a being superiour to time and place.” Imlac goes on and on, his demands of the poet multiplying until the prince cries out, “Enough! Thou hast convinced me, that no human being can ever be a poet.”

The vocation of teacher, as I have deduced it from *Middlemarch* and as I have described it, sounds almost equally extravagant and impossible. I take comfort,

*The
Power of
"Middle-
march"*

though, from Imlac, who responds to the prince's comment in a deflated tone, but with a reasonable observation. "To be a poet," he remarks, "is indeed very difficult." He fails to remark what the rhapsodic tone of his prescriptions for the poet has implied: that to be a poet is also exhilarating. Perhaps all vocations, ardently pursued, partake of the impossible and of the exhilarating. *Middlemarch* suggests as much about Dorothea's quest for goodness and Lydgate's efforts (ultimately abandoned) toward scientific discovery. Providing implicit guidance both about what skills and what topics one might teach in presuming to teach literature and about why literature must be taught, the novel reminds us to value the pursuit of the impossible.

Beckett's "neither" & Giacometti's *Figurine entre deux boîtes qui sont des maisons*

with discussion by James Olney

I am very grateful to the editors of *Dædalus* for permitting and even encouraging me to select two works – Samuel Beckett's "neither" and Alberto Giacometti's sculpture *Figurine entre deux boîtes qui sont des maisons* – for my discussion of influence. As I have been associated with literature departments throughout my career, I have chosen Beckett's for my primary text. But while I believe that what I want to say could be said from that work alone, I also believe that it will be more forceful, more convincing, and surely more graphic if I couple "neither" with Giacometti's *Figurine*. And as artists, Beckett and Giacometti had, in the final analysis, so much in common that when we read, as a summary judgment of a whole body of work, that "he is one of the few artists who has contributed fundamentally to the way the human condition is perceived," no one unfamiliar with the statement could say with any assurance which artist is its subject.

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Had I been asked earlier in my career to consider texts that have influenced me and my own work, I would certainly have chosen differently. Indeed, looking through the index to my first book on what might best be called "life-writing," *Metaphors of Self*, I find no mention of Samuel Beckett. Yet today there seems to me an inevitability about the choice of Beckett, the only issue being which text to choose from the many that offer themselves. A major reason for this development is that *Metaphors of Self*, as its title implies, was a nonlinear exercise, a study of various writers in various times, and what each had to

“neither”

to and fro in shadow from inner to outershadown
from impenetrable self to impenetrable unself by way of neither
as between two lit refuges whose doors once neared gently close,
once turned away from gently part again
beckoned back and forth and turned away
heedless of the way, intent on the one gleam or the other
unheard footfalls only sound
till at last halt for good, absent for good from self and other
then no sound
then gently light unfading on that unheeded neither
unspeakable home

—From *Samuel Beckett: The Complete Short Prose, 1929 – 1989*, ed. S. E. Gontarski (New York: Grove Press, 1995), 258. Copyright © 1995 by the Estate of Samuel Beckett. Used by permission of Grove/Atlantic, Inc. Any third party use of this material, outside of this publication, is prohibited.

say of the self. My most recent book on the subject, on the other hand, is profoundly linear, as its title would also imply: *Memory and Narrative*. Narrative is always, by its nature, linear, and so is memory, in spite of gaps and doubling-back and so on; thus there is a story of some sort recounted in each piece of life-writing, while there is also a history at-large of the entire genre. In effect, Beckett has grown on me and imposed himself as the quintessence, the endpoint (for now, for our time, not forever) of all earlier and all contemporary exercises in life-writing.

The great story of autobiography begins, for me and I believe for Beckett also, with St. Augustine. It passes by way of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and his massive, unrelenting, and tortuous effort in life-writing to issue in a host of modernist writers who question and refuse the very premises of the genre, yet feel compelled to make the attempt again and again. For Augustine, however, the genre was a relatively new one, without the overlay of attempts from

his time to the twentieth century, and in him Beckett could find phrasing and *apercus* to turn to his own uses. As he tells us in an early letter, Beckett spent an entire day “phrase-hunting in St. Augustine,”¹ and elsewhere we hear that he kept a notebook devoted exclusively to quotations from Augustine, bits and pieces out of which to construct his own tale.

But it is not in bits and pieces (or “bits of pipe,” as Beckett once phrased it) that Augustine makes his greatest contribution to his twentieth-century descendant; rather, it is in the stichomythic structure of *Waiting for Godot* and almost everything else Beckett wrote, which was derived, or so the story goes, from a St. Augustine passage about the two thieves crucified on either side of Jesus, the one damned, the other saved. When questioned by drama critic Harold Hobson about his interest in the two thieves when he was very remote from professions of Christianity, Beckett, according to Hobson, “became eager, excited. . . . ‘I am interested in the shape of ideas even if I do not believe



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them. There is a wonderful sentence in Augustine. I wish I could remember the Latin. It is even finer in Latin than in English. “Do not despair; one of the thieves was saved. Do not presume; one of the thieves was damned.” That sentence has a wonderful shape. It is the shape that matters.”² No one has specified just where this “wonderful sentence” occurs in Augustine, but no matter: if Beckett wishes to credit the Great Progenitor for his own interpretation of the human condition as one situated always in-between – between salvation and damnation, hope and despair, hither and yon, between doors that “once neared gently close, / once turned away

from gently part again” – who would argue with him? It is this shape that rules his work in large and in small, from beginning to end. And being the dramatist he was, Beckett was nothing loath to turn the Augustinian “wonderful sentence” to farcical purposes, as in *Waiting for Godot*, when his Didi and Gogo, like the biblical thieves before them, assume places on either side of the fallen Pozzo, lifting him from the floor and carrying him about the stage as if they were all on Golgotha.

There were, of course, significant life-writers between Augustine and Rousseau – Giambattista Vico, for example – and between Rousseau and Beckett – Henry

Adams, for one – but Rousseau remains the essential and inescapable figure who, like all of Beckett’s figures, lies in-between. And as with Augustine, so with Rousseau: Beckett’s comments provide the best guides on how to read Rousseau. In a letter of 1932, Beckett points to “the madness and the distortion”³ in Rousseau’s writing, and while the specific reference is to the *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, it could apply equally to Rousseau’s *Confessions* or *Dialogues*, three volumes taken together that comprise Rousseau’s massive, obsessive achievement in life-writing. But as any reader who comes to Beckett with innocent expectations of sanity and clarity in writing could testify, “madness” and “distortion” do as well for Beckett’s texts as for Rousseau’s.

The crucial difference is that the madness in Beckett’s work is all in the character, never in the author, while there is no distinction between author and character in Rousseau. Even when he divides himself into multiple characters in *Dialogues* – J. J., Rousseau, and the Frenchman – it’s all Rousseau, manic and distorted from beginning to end. Rousseau adopts three different forms for his life-writing exercises – narrative in *Confessions*, dialogue in *Dialogues*, and reverie in *Reveries* – but each in its own way spins out of control. The general movement of the three volumes is from social engagement, troubled though it may be, to absolute isolation and profound silence as Rousseau, turned away from door after door, seeks “that unheeded neither / unspeakable home” of Beckett’s text. Giving a positive, if tragic, twist to Rousseau’s isolation, Beckett, in a letter of 1934, declared, “I must think of Rousseau as a champion of the right to be alone and as an authentically tragic figure in so far as he was denied enjoyment of the right, not only by a society that considered solitude as a vice . . . but by the infantile aspect, afraid of the dark, of his

own constitution.”⁴ This is a very subtle analysis of the fact and the logic of Rousseau’s solitude, altogether worthy of the man who would conclude the 1950 novella *Company* with these lines:

But with face upturned for good labour in vain at your fable. Till finally you hear how words are coming to an end. With every inane word a little nearer to the last. And how the fable too. The fable of one with you in the dark. The fable of one fabling of one with you in the dark. And how better in the end labour lost and silence. And you as you always were.

Alone.

One could think of no epilogue more fitting than this for Rousseau, and it describes well the hopeless situation he left for his successors in the life-writing venture: “you must say words, as long as there are any, until they find me, until they say me . . . perhaps they have carried me to the threshold of my story, before the door that opens on my story, that would surprise me, if it opens, it will be I, it will be the silence, where I am, I don’t know, I’ll never know, in the silence you don’t know, you must go on, I can’t go on, I’ll go on.”⁵ Beckett did go on, and so did many another modernist: inheritors all of the world that had so confounded Rousseau. Beckett once said that it is the task of the contemporary artist “to find a form that accommodates the mess.”⁶ Though it is by no means the whole story, it would be fair to say that Rousseau bequeathed the mess to Beckett, his contemporaries, and his successors, while Augustine provided a form that might accommodate it.

If it be granted that Beckett is the key figure in life-writing in his time, there still remains the question of which text to choose to demonstrate this most persuasively. The virtues of “neither” are the

compactness of the piece, what we know of its genesis and evolution, and the reverberations set off by coupling it with Giacometti's *Figurine*. Beckett's mature art was one of elimination, concentration, shearing away to the essential and beyond as if to reduce the mess to that which might be accommodated by some vestige of form. Figures are gradually disembodied, as Winnie is in *Happy Days*; or they start out and remain disembodied, as with Mouth in *Not I*, or with the voice from offstage in *Footfalls* or from nowhere that can be discerned, as in *Ghost Trio*. This sort of reduction reaches its apotheosis with "neither," where there is no character – not even a pronoun for an absent name – although, as S. E. Gontarski tells us, "When the British publisher of Beckett's prose and fiction, John Calder, was about to publish the work in the *Collected Poems*, Beckett resisted because he considered it a piece of prose, a story."⁷ In a story without a character or characters, it seems fitting that the only sound should be "unheard footfalls." Unnamed and unseen, indeed nonexistent, characters and unheard footfalls: this is the art of irreducible reduction to suit a time and a condition otherwise a mess.

What we know of the origin of "neither" comes from a story told by the American composer Morton Feldman, a story of distinctly Beckettian tenor.⁸ Having been commissioned to write an opera, something he had never attempted before, Feldman contacted Beckett, who agreed to meet him at the Werkstatt Theater in Berlin, where Beckett was assisting in a production of *Footfalls* and *That Time*. Feldman, who had very weak eyesight, continues with the tale: "I was led from daylight into a dark theater, on stage, where I was presented to an invisible Beckett. He shook hands with my thumb, and I fell softly down a huge black curtain to the ground." One hardly needs to in-

voke Didi and Gogo, for they are so patently there. Later, over lunch, Beckett, clearly puzzled by what Feldman might be seeking from him, stated, "I don't like opera," to which Feldman responded, "I don't blame you." And so the two, in agreement but at cross-purposes, continued. Beckett: "I don't like my words being set to music." Feldman: "I'm in complete agreement. In fact it's very seldom that I've used words. I've written a lot of pieces with voice, and they're wordless." Beckett: "But what do you want?" Feldman: "I have no idea." After having declared himself clueless, Feldman came up with an intriguing formulation: "I said that I was looking for the quintessence, something that just hovered" – something that hovered, as it were, between words and silence, between to and fro, between light and dark, something, one might say, Augustinian in form.

Picking up from Feldman's hint, Beckett declared that there was only one theme in his life and work and jotted down what that was: "To and fro in shadow, from outer shadow to inner shadow. To and fro, between unattainable self and unattainable nonself." Remarking that this might need some more work, Beckett offered to send a reworked piece to Feldman, which he did shortly thereafter, with slight revisions to these first two lines and the rest of "neither" as we now know it. Feldman promptly set it to music and so fulfilled his commission.

Musicologists are divided on whether "neither" is to be called an opera or not. There is a single voice, who is not a character in any detectable story, singing the "libretto" of eighty-seven words – the words, however, not discernible as such. But then, if Beckett could call "neither" a story, why not an opera as well? Beckett and Feldman worked on "neither" quite separately, hence, as one music critic puts it, the piece cannot be called a collabora-

tion, but should be thought of as a “collaboration”; it is “a work containing the input of two like-minded visionaries focused on a single theme: the endless and perhaps hopeless quest for understanding of the self and the universe, as carried out within the flash of a single life.”⁹ Beckett must have been more than satisfied with Feldman’s translating his words into “hovering,” for he later suggested Feldman as composer for his radio play *Words and Music*; Feldman – in turn and, as it were, in gratitude – followed *Words and Music* with a long piece (which was to be the last composition before his death), *For Samuel Beckett*. Feldman evidently found something innately musical in Beckett’s lines, and I think he was right; for what we have in “neither” is a markedly lyrical grace in a threnody for humanity moving toward that “unheeded neither / unspeakable home.”

Alberto Giacometti could not have known “neither,” nor Beckett’s claim that in it he realized the “one theme in his life”: Giacometti died in 1966, a decade before Beckett’s meeting with Feldman in 1976. Yet Giacometti’s *Figurine entre deux boîtes qui sont des maisons* could well stand, *avant la lettre*, as the most brilliant commentary we have – or could have – on that piece. And we do know that Giacometti and Beckett were in the habit of meeting for late-night drinks in one or another bar in Montparnasse before setting out on long, nocturnal rambles through the streets of Paris, sometimes chatting but just as often in silent communion. When they did converse, Beckett said that Giacometti often spoke of his torment in not being able to capture in paint or sculpture what he saw before him: it was impossible, he said, yet he went on hopelessly trying. Moreover, the figures he sculpted kept getting smaller and smaller until they disappeared in dust. (“But

wanting to create from memory what I had seen, to my terror the sculptures became smaller and smaller. . . . Often they became so tiny that with one touch of my knife they disappeared into dust.”¹⁰) Beckett’s advice was to embrace the impossibility of the task, as well as the incessant reduction in size, as his very subject.

To be a minimalist and in despair at the fact was not exactly Giacometti’s choice, nor was it Beckett’s, but rather their mutual destiny. As Giacometti’s figures dwindled to dust, the ego or the I correspondingly became impossible and disappeared from Beckett’s texts. It was this joint phenomenon, and its repercussions for the act of life-writing, that assumed such significance for me and my work. If the “autos” and “bios” of autobiography become unavailable, all that is left is *graphein*, which describes the desperate dilemma of contemporary life-writers and critics of the mode.

Most of the late-night conversations of Beckett and Giacometti are lost to us now, but one that occurred in unique and emotion-laden circumstances has been preserved through Giacometti’s telling. When *En attendant Godot* was revived in 1961 at the Odéon Théâtre de France in Paris, Beckett asked Giacometti to design the stage set, and what he produced, in addition to the full moon that rises at the end of Act I and again at the end of Act II, was what Beckett was later to call “the Godot tree”: a stark, plaster tree that seems to signify now life, when it unexpectedly springs new leaves, now death, when Didi and Gogo contemplate hanging themselves from its branches, and always the in-between that so dominates the play. After the tree was created in Giacometti’s studio, he and Beckett spent one whole night putting it in place on the stage, fiddling with it, adjusting it ever so slightly in one direction or another. “It was supposed to be a tree,” Giacometti later said,

“a tree and the moon. We experimented the whole night long with the plaster tree, making it bigger, making it smaller, making the branches finer. It never seemed right to us. And each of said to the other: perhaps.”¹¹ I have taken the liberty of translating the final word (*forse*) as *perhaps*, rather than the standard translation of *maybe*, simply to bring it into line with Beckett’s comment to theater critic and theologian Tom Driver: “The key word in my plays is ‘perhaps.’”¹² Neither yes nor no is possible to them, only perhaps; perpetually caught (in Giacometti’s phrase) “between being and non-being,” the two of them could only go on and on, “beckoned back and forth and turned away / heedless of the way.”

“The older I get, the more I find myself alone. I suppose in the end I will be entirely alone.”¹³ Beckett or Giacometti? Though it happens to be the latter, it could well be either. Were it Beckett, it would likely be the expression of a character rather than the author, but in either case, the remark recalls nothing so much as the utter isolation of the *Figurine*, an isolation made yet more terrible by the suffocating closeness of the “two boxes that are houses” – or, in a translation of “maisons” perhaps more to the point, “homes,” which returns us to “neither” and its “unspeakable home.” There is a striking anomaly about the *Figurine* in that, almost alone among Giacometti’s sculpted female figures, it is in motion, indeed in full stride: but moving where? Giacometti once called the piece “*Figurine in a box* between two boxes which are houses,”¹⁴ which points up the utterly constricted nature of movement for the figurine, boxed-in and with nothing but boxes, before and behind, to move to.

Every viewer of Giacometti’s sculpted figure must feel that there is some story behind it, a story that would account for

the agitated movement of the woman. This story comes to a terrible and poignant focus when we learn that in the figure Giacometti was probably recalling a 1945 newspaper photograph of “a naked Jewish woman being driven across the open space between the prisoners’ barracks and the gas chambers.”¹⁵ It is thus a very emblem of its time, quite like what Beckett says the Irish Red Cross volunteers received when they went to assist in rebuilding the city of St.-Lô after it “was bombed out of existence in one night.” Those volunteers, Beckett says, “will come home realizing that they got at least as good as they gave, that they got indeed what they could hardly give, a vision and sense of a time-honoured conception of humanity in ruins and perhaps,” he continues, in one of the most hopeful of all passages in Beckett, “perhaps even an inkling of the terms in which our condition is to be thought again.”¹⁶ That “inkling” is what gives us the work of Giacometti and Beckett, preeminently *Figurine entre deux boîtes qui sont des maisons* and “neither.”

James
Olney

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- 3 Fehsenfeld and Overbeck, eds., *The Letters of Samuel Beckett*, vol. 1, 145.
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- 5 Samuel Beckett, *The Unnamable*, in *Three Novels by Samuel Beckett* (New York: Grove Press, 1991), 23.
- 6 Tom Driver, “Beckett by the Madeleine,” *Columbia University Forum* 4 (Summer 1961): 23.
- 7 S. E. Gontarski, ed., *Samuel Beckett: The Complete Short Prose, 1929 – 1989* (New York: Grove Press, 1995), 284.
- 8 James Knowlson, *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), 556 – 557.
- 9 Unsigned note under “Morton Feldman’s ‘neither,’” http://www.themodernword.com/beckett/beckett_feldman_neither.html.
- 10 Quoted in a catalogue accompanying a 1965 Giacometti retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, p. 28.
- 11 James Lord, *Giacometti: A Biography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1953), 429.
- 12 Driver, “Beckett by the Madeleine,” 23.
- 13 Lord, *Giacometti*, 427.
- 14 Catalogue of Giacometti exhibit, *Alberto Giacometti, 1901 – 1966* (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 1996), 167.
- 15 Reinhold Hohl, *Alberto Giacometti: Sculpture, Painting, Drawing* (New York: Henry N. Abrams, 1972), 304.
- 16 Beckett, “The Capital of the Ruins,” in *Complete Short Prose*, ed. Gontarski, 278.

I'm Not There

Ross Posnock

Perhaps, like me, you have a propensity to collect books without quite knowing why. Over the years I have piled up books by and about, say, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Hannah Arendt, George Santayana, Philip Roth, Ad Reinhardt, Philip Guston, Franz Rosenzweig, Penelope Fitzgerald, Thomas Bernhard – and not only not read them, but have no desire to do so. I have kept busy working on other things. And for a decade or two at a time, these texts simply gather dust on my shelves. But then, inevitably, I am drawn to these nearly forgotten volumes and, strangely, they prove pivotal to a new project: I recall, for instance, that Santayana ascended, literally, from the obscurity of a low shelf to earn a chapter in my book on William and Henry James. Wittgenstein made an analogous, if more circuitous, journey from the shadows, waiting untouched, until five years ago when I kept a long-held inner vow to read another languishing tome, one that had stared me down so often it had acquired an aura of intimidation: Stanley Cavell's *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality and Tragedy*. It was indeed intimidating, but also inspiring: that experience opened the door to more Cavell – and to deeper engagements with Emerson – and to Wittgenstein, who has joined the sage of Concord as a central figure in my current project on writers, artists, and philosophers who renounce their careers.

The peculiarities of this manner of book buying – the absence of full consciousness and the long gap between acquisition and reading – puts me in mind

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of Walter Benjamin's essay "Unpacking My Library." He starts with the premise that "every passion borders on the chaotic," and finds that the passion of the book collector unleashes a "chaos of memories," where in each purchase "chance" and "fate" seem to jostle against each other. Benjamin speaks of his library as the "accustomed confusion of these books. For what else is this collection but a disorder to which habit has accommodated itself to such an extent that it can appear as order."¹ For decades, the "chaos" of my own book collecting was a form of "disorder" that blurred agency and intuition, chance and fate. And though this "disorder" helped shape my intellectual life, it had been masked by habit and so escaped my reflective notice. That is, until a recent encounter with a passage from Nietzsche helped shed light. But before that, something else intervened to nudge me to interrogate my habit.

Around 2002, when I decided to write a book on Philip Roth, I had at hand most of his novels, having dutifully acquired them over the years and, true to form, remained largely indifferent to reading them. As I burrowed into Roth's oeuvre, however, I grew aware of his close friendship with the painter Philip Guston, a relationship that became basic to my understanding of what I began calling Roth's aesthetics of immaturity. That understanding was built on what was also at hand: my pile of monographs and articles on Guston. No longer inert objects but palpable presences, this patient stack of Roth and Guston had undergone a transformation that now struck me as more than a serendipitous accident.

For the first time, I wondered what was going on: how did I explain my thoughtless buying and deferred reading; what game was my unconscious playing? It seemed to be busy working subliminally (as if behind my mind's back?), replacing deliberate effort with intuition or instinct

in order to quicken receptivity, keeping me in a period of prolonged incubation, as I filled my shelves in advance of my conscious turn to works that would prove crucial. Was it a professorial enactment of what Emerson called *abandonment*: the "one thing which we seek with insatiable desire" is to "forget ourselves . . . to do something without knowing how or why; in short, to draw a new circle." This famous passage – from the final paragraph of the exhilarating "Circles" – had always been a personal favorite and a pedagogical touchstone of my lectures. But who knew I was *living* it?²

The possibility that I was indeed living my own bookish version of abandonment, that I had unwittingly – hence appropriately – been drawing Emersonian circles, apparently for decades, received sharp confirmation last year. Teaching a seminar on Emerson and his avid admirer Nietzsche, I encountered a passage from the latter's autobiography, *Ecce Homo: How One Becomes What One Is*, section nine of the chapter "Why I Am So Clever." This, at last, crystallized matters. With brazen perversity, Nietzsche replaces the venerable motto "know thyself" (now a "recipe for ruin") with "self-*misunderstanding*," and describes his own self-becoming as a miracle of self-forgetting. He begins by declaring, "At this point the real answer to the question, *how one becomes what one is*, can no longer be avoided." The question "presupposes" that "one must not have the faintest notion *what one is*." From this perspective, "even the *blunders* of life – the temporary side paths and wrong turnings . . . have their own meaning and value," as if Nietzsche acknowledges that one's self-estrangement awakens one from the tunnel vision that plagues the certain knower.

What Nietzsche portrays in *Ecce Homo* is the coming to being of the most "innocent" of selves, that is, one free of ressen-

timement and full of “irresponsibility” – a lightness gained from relinquishing the guilt instilled by religion and other institutions of control. Knowledge is warded off, permitting the “surface of consciousness” to be kept clear of any of the “great” imperatives, desires, words, attitudes: all that would burden one with responsibility and goals and make one a man of knowledge. The grand words represent “so many dangers that the instinct comes too soon to ‘understand’ itself” and will be clogged with meaning. Keeping consciousness clear thus allows the eventual organizing powers to grow in the dark as it were, “deep down” in the depths. A self with the capacity to reevaluate values requires an especially intricate psychic development – “contrary capacities” must be cultivated – and must be carefully protected from awareness of the “secret labor” of the instincts. Nietzsche tells us how he thrived as a stranger to himself:

Considered in this way, my life is simply wonderful. . . . I have never even suspected what was growing within me – and one day all my capacities, suddenly ripe, *leaped forth* in their ultimate perfection. I cannot remember having taken any trouble – no trace of *struggle* can be demonstrated in my life, I am the opposite of a heroic nature. “Willing” something, “striving” for something, envisaging a “purpose,” a “wish” – I know none of this from experience. At this moment I still look upon my future . . . as upon calm seas: there is no ripple of desire. I do not want in the least that anything should become different than it is; I myself do not want to become different. . . . But that is how I have always lived. I had no wishes. A man over forty-four who can say he never strove for *honors*, for *women*, for *money*! Thus it happened, for example, that one day I was a university professor – no such idea had ever entered my mind, for I was barely twenty-four years old.³

In “Why I Am So Clever,” Nietzsche depicts himself as a version of his character Zarathustra, the human being redeemed from the spirit of revenge and a herald of the *Übermensch*. Of course, on one level this self-portrait projects a grandiose aristocratic fantasy of immaculate effortlessness. This is the Nietzsche who, for generations, has intoxicated the undergraduate aesthete, who has inspired far less dangerous Leopolds and Loebis. Those 1920s rich boys, precocious law students at the University of Chicago, drunk on Nietzsche, kidnapped and murdered a boy, stylizing themselves as *Übermensches*. Their lawyer, Clarence Darrow, described his clients as victims of Nietzsche’s ideas. Beneath his cynical opportunism, Darrow had a point, if not an exculpatory argument. Hitchcock portrayed the duo, thinly veiled, in the film *Rope* (1948), where Nietzsche’s name is bandied about.

Yet the self-portrait also deflates grandiosity by making manifest the self-overcoming that Nietzsche prizes – when we experience the impersonality of ourselves rather than affirming our familiar sense of identity. This impersonality – we are “strangers to ourselves, we do not comprehend ourselves,” as he says at the start of the preface to *The Genealogy of Morals* – is a salutary rebuke to the fantasy dear to the Western male psyche: the sovereign individual as self-knowing master of experience. “‘Willing’ something, ‘striving’ for something, envisaging a ‘purpose,’ a ‘wish’ – I know none of this from experience.” Renouncing the deliberative self who formulates a plan of life (John Stuart Mill’s notion) and renouncing “know thyself” (and its correlative “to thine own self be true,” as foolish Polonius put it), Nietzsche challenges us to bear *not* knowing, to live without *why*. To let instinct speak opens us to new and hidden energies in the self, beyond the reach of rational cognition, that are normally blocked in the act of self-

reflection. Nietzsche, in sum, loosens the hold of the Cartesian cogito, which makes the *knowing* subject foundational.

He shares this philosophic anti-intellectualism (the proposition that all experience is a mode of knowing) with, among others, his beloved Emerson and his contemporary William James (whose theory of emotion insists on the primacy of the body: we are afraid because we tremble, rather than the commonsense opposite) and, later, Wittgenstein (who says that when one acts with “comfortable” certainty, one is to be regarded as a “creature in a primitive state”; and when one follows rules, one does so blindly).⁴ For these figures, as for John Dewey, mind is embodied and experience is not a “knowledge affair,” but rather is where things are suffered and endured, are *had*, before cognized. Though James alone among this group is tempted to dispense with concepts and “fall back on raw un verbalized life,” he also acknowledges: “both theoretically and practically this power of framing abstract concepts is one of the sublimest of our human prerogatives.”⁵

But concepts are merely practical, a means to an end, insists James, a view that tallies with Emerson, who remarks that “in all unbalanced minds, the classification is idolized, passes for the end” (277), and with Nietzsche, who grants the saving power of our projected arrangements, our conceptual grids, but at the same time urges that we grasp them as man-made, necessary fictions, artifice whose function is to serve as equipment for living. Concepts are not to be “idolized,” as they are by philosophers who, in their terror of change and movement, seek to arrest becoming. Instead, concepts are tools to be used to impose meaning upon the innocent fatality of destiny.⁶

The passage from “Why I Am So Clever” hit home, for it made sense of my own

self-opacity. The passage also made me feel rather heady, as if I were now licensed to consecrate my blind book buying on the altar of the Nietzschean *Übermensch*, Amazon unbound. My temptation to self-transport seemed not wholly inappropriate when I reflected that, as the Emerson-Nietzsche seminar revealed on more than one occasion, Emerson’s praise of whim, intuition, and insouciance seems at times to intoxicate Nietzsche and inspire him to new heights of rhetorical audacity.

After the revelation afforded by *Ecce Homo*, I revisited Emerson’s “Intellect” to see if it too extolled the virtues of self-forgetting. Not only did the essay offer more shocks of recognition, but its discomfiting thesis – that “we have little control of our thoughts” thanks to “the superiority of the spontaneous or intuitive principle over the arithmetical or logical” – contained seeds that flower in *Ecce Homo*’s portrayal of how Nietzsche became what he is (*Essays and Lectures*, 419). “Intellect,” too, made explicit what I had unwittingly lived: that intuition is a “taking-in-stride” that has a “complex temporality,” since in Emerson’s version of intuition “the mind does not immediately intuit what it has taken-in-stride. His idea of intuition – and hence its strangeness – is counterintuitive,” as literary scholar Branka Arsic has shown in her subtle reading of this essay in her book *On Leaving*.⁷ “Long prior to the age of reflection,” says Emerson, “is the thinking of the mind. Out of darkness, it came insensibly into the marvelous light of to-day” (*Essays and Lectures*, 418). This lag between thinking and reflection occurs, notes Arsic, because “perceptions affect one another in the intellect without the mind knowing anything about it” (*On Leaving*, 155). This explains why Emerson, responding to his rhetorical question “What is the hardest task in the world?” answers: “To think.”

This dramatically reverses the Cartesian cogito, remarks Arsic: here “‘I’ is what ‘cannot’ think, what is not entrusted with the power to think” (*On Leaving*, 160). Logic is not absent in us, notes Emerson, but is “virtual and latent” within the “intuitive principle”: logic is the “procession or proportionate unfolding of the intuition; but its virtue is as silent method; the moment it would appear as propositions, and have a separate value, it is worthless” (*Essays and Lectures*, 419).

What makes thinking so hard, why deferral is as if built into it, is the incorrigibility of our will; it doesn’t control our power of thought:

What am I? What has my will done to make me that I am? Nothing. I have been floated into this thought, this hour, this connection of events, by secret currents of might and mind, and my ingenuity and wilfulness have not thwarted, have not aided to an appreciable degree. . . . Our truth of thought is therefore vitiated as much by too violent direction given by our will, as by too great negligence. We do not determine what we will think. We only open our senses, clear away, as we can, all obstruction from the fact, and suffer the intellect to see. We have little control of our thoughts. (*Essays and Lectures*, 418 – 420)

Intellect grows spontaneously; “without effort,” some image, word, or fact imprints itself on the mind and that adherence gradually germinates, unfolding “like the vegetable bud.” “You have first an instinct, then an opinion, then a knowledge, as the plant has root, bud and fruit. Trust the instinct to the end, though you can render no reason. It is vain to hurry it. By trusting it to the end, it shall ripen into truth, and you shall know why you believe” (419).

Nietzsche and Emerson’s shared suspicion of the will to self-knowledge and

their shared trust in instinct also precipitated my turn to another volume that had spent decades untended on my shelf: Michael Polanyi’s *Personal Knowledge*. When earlier I described my prereflective literary habits as amounting to a prolonged period of “incubation,” I borrowed this word from Polanyi; his book, never read, long owned, had survived multiple moves, its crammed, poorly printed pages now made all the more uninviting by thin yellowing paper and a cracking paperback spine. Over the years, lured by its title and some of its headings – “The Art of Knowing,” “Intellectual Passions,” and “The Tacit Component” – I would periodically rescue the book from my chronic negligence, taking it up in a burst of enthusiasm, only to set it aside, my impulse rebuked (still too much science, I rationalized, and besides, the print was a trial and the pages loose). But in the wake of my Nietzschean and Emersonian induced epiphanies, the moment of *Personal Knowledge* had arrived. I was ready at last for its central point: “we feel our way to success . . . without specifically knowing how we do it”; this tacit dimension (the title of a better known Polanyi volume) is “an immense mental domain” acquired by an “effort which went beyond the hitherto assured capacity of some person making it. . . . It relied on an act of groping which originally passed the understanding of its agent and of which he has ever since remained only subsidiarily aware, as part of a complex achievement.”⁸

Here was a “meta” moment so prized by English professors: a work that celebrated “groping” knowledge – unspecifiable, ineffable, unempirical – mirrored the very groping I had long been (tacitly) practicing, most recently when I plucked *Personal Knowledge* from (my) seeming oblivion at a propitious moment. “Trust the instinct to the end, though you can render no reason. It is vain to hurry it,” Emerson had

said. Trust in feeling one's way forward informally, in the absence of conscious action, typifies the *incubation* period of discovery (one of four levels, according to Henri Poincaré; and Polanyi tells us that it follows *preparation* and precedes *illumination* and *verification* [121]). During incubation, nothing happens on the level of consciousness or behavior, even as we are preoccupied unconsciously: "the fact that our intellectual strivings make effective progress during a period of Incubation without any effort on our part is in line with the latent character of all knowledge" (129).

The magnum opus of a distinguished Hungarian chemist who abandoned science for philosophy, politics, and economics, *Personal Knowledge* (1958) has always lived in the shadows of the famous work it anticipates, Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962). As Polanyi's most recent biographer remarks, most people first know of Polanyi from Kuhn's remark in *Structure* commending his notion of "tacit knowledge."⁹ Polanyi's work, which joined Kuhn's as foundational for the new field – the social construction of science – argued for an alternative to the positivist model of scientific inquiry as unalloyed objectivity and rational deliberation. "True discovery is not a strictly logical performance" but requires "plunges" and "leaps" across logical gaps (*Personal Knowledge*, 123). "Tearing away the paper screen of graphs, equations, and computations, I have tried to lay bare the inarticulate manifestations of intelligence by which we know things in a purely personal manner." Neither subjective nor objective but transcending their opposition, personal knowledge in

science is not made but discovered, and as such it claims to establish contact with reality beyond the clues on which it relies. It commits us, passionately and far beyond our comprehension, to a vision of reality. Of this responsibility we cannot divest

ourselves by setting up objective criteria of verifiability. . . . For we live in it as in the garment of our skin. Like love, to which it is akin, this commitment is a "shirt of flame," blazing with passion and, also like love, consumed by devotion to a universal demand. Such is the true sense of the objectivity in science. (64)

Science joins art and mysticism in breaking "through the screen of objectivity," drawing on "our pre-conceptual capacities of contemplative vision," capacities shared, he repeatedly shows, by infants and chimpanzees (199).

Like James and Dewey, Polanyi wants to rescue experience from those observers and instrumentalists who, "guided by experience . . . pass through experience without experiencing it *in itself*": what keeps us aloof from things, their sound, sight, smell, and touch is the very "conceptual framework by which we observe and manipulate things." But "contemplation dissolves the screen, stops our movement through experience and pours us straight into experience; we cease to handle things and become immersed in them" (197). Because we start constructing frameworks as infants, the experience of contemplation tends to be precarious and brief, won in the teeth of the confining and indispensable presence of established concepts. Scientific discovery demolishes one accepted framework to construct another, more rigorous one, but that act of revision and discovery "bursts the bounds of disciplined thought in an intense if transient moment of heuristic vision . . . overwhelmed by its own passionate activity" (196).

This turbulence of creative freedom that defies, if for a moment, the "bounds of disciplined thought," recalls Kant's depiction of genius as a force of originality indifferent to rules; hence the genius "does not himself know how the ideas for

it have entered into his head, nor has he it in his power to invent the like at pleasure, or methodically, and to communicate the same to others in such precepts as would enable them to produce similar products.”¹⁰ Genius dwells in the tacit dimension. Visual artists, immersed in the hands-on interplay with paint and canvas, are often evasive or reticent regarding requests to stand back and explain the meaning of their art. But they are rich in tacit knowing, in intuition, that makes them “willing to follow what the materials in hand seemed to want to do,” notes the art historian Richard Shiff, who quotes the abstract expressionist painter Barnett Newman: “‘How it went, that’s how it was.’”¹¹

Newman’s eloquently laconic remark adapted surrealism’s automatism for his own purposes, as if in his work of the 1940s, says Shiff, “he did little more than allow his lines and colors to fall into place, the places they wanted.” Shiff continues: “Newman’s ‘how it went’ avoided the preconceived formulas of geometric abstraction along with those of conventional figure painting, landscape and still life. To some extent, he infantilized himself, lending an animistic spirit and motivation to inanimate entities and material stuff” (68). His verbal shrug and appeal to the artifact itself as the mute arbiter of questions are defensive strategies to protect the workings of the tacit and intuitive from the demands for explanation and classification. Describing Barnett Newman’s artistic breakthrough – *Onement I*, created in 1948 – Shiff says, “it created him rather than the other way around. By no means a product of his intended action, the painting, he claimed, changed his life.” Newman “yielded control to his painting. It was an intuitive act of faith in the midst of his early doubts” (76).

When an artist such as Newman permits the quality of anonymity to come

forward, letting the work rather than maker take the lead, he allows the object to speak for itself. Some creators in effect adopt anonymity as a way to help deflect the rampant American media pressure to turn them into celebrities and their work into commodities. Remember, for instance, how Bob Dylan during early and mid-1960s press conferences stymied journalists by refusing to explain what his songs meant or what politics they recommended, leaving his surrealist collages of imagery and his more directly folk or protest works equally mysterious. Dylan’s insouciant vagueness communicated his contempt for the crassness of a literal-minded press corps, and was witty homage to the elite high modernist stance of deliberate opacity in the face of public scrutiny. That stance became prominent with Rimbaud, an early hero of Dylan’s. “*Je est un autre*,” is Rimbaud’s signature declaration. Todd Haynes’s brilliant Dylan film, *I’m Not There*, which presents multiple incarnations of the singer, deftly nods to this modernist move by aligning Dylan in his Rimbaud persona to the press conference evasions.

Before Rimbaud, who quit writing at age twenty-one, poetry had to make sense. That imperative of meaning vanished with Rimbaud’s breakthrough to radical linguistic autonomy. When T. S. Eliot mocks meaning as what the poet provides the reader while going about his work, the way the burglar offers the guard dog a bit of meat to distract him, he implicitly affirms Rimbaud’s priorities. Dylan himself resented, he said in *Chronicles*, the way his “lyrics had been extrapolated, their meanings subverted into polemics,” rather than regarded as embedded within “songs that floated in a luminous haze.”¹² This last phrase, insisting on respect for poetic presence – the refusal of clarity – merits context: “I really was never any more than what I was – a folk musician

*I'm Not
There*

who gazed into the gray mist with tear-blinded eyes and made up songs that floated in a luminous haze" (116). Dylan's sentence neatly enacts his slipperiness: what begins with the simple sincerity of a tautology of self-identity turns out to be a feint, suddenly swaddled in the hazy "gray mist" of symbolist imagery.

William Faulkner had famously perfected the mask of evasion a few years before Dylan. When questioned in graduate seminars at the University of Virginia (sessions that became canonical when published) about, say, *The Sound and the Fury*, Faulkner opined: you would have to ask Quentin (referring to his novel's main character). An effort to honor and preserve art's mystery, its aura, seems shyly to lurk in Dylan's and Faulkner's advertisements of ignorance. Both men heightened their own mystery by swathing their early history in elaborate legends: Faulkner claimed he was a fighter pilot, Dylan says he ran away with the circus. Beginning with his borrowed name, Dylan has crafted mask upon mask; indeed, "his refusal to be known" is a "passion that has shaped his work," as Ellen Willis once wrote.¹³ He has also refused to be a knower.

It is tempting to write off the artist's public performance of estrangement before his own creations as a quintessentially American pose that pledges allegiance to our most enduring native tradition: anti-intellectualism. But if we turn anti-intellectualism from the familiar philistine sense to a less familiar one – philosophical anti-intellectualism – we are more accurate. Not only does this preference for anonymity protect art's aura. But the deadpan inscrutability of Dylan, the Southern gentleman misdirection of Faulkner, the monosyllabic tautology of Newman's "How it went, that's how it was," also enact artists' refusal to enthrone

themselves as transcendental knowers in sovereign control. Such lofty intellectualism has always been the enemy of one prominent strand of high modernism. Recall, again, T. S. Eliot, who wants an aesthetic that fuses back together what has been torn asunder: thought and feeling, the intellectual and emotional. Eliot sought to end the "dissociation of sensibility" that he believed had occurred in the seventeenth century (his phrase of 1921 took on a life of its own despite being subjected to withering historical critique in ensuing decades), and his colleague Ezra Pound warns us "go in fear of abstractions," part of his doctrine of imagism. Pound's friend William Carlos Williams insists: "no ideas, but in things." Even that seemingly most aloof formalist, Henry James, spoke in his final preface of the bruising imperative of intimacy: "I get down into the arena and do my best to live and breathe and rub shoulders and converse with the persons engaged . . . the deeply involved and immersed and more or less bleeding participants" – his characters. Any act less intimate will allow "the muffled majesty of authorship" to "reign" – an "irresponsibility" to be avoided.¹⁴

As if reacting against the modernist passion for sensuous particularity and immersion, postmodern theory tends to be skeptical of the unmediated in any form, be it body or nature. Making unrelenting war on the natural, theory reduces the self to an ideologically constructed identity. One result is that theory inadvertently reinstates the gap between nature and culture, body and mind, emotion and reason, and leaves feeling – or any immediate experience or sensation – under suspicion as hopelessly naive. Forms of intellectualism pervade postmodern theory: for instance, the belief in the ubiquity of textualism (Derrida), rhetoric and figurality (De Man), and interpretation

(Fish). Whereas literature, as De Man famously wrote, is the “only form of language free from the fallacy of unmediated expression,” the practitioners of visual art tended to embrace the fallacy of the unmediated in their relish of the violence of sensation.¹⁵ In his famous interviews with David Sylvester, Francis Bacon speaks repeatedly of painting as an effort to record “one’s own feelings . . . as closely to one’s own nervous system as one possibly can.”¹⁶ In effect, it was a job of art theorists to tidy up the artist’s naive belief in the power of the visceral, which was grounded in engagement with obdurately palpable materials.

But postmodernism’s programmatic “suspicion over claims of naivete” has produced a counter-response, one that Richard Shiff articulates in *Doubt*: “Claims for the ubiquitous efficacy of cultural forces may be creating a more pernicious mythology than speculation on the putatively absolute value of aesthetic immediacy and naturalness” (127). Shiff’s doubt about postmodern orthodoxy leaves him “hanging”: it “does not entail being convinced of the real existence of the natural self that certain artists may be continuing to seek as a liberating alternative to culture”; rather, “our doubt merely indicates how deeply dissatisfying it is to believe that there can be no natural self and no physical existence at all – no source of sensation that might escape the generalizing sameness of our various cultural identities” (127).

Tired of “feeling pressured by the critical indoctrination” that trains us to “all too readily expose the superficiality, the constructed spectacle, the mirage of sensation,” to “distrust our feelings more than to trust them,”¹⁷ Shiff asks: “To what degree are we . . . willing to trust and act on feeling, especially when no theory supports it?” (*Doubt*, 25). He urges us to “stop conflating the history of the criticism

and theory of art with the history of making art” (131). The former depends on a “fantasy world of the general and conceptual” that “can only lead away from the sensory world of the specific and the real” (51). Though theory encouraged him to be “extraordinarily wary of many of the claims of the modern artists,” Shiff now tries to resist his own distrust. In his effort to keep faith in feeling, he enlists Polanyi’s *Personal Knowledge*. When asked in an interview “what is worth caring about,” Shiff responds that we need to understand “our cultural hunger for experience that escapes conceptualization.”¹⁸

This hunger is deep in the American romantic grain. Emerson called the hunger *abandonment*, and his greatest reader, Nietzsche, alerted me last year that I, too, had this hunger. For decades I had been feeding it in my own acts of biblio-abandonment, my intuitive book buying, the urge “to do something without knowing how or why; in short, to draw a new circle.”

Another circle: concurrent with the writing of this essay, I am teaching my favorite novel, Henry James’s *The Ambassadors*, which I have done many times since my first try in 1981. The simultaneity makes me see that its protagonist, Lambert Strether, is James’s great tribute to “personal knowledge” and to Emersonian abandonment. Strether’s “very gropings,” writes James in his preface, “would figure among his most interesting motions” (12) since, not unlike Polanyi’s “groping,” they are guided by no plan or project: he is deferring and soon flouting his ambassadorial duties for perambulations in Paris (“wherever one paused in Paris the imagination reacted before one could stop it” [81]) that involve him in prolonged acts of abandonment and circle-drawing, acts that come to delight in proportion as they baffle him. For what he has managed to abandon is the tyranny

of explanation: “his heart always sank when the clouds of explanation gathered. His highest ingenuity was in keeping the sky of life clear of them. Whether or no he had a grand idea of the lucid, he held that nothing ever was in fact – for any one else – explained” (114).

Falling in love with both Chad (whom he has pledged to haul back from Paris to Woollett, Massachusetts, to run the family business) and Chad’s enchanting Parisian mistress, Marie de Vionnet, Strether is “letting himself go . . . diving deep.” At lunch alone with Marie he feels the “warm spring air” begin to “throb,” his senses liberated not least because he has dispensed with “explanations”: “it was at

present as if he had either soared above or sunk below them – he couldn’t tell which. . . . How could he wish it to be lucid for others, for any one, that he, for the hour, saw reasons enough in the mere way the bright clean ordered water-side life came in at the open window” (220). Soaring or sinking, not sure which, Strether is immersed in the “tacit,” whose etymology is “to be silent” or grow dumb. He is, to borrow Polanyi’s words, being poured straight into experience, “overwhelmed” by “passionate activity.” “I’m incredible. I’m fantastic and ridiculous – I don’t explain myself even *to myself*,” he jauntily exclaims near the end of the novel (355). “I’m Not There,” indeed.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969), 60.
- ² Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Essays and Lectures* (1841; New York: Library of America, 1983), 414. Subsequent citations noted parenthetically within the text.
- ³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals & Ecce Homo*, ed. Walter Kaufmann, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (1908; New York: Random House, 1967), 253–255. Used by permission of Random House, Inc. Any third party use of this material, outside of this publication, is prohibited.
- ⁴ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, trans. Denis Paul and G.E.M. Anscombe (New York: Harper, 1972), 62, para. 475.
- ⁵ William James, *Writings, 1902–1910* (New York: Library of America, 1987), 755, 728.
- ⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, trans. Richard Polt (1889; Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997), 18–19. The debate about concepts and intuition remains a live philosophical issue; a recent incarnation of it sets John McDowell against Herbert Dreyfus. Arguing against the “myth of the pervasiveness of the mental” that he ascribes to McDowell, Dreyfus stresses the “absorbed coping and acting in flow” that is found in the behavior of infants, animals, and experts. McDowell, in turn, shows that Dreyfus subscribes to “the myth of the mind as detached” and urges “an integrated conception of ourselves as animals, and – what comes with that – beings whose life is pervasively bodily, but of a distinctively rational kind.” Their essays, with responses by others, are collected in *Mind, Reason, and Being-in-the-World: The McDowell-Dreyfus Debate*, ed. Joseph Schear (New York: Routledge, 2013), 54, 15, 56.
- ⁷ Branka Arsic, *On Leaving: A Reading in Emerson* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010), 154. Subsequent citations noted parenthetically within the text.
- ⁸ Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (1958; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), 62–64. Subsequent citations noted parenthetically within the text.
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Louise Glück's "Messengers"

with discussion by Henri Cole

You have only to wait, they will find you.
The geese flying low over the marsh,
glittering in black water.
They find you.

And the deer –
how beautiful they are,
as though their bodies did not impede them.
Slowly they drift into the open
through bronze panels of sunlight.

Why would they stand so still
if they were not waiting?
Almost motionless, until their cages rust,
the shrubs shiver in the wind,
squat and leafless.

You have only to let it happen:
that cry – *release, release* – like the moon
wrenched out of earth and rising
full in its circle of arrows

until they come before you
like dead things, saddled with flesh,
and you above them, wounded and dominant.

– "Messengers," from *The First Four Books of Poems* by Louise Glück. Copyright © 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1974, 1975, 1976, 1977, 1978, 1979, 1980, 1985, 1995 by Louise Glück. Reprinted by permission of HarperCollins Publishers.

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Louise Glück's first book, *Firstborn*, was rejected eighteen times before it was published. Or was it twenty-eight times? And there was an interval of seven years before her second book, *The House on Marshland*, was published by Ecco Press in 1975. But when it appeared, it was clear that a commanding new voice – classically restrained, yet emotional – had arrived. It was the late 1970s, and I was still a graduate student, reading Elizabeth Bishop's *Geography III*, Seamus Heaney's *North* and *Field Work*, John Ashbery's *Self-portrait in a Convex Mirror*, and Robert Hass's *Praise* – they were game-changers, too.

* * *

Today, the poems in *The House on Marshland* do not seem to me so much austere as essential utterances in which everything ornamental has been stripped away. The lines are made of simple Latinate sentences, sometimes with suspensions, sometimes with dashes and ellipses . . . revealing a writer's hunger for a listener. Also, the endings of the poems seem to move outward like the mouth of a river, instead of stopping abruptly, like a knife against a board. Though there are echoes of Rilke and James Wright's *To a Blossoming Pear Tree* – also, Sylvia Plath (in particular the harsh *Ariel*) and the Robert Lowell of *Life Studies* – the dangers of imitation (is there any greater danger for a poet than drowning in another's glorious style?) have somehow been surpassed.

* * *

In *The House on Marshland*, there are just thirty-five short poems, and the section titles – “All Hallows” and “The Apple Trees” – convey Glück's love of the earth, or, to put it another way, her preoccupation with death. Family life, the conundrum of marriage, maternal love, childhood – these are some of Glück's early subjects. In her poems, life seems continually to be mirrored in the passing of the seasons.

The self (or should I say the soul?) awakens inside a body, like a flowering plum tree, which will fade as autumn comes. Henri Cole

* * *

I first read Glück's poem “Messengers” in *Antaeus*, the international literary magazine (edited by Daniel Halpern), which sadly ceased publication after twenty-five years in 1994. But during the intervening decades, the poem has not lost its intensity for me, or its beauty. Set near a marshland, it begins:

You have only to wait, they will find you.
The geese flying low over the marsh,
glittering in black water.
They find you.

And the deer –
how beautiful they are,
as though their bodies did not impede them.
Slowly they drift into the open
through bronze panels of sunlight.

The second-person point of view (*you you you*) gives the feeling of experience (even the protagonist's own experience) being commented on from a distance – in the most reduced terms – as if it is occurring in a myth where we get the haunted (almost posthumous) commemoration of experience. There is no first-person narrator revealing the events of her life. Instead, the tone is matter-of-fact, disembodied, but strangely triumphant, too. The deer seem to have meaning for the speaker, who asks: “Why would they stand so still / if they were not waiting?”

Like the deer, is Glück waiting for something? Has her body impeded her? Is this why she envies their instinctual grace, stepping through “bronze panels of sunlight” like figures on a medallion? I wonder now to what degree a deer is a female image – for surely femaleness calls up something in us that is different than maleness. Is Glück speaking about the complicated relationship she had with

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her own body as an anorexic? Though I don't know the answer to this, I'm drawn to the noncircumstantial content of the poem – to the symbolic rather than the biographical – and to the story which feels intimate and heroic.

* * *

Then the camera pans out, and we see a little more of the landscape:

Almost motionless, until their cages rust,
the shrubs shiver in the wind,
squat and leafless.

Glück is not a poet of metrical fluency. Instead, there is a plainness in her poems that has an archaic quality. And Glück is not a poet of elliptical fragmentation – she goes deeper. With her simple vocabulary, dramatic juxtapositions, and subtle pacing, the poems seem to be more in conversation with Blake, Yeats, and Eliot, illuminating what all art must, those human subjects that she identifies as “time which breeds loss, desire, and the world's beauty.”

* * *

Near the end of “Messengers,” there is an invocation to the reader that reframes the first line of the poem, “You have only to wait, they will find you.” Glück says:

You have only to let it happen:
that cry – *release, release* – like the moon
wrenched out of earth and rising
full in its circle of arrows

until they come before you
like dead things, saddled with flesh,
and you above them, wounded and
dominant.

After the mind engages with the landscape and the deer, the poem strives to move toward some fresh idea. Are the grazing deer emblems of pure spirit that do not seem to be detained by anything physical – as we humans are detained by our “wounded” and “dominant” bodies?

Does Glück long for the same preternatural grace and strength that she observes in the deer as they step through bronze sunlight like figures on a painted screen?

* * *

Perhaps, because it is a longing that can never be satisfied, she will make something durable from language instead, though “Messengers” – like all of Glück's poems – does not comfort or placate the reader. It ends on a note of ungratified spiritual hunger. But for the reader there is nobility in recognizing this state, and pleasure in seeing it dignified through language. Her poems could be said to be influenced by an aesthetic in which beauty is always imperfect, impermanent, or incomplete, and in which only three simple realities are acknowledged: nothing lasts, nothing is finished, and nothing is perfect. The soul (or consciousness) must question, undergo, and choose, but there is never an easy resolution. Instead there is a turning away.

For all of us trying to make something durable from language – who are not drawn to the prettiness of our utterances, or their melodic flourishes; who are attracted to a kind of fatal truthfulness; and who seek in poems a voice whose distilled vocabulary demands only one listener (like a conch shell pressed against an ear) – Louise Glück is a liberator.

Dido's Long Dying

Michael C. J. Putnam

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... sic fata gradus evaserat altos,
semianimemque sinu germanam amplexa fovebat
cum gemitu atque atros siccabat veste cruores.
illa gravis oculos conata attollere rursus
deficit; infixum stridit sub pectore vulnus.
ter sese attollens cubitoque adnixa levavit,
ter revoluta toro est oculisque errantibus alto
quaesivit caelo lucem ingemuitque reperta.
Tum Iuno omnipotens longum miserata dolorem
difficilisque obitus Irim demisit Olympo
quae luctantem animam nexosque resolveret artus.
nam quia nec fato merita nec morte peribat,
sed misera ante diem subitoque accensa furore,
nondum illi flavum Proserpina vertice crinem
abstulerat Stygioque caput damnaverat Orco.
ergo Iris croceis per caelum roscida pennis
mille trahens varios adverso sole colores
devolat et supra caput astitit. 'hunc ego Diti
sacrum iussa fero teque isto corpore solvo':
sic ait et dextra crinem secat, omnis et una
dilapsus calor atque in ventos vita recessit.

—Virgil, *Aeneid*, book 4: lines 685–705

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This said, she [Anna] mounts the pile with
eager haste,
And in her arms the gasping Queen
embraced;
Her temples chafed, and her own
garments tore
To stanch the streaming blood and
cleanse the gore.
Thrice oped her heavy eyes and saw the light,
But having found it, sickened at the sight,
And closed her lids at last in endless night.
Then Juno, grieving that she should sustain
A death so lingering and so full of pain,
Sent Iris down to free her from the strife
Of labouring nature and dissolve her life.
For since she died, not doomed by
Heaven's decree,
Of her own crime, but human casualty
And rage of love, that plunged her in despair,
The sisters had not cut the topmost hair
Which Proserpine and they can only know,
Nor made her sacred to the shades below.
Downward the various goddess took
her flight,
And drew a thousand colours from the light;
Then stood above the dying lover's head,
And said, "I thus devote thee to the dead:
This offering to the infernal gods I bear."
Thus while she spoke she cut the fatal hair,
The struggling soul was loosed, and life
dissolved in air.

—English translation of Virgil,
by John Dryden (1697)

In handbooks devoted to the history of Western literature, Virgil's *Aeneid* is usually bracketed between Homer's two masterpieces, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, and Dante's *Divina Comedia* as a milestone in the development of the epic. It is the Latin bridge between the literature of

ancient Greece and the evolution of vernacular exemplars of the genre in late-medieval and Renaissance Italy and beyond. From there we move, in English, from the work of Milton, Wordsworth, Tennyson, and Hardy, among others, to Derek Walcott's splendid *Omeros*, which, for twenty-first-century readers, brings to completion a millennial cycle of accomplishments in the form.

What Virgil adds to Homer could be briefly put as an expanded sense of historical development, of ethnic and political diversity, and of the ethics expected to be emulated by the powerful figures destined to be the major protagonists in Rome's march to empire. Our poet extends the Homeric prototypes so that we have a novel mixture of the *Iliad*, with its battling before the walls of Troy, and the *Odyssey*, an adventure-filled journey of return to island home and family. As an amalgamation, the *Aeneid* in fact draws throughout its full course on both earlier epics to fashion its own particular version of a voyage of discovery, from Troy in ruins to the shores of Italy, to the site of Rome, and to the golden age of Augustus – in the far distance for the poem's chief protagonist, Aeneas, but contemporary for Virgil and his readers.

As the hero pursues his fated path, we follow a route dotted by extraordinary occurrences, such as his dalliance with Dido, or his venture into the Underworld, with the Cumaean Sibyl as guide, to visit his father and learn something of what lies ahead for himself and for his progeny, with their unprecedented sweep of achievements projected through time. Homer has little that suggests this notion of a thousand-year development, of a fated progress that ends with one of the West's grandest cultural statements.

Nor does Homer more than suggest the patterns of behavior open to a hero who bears the spiritual burden of Rome's fu-

ture greatness while he literally carries his father on his shoulders and leads his son by the hand out of the smoldering remains of Troy. A major aspect of the ethics that should dictate how to use the omnipotence that follows in the aftermath of victorious conquest is put to Aeneas by his father, Anchises, at the end of their meeting in the land of the dead. Apostrophizing him as *Romane*, and therefore as prototype and paragon of his future race, he outlines by précis the nub of what Rome's greatest talent will accomplish. It will be not for achievements in bronze or stone sculpture, not for skill at oratory or in astronomy that his people will boast in due course. Roman artistry lies elsewhere:

tu regere imperio populos, Romane,
memento
(hae tibi erunt artes), pacique imponere
morem,
parcere subiectis et debellare superbos.
(*Aeneid*, book 6: lines 851 – 853)

Remember, Roman, to rule peoples with might (these will be your arts), to impose [upon them] a custom for peace, to spare the humbled and war down the proud.¹

In other words, Roman aesthetic or intellectual accomplishment will not lie in tangible works of art, or even in rhetoric's persuasive abilities or in the authority that derives from cataloguing the heavens. It will come from something both less and more tangible: from a dynamic form of political astuteness dedicated especially to a morality of restraint in dealing with those vulnerable to a conqueror's force.

In the verses before addressing these abstract dicta to his son, Anchises calls our attention to a concrete instance where sparing the subjugated should be exemplary in future Roman behavior. In the parade of Roman greats whose ghosts knowing father catalogues for ignorant son, the patriarch in conclusion apostrophizes

two, Caesar and Pompey, father-in-law and son-in-law, who challenge each other in the penultimate phase of the lengthy civil war that preceded the Augustan peace. The prayer, addressed specifically to Caesar whom the myth of the Julian gens claimed as Anchises's linear descendant, asks him to practice moderation in pursuit of war, which is to say, in practical terms, to spare by ridding himself of the weapons that the victor might be tempted to misuse. Restraint seems particularly imperative when brother is fighting brother and when the fatherland (*patria*), the abstract body politic that protects all, is the ultimate victim. In actuality, this period of fighting only ended when first Pompey and then Caesar were murdered.

Instances of moderation dot the epic's text. In book 2, Venus prevents angry Aeneas from killing Helen in revenge for the suffering she has caused, and in book 9, Apollo orders Aeneas's son, Ascanius/Iulus, to forbear from further slaughter lest he bring retaliation in turn upon himself. But, in this context, the example that most troubles the reader, with purpose on Virgil's part, is the very conclusion of the poem, where Aeneas, "set aflame by furies and terrifying in his anger," kills his suppliant opponent, Turnus, who is on his knees, hand outstretched, craving mercy. None is forthcoming.²

With this background in mind, I would like to turn to the specific event in the *Aeneid* that has had the deepest effect on later artists, namely the death of Dido, to whom Virgil devotes the fourth book of his poem. Other individual scenes in the epic have captured the imaginations of future generations – I think, for instance, of Aeneas and the Sibyl, or of Turnus's death – but none has moved readers as deeply and consistently as the sequence of occurrences associated with the love between Trojan prince and Carthaginian

queen, events that culminate in her suicide. The story of Dido has exerted a profound influence on Western literature, from Virgil's younger contemporary Ovid, in the seventh of his *Heroides*, to the recent poetry of Louise Glück. Its potency is felt in music, in masterpieces such as Henry Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas* and Hector Berlioz's *Les Troyens*. And various scenes from book 4 have elicited powerful depictions from painters as diverse as Claude Lorrain, Tiepolo, Reynolds, and Turner.

The paradox remains that the tragedy as it evolves is built on Aeneas's forced renunciation of private passion in order to embrace the impersonal destiny that fate has cast his way. The ending of the poem suggests that the titular hero could act quite differently from how he behaves toward Dido. From one angle of interpretation, the poem's conclusion is discomforting because Aeneas gives in to personal emotion when he should least do so, which is to say, at a crucial turn of events where he should function as a model of forbearance and where Virgil's text itself, at its finale and climax, should most serve a didactic purpose, for us as well as for its initial readers. We leave the poem having just witnessed, for a final time, how the specifics of human emotionality are ever at odds with more general, idealizing aspirations. We hope for a cathartic display of mercy through an act of pardon, a scenario similar to the conclusion of Mozart's *Le Nozze di Figaro*. Virgil fails to gratify our wishes, leaving us for contemplation only a manifestation of rage leading to a violent killing. His lesson reinforces a constant in the chronicle of human history, that revenge regularly breeds further revenge.

Though in book 4 Aeneas suppresses his feelings in favor of an impersonal calling, Dido, by contrast, turns her own deep sensibility first verbally against her absconding lover, then physically against herself as she resorts to suicide, so as to end all

feeling. It is in projecting her road to death that Virgil's virtuosity is most apparent. Here, his text has had its profoundest influence on later artists, and it is where I felt its power most when I first read the poem's twelve books in Latin as an undergraduate in college. I would like to devote the remainder of this essay to watching closely a few of the ways by which the text works its magic upon us. I am interested in particular in the means by which the poet extends the time-span of Dido's suffering so as gradually to draw the reader into close sympathy with her circumstances. There is no better way to trace a master poet's maneuvers than by looking intently at his words and their deployment. Here, as regularly, only a close examination of the original language will do justice to the artist's craft and inventiveness.

Let us begin as we find Dido and Aeneas sharing a banquet she has prepared for her royal guest:

nec non et vario noctem sermone trahebat
infelix Dido longumque bibebat amorem, ...
(1:748 – 749)

Ill-fated Dido also was stretching out the night with varied conversation and drinking in love at length...

As we turn from literal drinking to metaphorical, we move from wine to the implicit poison her love for Aeneas portends. The double use of the imperfect tense not only implies temporal continuity, the echo of *trahebat* in *bibebat* also connects the words themselves with love's lengthening over time. And indeed, as the queen listens to the tale of her guest's adventures during and after the fall of Troy, a recitation that takes up the epic's second and third books, her love only deepens.

As we reach book 4 and return to the narrative proper, Virgil changes the metaphor from poison to wound and flame,

while still reminding us of time's extent as a marked feature of his presentation:

At regina gravi iamdudum saucia cura
vulnus alit venis et caeco carpitur igni.
(4:1–2)

But the queen, for a long time now wounded with grievous suffering, nourishes the wound with her veins and is the prey of hidden fire.

But it is only at lines 169 to 172, with an authorial intervention in the narrative, that we begin to realize to the full Virgil's intent of figuratively dilating the duration of the queen's agony:

ille dies primus leti primusque malorum
causa fuit; neque enim specie famave
movetur
nec iam furtivum Dido meditatur amorem:
coniugium vocat, hoc praetexit nomine
culpam. (4:169–172)

That was the first day of death and the first to be the source of evil; for Dido is not moved by appearance or repute nor does she now ponder a hidden love. She calls it marriage and with this label veils her blame.

The demonstrative *hoc* brings home the fact that the narrator is commenting on the action, presenting its meaning directly to us, but it is especially the initial phrase, *ille dies primus leti*, that captures our attention as we follow out Dido's emotional history to its conclusion. One of our finest Virgilian scholars, Roland Austin, minimizes the effect of *primus* here by making it adverbial (he translates: "That day in the beginning was the cause of death, that day in the beginning was the cause of sorrow").³ But such a reading tends to diminish the horror of Virgil's implication that Dido's dying takes place over a stretch of time. We have been prepared for this by the earlier metaphoric implications of poison, wound, and fire. We are now wit-

nessing the commencement of the death that will ultimately come about from their imminence.

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As the plot progresses, Virgil uses figuration regularly to draw the reader into Dido's emotional world. Let me offer one salient example. At line 401, the narrator, in an unusual gesture within what is ordinarily third-person delivery, addresses us in the second person. We are asked in our mind's eye, as individual students of Virgil's text, to imagine beholding the Trojans as they flee Carthage:

migrantis cernas totaque ex urbe ruentis: . . .

you might observe them moving away and hurrying from the whole city.

And, with only the intervention of a simile, that "you" shortly becomes Dido herself:

quis tibi tum, Dido, cernenti talia sensus,
quosve dabas gemitus, cum litora fervere late
prospiceres arce ex summa, totumque
videres
misceri ante oculos tantis clamoribus
aequor! (4:408–411)

What feelings were yours then, Dido, observing such things, or what groans did you keep uttering when you looked out from the top of the citadel at the beach swarming far and wide, and saw before your eyes the whole sea swirling with such great shouts!

The apostrophe to Dido makes her present before our eyes. By the magic of figuration we are at Carthage, watching her as she watches the Trojans departing. We hear the noise ("such great shouts") that she apprehends. But by the focused repetition of *cernas* in *cernenti*, Virgil would have us for a brief stretch of time actually become the grieving lover as she views Aeneas and his colleagues set sail on their way to Rome. It is hard to imagine great sympathy being elicited more magisterially by verbal means.

Dido's Long Dying But, if we have been witnessing her death over the length of four books of an epic, Dido's actual moment of dying is itself also powerfully protracted in its exposition. Take the word *vulnus* (wound), for instance. It occurs in the singular earlier in book 4 at lines 2 and 67, as metaphor for her love's destructive aspect. When she actually stabs herself with Aeneas's sword on her funeral pyre, Virgil turns singular to plural (*vulnera* [4:683]). Literal wounds have now been added to a single, metaphorical hurt, forcing us to contemplate the arc of this very development as one type of suffering leads to, and is piled upon, another during the approach of death.

Virgil employs a complementary technique shortly after as the goddess Juno at last frees her suffering devotee from the body's trammels:

Tum Iuno omnipotens longum miserata
dolorem
difficilisque obitus Irim demisit Olympo
quae luctantem animam nexosque
resolveret artus. (4:693 – 695)

Then almighty Juno, taking pity on her long grief and difficult dying sent Iris down from Olympus to undo her struggling spirit and entangled limbs.

Let me point out two details in this extraordinary resolution of life into death. The first is the echo of *longum amorem*, whose poison we have seen Dido drink in book 1 when the banquet's literal wine becomes the venom of destructive, extensive passion. Long love now yields place to *longum dolorem*, the grief brought about by unreciprocated passion over time that both complements and then becomes the pain of a prolonged demise. We have followed this metamorphosis from book 1 to the end of book 4, engaging with the anguish of the queen during the transmutation of metaphoric wound into literal.

A second detail is the striking phrase *difficilis obitus*. It has been a subject of debate by students of Virgil as to why the poet chooses to use a plural, "difficult deaths," instead of the more straightforward singular to describe Dido's passing. In his commentary on the phrase, Austin feels that the plural here may be "'intensive', marking the slow agony of Dido's death, the tortured moments one by one," but then underestimates the force of his insight as "highly subjective."⁴ Surely, however, he is absolutely correct and his judgment should be expanded. Through a single word we endure the final minutes of Dido's drawn-out passage from life to death, hurt by hurt, grief by grief, with mental pain combined with physical in a concatenation of suffering.

But Dido's final instants are but part of the larger history of dying. Her death began for the reader long ago, with the poisoned draught of love and with *ille dies primus leti*, the day when the lovers consummate their desire. In the case of Dido, death is implicit in love and marks its beginning. And it is a sign of Virgil's virtuosity not only to spread this aspect of her tale out over narrative time, but also to give it particular concentration at the actual moment of her demise, where the plural *obitus* implies a multitude of deaths both now and in the past.

Her deaths stay with us throughout the rest of the poem.⁵ When Aeneas meets Dido's ghost in the Underworld, it is of her *dolor* (6:464) at his departure that his words tell. Or, for another example, Virgil opens the poem's eleventh book by repeating a line from book 4 that introduces the tragic hunt and storm:

Oceanum interea surgens Aurora reliquit: ...
(4:129)

Meanwhile the rising Dawn had left the Ocean ...

This repetition is tantamount to advising the reader that he should sense a connection between Dido's passing and the burgeoning war in Latium. The poet suggests a reason for such a link some seventy lines later, when Aeneas prepares the body of the dead youth Pallas for burial:

tum geminas vestis auroque ostroque rigentis
 extulit Aeneas, quas illi laeta laborum
 ipsa suis quondam manibus Sidonia Dido
 fecerat et tenui telas discreverat auro.
 harum unam iuveni supremum maestus
 honorem
 induit arsurasque comas obnubit amictu.
 (11:72 – 77)

Then Aeneas took out twin clothes, stiff with gold and purple, which Dido of Sidon, happy with her efforts, had herself once made for him with her own hands and had interspersed the texture with gold. In sadness with one of these, as a final honor, he clothes the youth and veils his locks, soon to burn, with the shroud.

The reader is left to surmise why Dido is so prominently recalled to memory before the funeral of Aeneas's young protégé. But Virgil implies at least one answer at the very end of the poem. There we learn that the hero's *dolor*, his grief and resentment at the death of Pallas, is what finally spurs him to kill Turnus, his suppliant antagonist who had earlier killed the youth in hand-to-hand combat. Passion is again the spur to action, even against a humbled foe. The chief difference with the death of Dido is that now the hero himself kills, rather than simply serving as the indirect cause of suicide.

And, finally, there is Turnus himself. His name initiates the epic's final, longest book, just as the departure of his life to the shades brings it to a conclusion. He, not Aeneas, claims the poetry's cycle. At the opening, Virgil brings him before us with a startling simile that likens him to a

lion stricken by hunters, one of whom is called a *latro*, a robber. I quote the initial lines of the comparison:

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...Poenorum qualis in arvis
 saucius ille gravi venantum vulnere pectus
 tum demum movet arma leo, ... (12:4 – 6)

...just as in the fields of the Poeni that lion, wounded in his chest by hunters' grievous wound, then at last advances to battle ...

The demonstrative *ille* points our eye at this special animal, and the particularity continues in several other ways.⁶ The lion is placed in the territory of the Carthaginians (*Poeni*). The creature's uniqueness becomes still more distinctive by means of the poet's careful reminiscence of the opening lines of book 4, quoted earlier:

At regina gravi iamdudum saucia cura
 vulnus alit venis et caeco carpitur igni.

This is no ordinary human lion whose habitat is Carthage, but one who stands as direct surrogate for Dido. The epic's final book, as we have seen, begins and ends with Turnus, not with the titular hero. It also carefully imitates the progress we have traced in book 4 from metaphorical to literal wound. There, Dido endures both the pain of unrequited love and the self-inflicted wound of her suicide. In book 12, Aeneas engenders the figurative hurt by robbing Turnus of Lavinia, to whom he considers himself betrothed. He also perpetrates the final wounding of Turnus as the epic comes to its dramatic, unrelieved conclusion. So Dido's long dying continues after her own death in book 4, carefully extended by the poet's genius. We are reminded literally of it in book 6, when Aeneas meets her ghost, "Phoenician Dido with her wound still fresh" (*Phoenissa recens a vulnere Dido* [6:450]). But, as we have seen, her presence symbolically complements the deaths of

Dido's Long Dying both Pallas and Turnus, which are in turn strategically intertwined.

So the influence of Dido permeates the action of the epic long after her own passing and until the very moment of its conclusion. It is this influence that has reached out to all sensitive readers of the poem and has made its mark on literature and the fine arts ever since. There is no better way to experience her hurt over the imagination's time than by listening

to her dying words as conveyed by commanding composers like Purcell and Berlioz, the latter a lover of Virgil from his youth. In "When I am laid, am laid, in earth" and in "*Ah, je vais mourir*," music's extent in briefer, more trenchant compass, movingly echoes the sorrow that Virgil, over a stretch of epic narrative, has so brilliantly conveyed to us in perhaps the most affecting portrayal of his final masterpiece.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ This and all subsequent *Aeneid* translations, unless otherwise noted, by the author.
- ² As he prepares to kill Turnus, Aeneas is *furiis accensus et ira / terribilis* ("set aflame by furies and terrifying in his anger" [*Aeneid*, book 12: lines 946–947]). The language deliberately recalls two moments in book 4. In the first, Dido describes herself before her suicide: *heu furiis incensa feror* ("Alas, I am borne along, set afire by furies" [4:376]). On the second occasion, as we have seen, the narrator remarks that, as she prepared for the moment of self-slaughter, she was *subito . . . accensa furore* (literally: "set aflame by sudden fury" [4:697]). In the end, the poet has Aeneas emulate Dido rather than Anchises by choosing passion over self-control, immediate human feeling over the restraint asked of Rome to come.
- ³ R. G. Austin, ed., *P. Vergili Maronis: Aeneidos: Liber Quartus* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955), 69 (on *Aeneid*, 4:169f). Dido's delay before leaving her room to share in the day's hunt is one of several great moments of hesitation that dot the epic (*cunctantem* [4:133]). We think also of the golden bough's reluctance to be plucked by Aeneas (6:211) and of the hero's own moment of pause before killing Turnus (12:940). Dido's delay in its own way further stretches out the duration of her dying.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, 199 (on *Aeneid*, 4:694).
- ⁵ Damien Nelis rightly pointed out to me that the "sad foreboding" (*triste augurium* [5:7]), which the departing Trojans sense as they look back at the flames emanating from Carthage, suggests that we will often return to thoughts of Dido and her death as the epic progresses.
- ⁶ The term *deictic* is appropriately applied to *ille* by T. E. Page in his comment on the word. See T. E. Page, ed., *The Aeneid of Virgil: Books VII–XII* (London: Macmillan, 1929), 413 (on *Aeneid*, 12:5).

Beloved: America's Grammar Book

Karla FC Holloway

When the music entered the window . . . [b]oth women heard it at the same time. . . [W]here the yard met the road, they saw the rapt faces of thirty neighborhood women. Some had their eyes closed; others looked at the hot, cloudless sky. Sethe opened the door and reached for Beloved's hand. Together they stood in the doorway. 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.

– Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987), 261. Copyright © 1987 by Toni Morrison. Used by permission of Alfred A. Knopf, a division of Random House, Inc. Any third party use of this material, outside of this publication, is prohibited.

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The expressive license within this epigraph, an extraordinary passage from Toni Morrison's quintessential American masterpiece *Beloved*, takes up the implicit challenge of a literary fiction: the authority in (and of) a literary imagination. This gathering of women's voices enables this speaking text – a "talking book" in the tradition of African American

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letters – that at once nominates, engages, and liberates the poetic voice. The passage gestures toward an essential complexity even as it maps a route toward understanding the ways in which America, and in particular this formerly enslaved community, has an exquisitely sculpted potential to survive the terror in our nation’s history. This potential might be as insistent as the immediate conundrum in the novel’s narrative: how the black folk who were experiencing a tenuous freedom in Ohio might live without the detritus of the past as a disabling accompaniment. The return of Sethe’s dead daughter Beloved as a fleshly inhabitation threatens her mother’s, her sister’s, and the new community of freed and escaped black folk’s opportunity to safely manage their lives beyond (and without) the shadow of enslavement, which maliciously haunts their new and quasi-liberated landscape.

In the context of America’s literary history, *Beloved*’s inhabitation explores the ways in which race in America is deeply embedded in persons, in our language, and as a consequence of these first two, in our national narratives. The persistence of a national paradigm of race that exists between persons, that constructs racialized identities, and that seeps into our linguistic and literary structures constitutes a particular and perhaps a peculiar American grammar. In the vulnerable era of *Beloved*’s setting, the perplexities of the U.S. legal framework surrounding property allowed the federal Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 to render a personal act of self-determination, such as escape, into a confounding shape-shift whereby a freed and legal black body is not quite either: neither free nor endowed with liberal, legal personhood. Instead, escaped slaves were vulnerable to recapture. As persons who were also property, they were liminal bodies whose presence oddly clarified, instantiated, and confused the tangle of U.S. personhood – arguably

the most critical nomination within the U.S. Constitution’s declaration of the nation’s insistent and principled autonomy. It was fully and absolutely a reasonable terrain for a ghost.

As long as the threat of recapture loomed, these people were too much like Beloved herself, caught in the interstices between personhood and fracture, freedom and fugitivity, fiction and fact. Because race mattered, its regulatory language clarified national personhood even as it confused private personhood. The Constitution’s representation clause assured the nation’s failure to perfect its union.¹ In fact, the mark it left, even after it was overturned by the 14th Amendment, would come to be as telling as a slaver’s brand. The consequence of constitutionally inscribed partial personhood lingered like a bookmark in the literary, legal, and even social texts that would follow.

In *Beloved*’s experiment with the intertextuation of words, bodies, and imagery, Morrison encapsulates a brief but critical and deadly serious *jouissance* with America’s racial shadows as literary scaffolding. The novel’s imagery, narrative, and characters excavate the interdisciplinary architectures of the deeply racialized texts that constitute our laws and compose our national literatures. Even its origin story is complicit. Morrison was prompted to create the fiction after reading an 1856 newspaper article from *The Cincinnati Enquirer* about an escaped slave, Margaret Garner, who killed her daughter when confronted with slave catchers who had tracked her down in Ohio and attempted to return her to her “owner” in Kentucky. It’s this engagement between Morrison’s fiction and the narrative fact of race in the United States that makes the evidence of what becomes an oddly reasonable terrain for racialized literary allusions as fateful as it is necessary.² The fullness of America’s racially haunted

history is a regulatory accompaniment to America's literary narratives. The way in which *Beloved* exposes this history as a necessary utility in American storytelling is what makes this book so extraordinary in our literary history and so revelatory of the ways in which the histories of our national literary landscape have been sculpted by our "play in the dark."

Morrison engaged that literary landscape and history in her 1992 William E. Massey, Sr. Lectures in the History of American Civilization at Harvard University. The lectures were later published as a monograph, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*.³ I see a slender but rigorous trace between the capacious subject of those lectures – American civilization – and her unbounded proffer in *Beloved* when she writes that "not a house in the country ain't packed to its rafters with some dead Negro's grief."⁴ *Beloved's* domestic site is the nation's homeland – without exception and without any demarcation other than their domestic location. Morrison's interest is similarly domestic in *Playing in the Dark*. There she explains how a "contemplation of [black people] . . . is central to any understanding of our national literature." Her argument explores how the consequently "coded language and purposeful restrictions of this Africanist presence . . . extend into the twentieth century."⁵ In *Playing in the Dark*, Morrison reveals the ways in which America's house (and not only its fiction by and about American black folk) is haunted by race. Her own excavation of that ghostly habitation is imaginatively reconstructed in the novel that preceded those lectures by just a few years. *Beloved* explored the ways in which our national narratives would be similarly haunted: in the nation's keys and its codes, in its imagery and through its gestures, in its architecture and its corporeal embodiments.

This is why it is particularly important to notice the literary landscape in the passage I've isolated – how the "yard meets the road." Although the yard is a domestic and privately bounded space, it reaches toward the road's public path. It is an invitation for the reader to map a new dimension in what Morrison locates as "a critical geography" and to follow the exemplary but vexed terrain that has contoured America's private and public interstices.⁶ In *Landscape and Memory*, Simon Schama explains how "landscapes are culture before they are nature; constructs of the imagination."⁷ The cultural conundrum of our national homeland is that it has been both bound and free, and that *textural* battle has shaped the landscapes in our literary imaginations. When I first read *Beloved*, I was well-schooled enough to recognize it as a descriptive grammar for my own work in American literary and cultural studies. But it is only now that I recognize its liberating creative license.

Legal Fictions: Constituting Race, Composing Literature, the book that I believe will be the capstone of my critical writing, has, at the very least, a far better grasp of the challenge of and potential in critical theory and literary text than did my first book, *The Character of the Word*, an outgrowth of my doctoral dissertation.⁸ I begin the epilogue in *Legal Fictions* with an epigraph of my own composition. It deliberately engages the fanciful potential in our words – what writer and philosopher Owen Barfield would have called an exploration of the aesthetic imagination in poetic diction. It is, for Barfield, "a felt change of consciousness."⁹ *Legal Fictions* embraces that shadow:

Our shadows linger and leak. They seep from mottled grey and scaffold scalar recollections. They assure our potential, securing it by ways and means at once penumbral and exquisite. They instantiate things re-

remembered past their time, promised beyond situation.¹⁰

Legal Fictions explores the consequence of the law’s persistent constitution of race as a category that matters in American socialities. It is a sustained meditation on the consequential literary imagination that such a scaffolding encourages, especially with literature’s memory of slavery as “remembered past its time, promised beyond situation.”¹¹ In the first chapter, “Bound by Law,” I make what some may read as a provocative argument as to why literary allusion is like legal precedent. I use *Beloved* to provide the illustration that I believe is credible and theoretically rigorous enough to sustain the weight I assign to our nation’s particular interplay of law and literature. To explain the literary representation of precedent, I recall this scene from *Beloved*, in which Sethe explains her idea of a “rememory” to her daughter Denver. Morrison writes:

I was talking about time. It’s so hard for me to believe in it. Some things go. Pass on. Some things just stay. I used to think it was my rememory. You know. Some things you forget. Other things you never do. . . . [T]he place – the picture of it – stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there in the world. What I remember is a picture floating around out there outside of my head. I mean even if I don’t think it, even if I die, the picture of what I did, or knew, or saw is still out there. Right in the place where it happened. . . . Someday you be walking down the road and you hear something or see something going on . . . and you think it’s you thinking it up. . . . But no. It’s when you bump into a rememory that belongs to somebody else.¹²

Beloved exemplifies the rigorously creative textual standard within the factual histories and execution of American letters, the codes of our conduct as well as the liberal principles that govern usage. It forces

us to confront the ethic of racial reasoning that produces the nonsense that comes from our insistence that race and the standing of one’s national personhood have a reasonable relationship. It also encourages the haunting persistence that exacts a toll on our national memory and contemporary socialities.

When *Beloved* was published, I was nearly a decade into my own scholarly career. I did notice its exquisite and even painful architecture of words that structured America’s legal and literary stories into a narrative terror. But I had neither the experience nor the *chutzpah* to claim myself as being among those who might take advantage of the resident opportunity in that complex congregation of women whose voices carried “the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words.” As a linguist, my scholarly perspective had been trained to notice the deep structures as well as the surface structures of language use, the compositions in its words, syntax, morphology, and phonology – and especially the principles and imagery that inhere – their moorings and their metaphors. *Beloved* became the book that encouraged my notice, and further than that, it urged me to do the work myself and claim the opportunity extended in that choral moment. I deliberately engaged this opportunity as I composed *Legal Fictions*, the book that *Beloved* made possible, and where I gave myself permission for moments of uninhibited play with literary language’s liberal imagination.

In the passage from *Beloved* quoted above, the grammar – linguistic and literary structures both – of America’s racial legacy are on display. Morrison instantiates this critical linguistic potential and bookmarks the moment, making certain that it is passed on to the reader.¹³ I was critically sophisticated enough to recognize its importance and to highlight the passage in my first

reading of the novel. But I was clearly not insightful enough to grasp the scholarly and creative opportunity offered to me or to notice that I too could be in that company – invited in, and offered a measure of whole notes.¹⁴

The choral gathering is as traditional to the literary text as it is extraordinarily endowed in this novel. For as much as it echoes the spoken word traditions of the Greek tragedians, *Beloved*'s chorus is written as a post-modern collage of voices imbued with an essential American text regarding their luminous performance of linguistic dexterity. The company – the congregation – of women matters. This is no singular task. The women gather in order to build “voice upon voice” until their tone settles into a wide “wave of sound” that could accomplish the necessary spiritual work and reach the regions that seemed beyond their everyday capabilities. When they did, Sethe “tremble[d] like the baptized” – a clear indication that she had been touched.

It wasn't immediately apparent what potential *Beloved* offered me. It was clearly the book that explored, as well as encouraged, the possibilities in the words I might choose to engage the literary discipline of U.S. African American literatures, the major focus of my scholarly oeuvre. And my background in linguistics prepared me for the deep structures buried in the grammars of our dialects and helped me navigate the “deep waters” that Morrison plumbs in *Beloved*. That extraordinarily empowered gathering that broke through the haunt of the novel underscores the work that a notice of grammar might accomplish to excavate American literature's stories as well as the ways in which race continues its spectral hold on our nation's imagination. But at the time I first read *Beloved*, I maintained my distance from their offering, satisfied to simply appreciate the stunning narrative within.

In my selected excerpt, Morrison writes that the women's congregated voices find communion under “a hot, cloudless sky . . . as if the Clearing had come to her with all its heat and simmering leaves.” Earlier in the novel, Morrison describes the Clearing as a place that was “green and blessed,” a place where the motley community could become “flesh” – surely a signifying allusion to the biblical gospel where the word becomes flesh. This embodiment is formed in a quintessentially American way because it was only in the United States where fully (rather than fractionally) fleshed black personhood was legally challenged. As a consequence, the literary bodies – black and white both – had potential to harm and be harmed. The women's gathering is defiant in its collaborative empowerment, but also vulnerable in the ways their congregated presence makes them dramatically visible and easily heard (“When the music entered the window . . . [b]oth women heard it at the same time”). Their offering is as bold as it is endangered, and it deploys the very contradiction of their presence in an American community. But it is also generous and salvific. The women use the moment to reclaim Sethe back into their vital community, to give her living daughter Denver the future they all struggled to enable, and to place the haunt of the past back into the unreasonable shadow of its origin.

So it is a choice the women make to claim the freedom road as a space cleared for communion. Despite the bounded private property of the yard in front of them, and despite the peril in memories, they gather to preserve and protect what could eventually become the post-slavery public potential of their persons. Their convention uses the only text they have in common as the route to restoration. My selected passage's reference to “the Clearing” – a critically capitalized site in this text – is an essential nomination of the place

that has already assured these women their salvific potential. It is the site where Beloved's grandmother, Baby Suggs Holy, preached the sermon that explicated the challenge confronting this newly freed, escaped, and hopeful yet haunted community. She understands their synecdochic dismemberment and the alienation of their bodies from self-love. She preached: "love your flesh . . . your eyes . . . your hands . . . your mouth. *You* got to love it. . . . *You*. For this is the prize." Like the final gathering of women, this early communal gathering held its music as well: "Long notes held until the four-part harmony was perfect enough for their deeply loved flesh."¹⁵ Later, when the women who had danced in the Clearing come together to use the force of their congregation to send Beloved back to memory, they use their restored, re-membered, and loved black bodies and their gathered sounds as "the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words," fracturing the text of their enslavement.

Morrison's *Beloved* excavated the ways in which our national literatures could help the nation understand the relational racial realities that our laws have instantiated and that our literatures remember. This underbelly of our constitution would mean that "reconstruction" would not simply be a notable era and event in our post-slavery history, but it would also have to be a moment when the fractured national body would require reconstitution and when America as a predator would have to reconstruct its prey as its prospect. But before there would be private bodies that mattered to history, or to our laws, there had to be public texts that were cognizable. Race was America's syntactic structure. Like a grammar, it held together the inherent complexities and contradictions.

Our laws' instantiation of racial rules made the plain fact of our legal fictions a regulatory apparatus – a structural social

reality. Race was a legal fiction worthy of the nation's literary imagination. Morrison was composing America's *grammar* – its art of letters – one that explored the potential of coherence after the incoherence of slavery, America's legal institution of fractionalized personhood, and America's (re)constitution of its bodied politics.¹⁶

In a 1989 review of the novel, I wrote that *Beloved* "is not a 'ghost story.'" I declared that instead "it is a spiritual."¹⁷ The distinction helped me explain what I then saw as a crucial difference, one that spoke of the translucent lingering that is less maleficent than it is confused. A ghost story has little of the agency that *Beloved* commands, almost as if she is taking up the challenge extended in the epigraph I used to introduce my review essay: "One wants a teller in a time like this."¹⁸ *Beloved* inhabits the novel as if she alone is the teller. She is certainly the one who is left to judge – to determine whether her mother's act was one of desperate kindness or desperate cruelty. She alone has the standing to speak through the murkiness of the reader's ethical dilemma – was Sethe's act murder or mercy? – and she was left to suffer the peculiar consequence of her early death. *Beloved*'s persistent, troubled, and finally insistently and deadly loving spirit underscores the complexity of the era but also makes necessary the community's and the reader's disengagement from her. The gathering of women is as necessary to the novel as it is to the reader. Their daringly engaged spirituality made certain there would be others who could be tellers, and they extend this potential to any who would use and remember the language and the texts that come from our history – whether they be fictions or facts. Even though the women have no quotidian vocabulary to exorcize Sethe's daughter, they clearly have an extraordinary spiritual reach that is enough for the task.

In a characteristically savvy play with our national grammar, Morrison ends *Beloved* with a warning: “It is not a story to pass on.”¹⁹ The preposition “on” allows the sentence to mean *it is not a story to be avoided*, even though its first meaning suggestively retains the intent of “on” as a particle: *it is not a story to share*. With that final syntactic complexity, Morrison explains how America’s grammar contains structural contradictions even as it unleashes creative potential.

At this particular moment in the middle of my fourth decade as a scholar, I feel fully embraced by that gathering of women.

In fact, I feel as if I am not only among their company but absolutely entitled to the license and creativity they engage. *Beloved*’s gathered women, the ones who hold the key and whose empowered sound can break the back of words, have given me license to my own life in letters and have challenged me to join the choir. I sing alto. And “who knows but that on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?”²⁰

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Article I, section II of the U.S. Constitution, also known as the representation clause, declared that each slave would count as “three-fifths of a free person” in matters of congressional representation and taxation. It protected the property of those who held slaves but at the same time quixotically rendered the enslaved to both categories: they were property as well as (partial) persons.
- ² In 1856, Margaret Garner and her family escaped from Kentucky to Cincinnati. They were found by slave catchers and returned to their owners, but not before Garner killed her daughter with a butcher knife. As tragic and pitiful as this story is by itself, its accompanying legal conundrum marks the case as one that explains the peculiar intersectionality of persons and property. Garner’s defense lawyer, hoping her trial might be in a free state, claimed she was a person who committed murder. But Kentucky argued for federal rule; she was property to be returned to her owner. See Stephen Weisenberger, *Modern Medea: A Family Story of Slavery and Child-Murder from the Old South* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1999).
- ³ Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (New York: Vintage, 1993).
- ⁴ Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987), 5.
- ⁵ Morrison. *Playing in the Dark*, 5 – 6.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, 3. Morrison explains that the chapters in *Playing in the Dark* would “put forth an argument for extending the study of American literature into . . . a wider landscape. I want to draw a map, so to speak, of a critical geography.”
- ⁷ Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), 61.
- ⁸ Karla FC Holloway, *The Character of the Word: The Texts of Zora Neale Hurston* (Greenwood, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1987). The dissertation, *A Critical Investigation of Literary and Linguistic Structures in the Fiction of Zora Neale Hurston*, was submitted to Michigan State University in 1978 to fulfill the requirements of my Ph.D. in English and linguistics.
- ⁹ Owen Barfield, *Poetic Diction* (1928; Middleton, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1984), 48. Here Barfield explains “aesthetic imagination” as a “felt change of consciousness.”
- ¹⁰ From Karla FC Holloway, *Legal Fictions: Constituting Race, Composing Literature* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2014).

“Beloved”: ¹¹ Ibid.

America’s ¹² Morrison, *Beloved*, 35 – 36.

Grammar ¹³ As I write “linguistic and literary structures” I recall the title of my 1978 doctoral dissertation, *A Critical Investigation of Literary and Linguistic Structures in the Fiction of Zora Neale Hurston*. It is with some satisfaction that I notice this consistency in my vision and interests, and that even then I was focused on the combinations, both “the key [as well as] the codes.”

¹⁴ I believed then, as I do now, this to be a correct (and decidedly humbling) determination of the reviewer who expressed her disappointment in the execution of *The Character of the Word*. Cheryl Wall suggested that there was more potential in the title than the text of my dissertation-become-book. See Cheryl A. Wall, “Black Women Writers: Journey Along Motherlines,” *Callaloo* 39 (Spring 1989): 419 – 422.

¹⁵ Morrison, *Beloved*, 88 – 89.

¹⁶ The derivation of the word *grammar* is from the Greek *grammatike (tekhne)*, or “art of letters.”

¹⁷ Karla FC Holloway, “Beloved: A Spiritual,” *Callaloo* 13 (Summer 1990): 516 – 525.

¹⁸ Ibid. The epigraph is the title and first line of a poem by Gwendolyn Brooks, “One Wants a Teller,” in *Blacks* (Chicago: Third World Press, 1994), 132.

¹⁹ Morrison, *Beloved*, 275.

²⁰ Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (1952; New York: Random House, 2010), 581.

Hooks Baited with Darkness

Scott Russell Sanders

I first read *Walden* when I was seventeen, the summer before starting college, at the urging of a high school teacher who sensed that my adolescent mind, brimming with questions, would benefit from grappling with a truly radical thinker. Much of the book baffled me. The tone shifted unpredictably from conversational to prophetic, from jokey to stern, from earthy to mystical. I was bewildered by some of the lengthy sentences, which zigzagged among ideas and images, and I was stumped by the cryptic short ones, which seemed to compress whole paragraphs of meaning into a few words. Not yet having made any big decisions about how to lead my life, I couldn't figure out what was troubling this Henry David Thoreau. So what if his neighbors thought he should use his Harvard degree to land a job and a wife, and then proceed to have kids, buy a house, get rich, and distribute alms to the poor? Couldn't he just ignore the scolds and go his own way? Not yet having lost a loved one to accident, illness, or old age, I only dimly understood his brooding about that amoral process we call nature. So what if armies of red ants and black ants slaughtered one another, herons gobbled tadpoles, a dead horse stank up the woods, or a thousand seeds perished for each one that took root? What did all that mayhem and waste have to do with us, the owners of souls aiming at heaven?

At seventeen, still a believer in souls and heaven, I didn't know which parts of the book were supposed to be wise and which parts cranky, so I read it

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all with an open mind. While missing much, I was sufficiently intrigued by the story of Thoreau's sojourn in the woods and sufficiently engaged by his cocky, inquisitive manner to keep reading. His brashness was evident from the opening paragraphs, where he announces that he will write in the first person, thus breaking one of the cardinal rules of composition I had learned in school, and he places himself at the center of his book without apology: "I should not talk so much about myself if there were any body else whom I knew as well. Unfortunately, I am confined to this theme by the narrowness of my experience."¹ As a boy from the back roads of Ohio, untraveled and unsophisticated, wondering what to make of my own narrow experience, I felt Thoreau was speaking to me, an impression confirmed a few lines later: "Perhaps these pages are more particularly addressed to poor students" (2). While I was a good student academically, I was a poor one financially, able to enroll in an Ivy League college that fall only thanks to a full scholarship.

Short of cash, I was long on country skills. My parents and neighbors, all of them frugal, taught me how to hunt, fish, garden, can, fence a pasture, care for livestock, fell trees, fix machines, repair a house, run electrical wiring, and sew on buttons. That summer of my first *Walden* reading I spent as an apprentice carpenter, learning to frame, hang drywall, install trim, and shingle roofs. So I took seriously Thoreau's suggestion that the students at Harvard, instead of paying rent, could have saved money and gained practical knowledge by building their own dormitories. I was fascinated by his detailed account of the cabin construction, from the digging of a cellar hole and the laying up of a chimney to the plastering of walls. Because I enjoyed such work, I understood why he would ask: "Shall we forever resign the pleasure of construction to the carpen-

ter? What does architecture amount to in the experience of the mass of men? I never in all my walks came across a man engaged in so simple and natural an occupation as building his house" (48). Since I had cobbled together treehouses in the backyard maples, forts in the meadow, and brush huts in the woods, and since I had helped frame homes for strangers, I expected to build my own house one day.

Here was a philosopher with dirt under his fingernails and calluses on his palms. Here was a man famous for his ideas who could say, "To be a philosopher is not merely to have subtle thoughts, nor even to found a school, but so to love wisdom as to live according to its dictates, a life of simplicity, independence, magnanimity, and trust. It is to solve some of the problems of life, not only theoretically, but practically" (14). The thrifty, resourceful people among whom I grew up prepared me to admire Thoreau's effort to provide some of the necessities of life with his own hands: not only by constructing a cabin, but also by sawing and splitting fallen trees for the stove (from Emerson's woodlot), by hauling water from the pond (still safe to drink in his day), and by hoeing beans (he made it only partway through his seven miles of rows and resolved to plant fewer the following year).

I did not yet appreciate, however, why he took such pains to distinguish between the necessities of life and luxuries, between enough and too much. When I packed for college that summer, everything I owned – clothes, books, towel, toiletries, clock radio, slide rule – fitted into my grandfather's sea trunk, which I could carry on my shoulder. I did not feel encumbered by property. Nor did I feel, with a radio as my only electronic device and without a car, that technology was forcing me to live at a faster and faster pace, and thus I could not grasp why Thoreau fretted about the accelerating influence of railroads, facto-

ries, and telegraph. Likewise, in that limbo between high school and college, without bills to pay or appointments to keep, with no occupations aside from carpentry, reading, meals, and sleep, I felt no need to simplify my life.

While my upbringing enabled me to follow the practical side of what Thoreau called his “experiment” in simple living, my youth prevented me from fully understanding the philosophy that accompanied it.² My difficulty had as much to do with his style as with his ideas. I puzzled over his paradoxes: “We do not ride on the railroad; it rides upon us” (98–99). I resisted his exaggerations: “I have lived some thirty years on this planet, and I have yet to hear the first syllable of valuable or even earnest advice from my seniors” (8). Well, I found myself asking, who had taught him to build houses, grow beans, or tie his shoes? If people older than thirty had nothing to teach him, why did he read all those ancient – and presumably elderly – sages from India and China and Greece? I bridled at his boastful claims: “There is a certain class of unbelievers who sometimes ask me such questions as, if I think that I can live on vegetable food alone; and to strike at the root of the matter at once – for the root is faith – I am accustomed to answer such, that I can live on board nails” (69). Really? Would those be the nails he salvaged from the Irishman’s shanty? Would he scrape off the rust before devouring them? Such faith, as he called it, reminded me of certain implausible beliefs I was beginning to question in church.

Thoreau often seemed to hide his meaning in riddles, like a Shakespearean fool wary of offending the king. (I had read *King Lear* at the urging of the same high school teacher.) What did he mean, for instance, by saying “I have a great deal of company in my house; especially in the

morning, when nobody calls” (147–148)? Or what did he mean by saying of the men who came to fish in the pond at night that “they plainly fished much more in the Walden Pond of their own natures, and baited their hooks with darkness” (141)? It was far from plain to me. Baiting with worms or crickets, sure. But darkness? Or when he claims, “It is a surprising and memorable, as well as valuable experience, to be lost in the woods any time,” how does he arrive, a few lines later, at his grand conclusion: “Not till we are lost, in other words, not till we have lost the world, do we begin to find ourselves, and realize where we are and the infinite extent of our relations” (186–187)? Getting lost in the woods I could imagine, but I could not see how this might lead to finding one’s place in infinity.

Time and again, *Walden* makes such dizzying leaps from the literal to the symbolic. Consider one further example, from a passage on carpentry, a subject I was less ignorant of than most other things:

I would not be one of those who will foolishly drive a nail into mere lath and plastering; such a deed would keep me awake nights. Give me a hammer, and let me feel for the furring. Do not depend on the putty. Drive a nail home and clinch it so faithfully that you can wake up in the night and think of your work with satisfaction – a work at which you would not be ashamed to invoke the Muse. So will help you God, and so only. Every nail driven should be as another rivet in the machine of the universe, you carrying on the work. (358–359)

I knew about lath, plaster, putty, and furring; I knew about the satisfaction of driving a nail home with two or three blows. So I followed this passage easily enough until I came to the Muse and God, and then I scratched my head, wondering how they entered the picture, and wondering even more how a well-driven nail

and the person who hammered it could be useful to the universe.

Even where the style posed no problems, I often balked at the philosophy. Take the chapter grandly entitled “Higher Laws.” In the opening lines, Thoreau confesses an urge to kill and devour a woodchuck raw, an impulse that stirs him to reflect: “I found in myself, and still find, an instinct toward a higher, or, as it is named, spiritual life, as do most men, and another toward a primitive rank and savage one, and I reverence them both” (229). Thus far I stayed with him, for I felt simultaneously the allure of science and girls, of books and basketball, and I was glad to think that both of these instincts deserved respect. But then Thoreau spends several pages elevating “purity” and denigrating everything “primitive rank and savage” about human life, from the eating of meat and the drinking of tea to “sensuality” of every kind, especially the “generative energy, which, when we are loose, dissipates and makes us unclean, when we are continent invigorates and inspires us” (239–240). Lest readers miss the allusion to sex, he goes on to insist that “Chastity is the flowering of man” (240), sounding less like a dissident thinker than like a Scoutmaster or high school nurse. Having begun by claiming to “reverence” the body’s urges, Thoreau ends by declaring, “He is blessed who is assured that the animal is dying out in him day by day, and the divine being established” (240)—advice that could have come from St. Paul, the chief source of shame in my childhood.

Somewhere between hungering after a woodchuck and repudiating sex, Thoreau provoked me to say no. I could not have fully explained the grounds of my objection, neither at this point in my reading nor at any other point where I disagreed with him, but the fact of my disagreement, and the force of it, was exhilarating. I sensed that to question his philosophy, to test his

ideas and opinions against my own reason and experience, was wholly in keeping with the philosophy itself.

Despite my reservations and confusions, what came through to me from *Walden*, and what most excited me, was Thoreau’s desire to lead a meaningful life. The very title of the second chapter—“Where I Lived, and What I Lived For”—thrilled me. The “where” concerned me less than the “what for.” At seventeen, I imagined that life must have a purpose beyond mere survival and the passing on of genes, beyond piling up money and possessions, beyond auditioning for paradise. But what might that purpose be? How could one discover it? And if life did have a purpose beyond those dictated by religion, economics, or biology, what then? How should one live in light of it?

I was haunted by such questions, yet my friends never spoke of them, and the adults I knew seemed to have resigned themselves to one or another conventional answer. So it was heartening to find Thoreau asking these very questions, in a passage I would later discover to be among the most celebrated in the book:

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practise resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world; or if it were sublime, to know it by

experience, and be able to give a true account of it in my next excursion. For most men, it appears to me, are in a strange uncertainty about it, whether it is of the devil or of God, and have *somewhat hastily* concluded that it is the chief end of man here to “glorify God and enjoy him forever.” (97)

Behind the bravado, I could hear his longing to find a true path, a way of spending his time and talents that would be worthy of the precious, fleeting gift of life. I shared that longing, as I shared his wariness about otherworldly philosophies. I did not recognize the source of his quotation in the last line – the Westminster Shorter Catechism, which opens with the declaration that “Man’s chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever” – but I had heard such pieties often, in sermons that discounted the value of life here and now except as preparation for life hereafter. What appealed to me most deeply in that first reading of *Walden* was Thoreau’s determination to observe and enjoy the marvels of Earth, to be fully awake and alive, right here, right now.

Today, fifty years and many rereadings later, *Walden* is quite a different book for me: less bewildering, since I have made my share of difficult choices and suffered my share of losses, and also more challenging, since I have come to recognize more clearly my own limitations as well as those of the book.

Although I have renovated the old house in which my wife and I reared our children, and in which we now entertain our grandchildren, I realize, at age sixty-seven, I will never build a house from scratch. Although I remain cautious about technology – agreeing with Thoreau that many of our inventions merely offer “improved means to an unimproved end” (55) – my life depends on electricity and petroleum and the devices they power, as

well as on the global networks that supply them. I try to minimize my possessions, giving away whatever I don’t use, yet I keep acquiring new ones, which must be paid for, stored, insured, cleaned, repaired, and eventually replaced, thus demonstrating the truth of Thoreau’s dictum that “the cost of a thing is the amount of . . . life which is required to be exchanged for it, immediately or in the long run” (32). I would rather not think about money, yet I spend hours keeping track of its coming and going, mainly to satisfy the IRS, merchants, and banks. As a husband, father, and now a grandfather, as a teacher for the past four decades, and as a citizen engaged in numerous causes, I bear responsibilities that I could not have imagined at the age of seventeen. No matter how I strive to simplify my life, it remains stubbornly complex. In short, I have failed to become the unencumbered, self-reliant, perpetually awake person I had envisioned in my youth.

Neither, I discovered, was Thoreau as unencumbered as he appeared to be on my first reading of *Walden*. During his sojourn in the woods, he frequently visited the village, saw friends, ate meals with his family, helped in the family pencil business, earned money from surveying and other jobs, carried on correspondence, gave lectures, and took trips. He revealed only part of himself on the page, which is all that even the most personal book can do. On the other hand, he presented far more of his thoughts and observations than actually occurred during the twenty-six months he spent living in the woods. The chronicle of his experiment at Walden Pond draws on material recorded in his journal from a period beginning years before and extending years after his time at the cabin. As a result, many passages in the book seem overstuffed, as if he felt compelled to include every anecdote, aphorism, witticism,

image, and insight that had ever come to him concerning a given topic. Having worked with many young writers in my classes, and having once been a young writer myself, I recognize this tendency to excess as a common sign of ambition. Better overdo it than leave out something valuable.³ I am more tolerant now of this and other stylistic quirks in *Walden*. The bluster and bragging are more than compensated for by the vigor and candor. For every showy allusion to classical literature or mythology, there is a burst of gritty American vernacular. For every willful obscurity in the prose, there are a dozen brilliant clarities.

While I am less inclined to quarrel with the style of *Walden*, I am more inclined to question some of the postures and opinions of the brash narrator. Thoreau's portrait of a solitary, self-sufficient life in the woods now appears to me as excessively, if unconsciously, male. His radical individualism, however necessary in his day as a bulwark against demands for conformity from church and society, now appears too narrow, rejecting as it does all responsibility of the self toward others. His opposition of spirit and flesh strikes me today as an expression of the dualism at the root of our ecological crisis, a dualism that sets mind against matter, culture against wildness. Thus our patron saint of environmentalism can declare: "Nature is hard to be overcome, but she must be overcome" (241). Recognizing such misgivings does not diminish my appreciation for the book's many strengths, or my gratitude for all that it has taught me.

When I compare my current reading of *Walden* with impressions from that first reading, I am reminded of Italo Calvino's remark that books read in youth can be "formative, in the sense that they give a form to future experiences, providing models, terms of comparison, schemes for classification, scales of value, exemplars of

beauty. . . . If we reread the book at a mature age, we are likely to rediscover these constants, which by this time are part of our inner mechanisms, but whose origins we have long forgotten."⁴ My experience differs from Calvino's description only in that I have not forgotten the source of those "inner mechanisms." The example of Thoreau's life and the challenge of his thought remain potent influences for me, as they have been potent influences for generations of readers.

Of all his writings, *Walden* has had the broadest impact, moving countless people to seek a way of life that is close to nature, materially simple, purposeful, and reflective. His vision has been transmitted and transmuted through a lineage of American writers, from John Muir and Aldo Leopold and Rachel Carson to Wendell Berry and Terry Tempest Williams and Bill McKibben, all of them striving to harmonize human behavior with the constraints and patterns of our planetary home. We are far from achieving such a harmony – as witness climate disruption, for example, or the accelerated extinction of species – but we would be farther still without the questioning and imagining Thoreau inspired. We have him to thank, as much as anyone, for the shift in consciousness that led to the creation of America's national parks, designated wilderness areas, and laws aimed at protecting air and water and soil. We still need his cautionary, curmudgeonly voice, because in our day the craving for more – more stuff, more money, more power – no longer merely enslaves individuals; it degrades the conditions for life on Earth.

Great books read us as surely as we read them, revealing, by the aspects of our character and personal history they illuminate, who we are. Today when I revisit *Walden* it is usually in the company of my students, whose reactions remind me of my own

early bafflement, resistance, and exhilaration. When they protest, as they often do, that they have no taste for Thoreau's experiment in simple living, I draw their attention to his disclaimer: "I would not have any one adopt *my* mode of living on any account; for, beside that before he has fairly learned it I may have found out another for myself, I desire that there may be as many different persons in the world as possible; but I would have each one be very careful to find out and pursue *his own* way, and not his father's or his mother's or his neighbor's instead" (75). Finding out and pursuing one's own way, while learning all one can about the ways that others have found, is the essential task not merely of education but of life.

Thoreau continued his search after moving from the cabin back into town, a search that would lead to his public denunciation of slavery, to inventions that improved the making of pencils and the refining of graphite, to meticulous natural history studies, to research on Native Americans, to essays and journals and travel accounts that would fill a shelf of books published after his death. Wanting my students to bear in mind that ongoing life, beyond the confines of *Walden*, I draw their attention to another passage, this one from the final chapter: "I left the woods for as good a reason as I went there. Perhaps it seemed to me that I had several more lives to live, and could not spare any more time for that one. It is remarkable how easily and insensibly we fall into a particular route, and make a beaten track for ourselves" (351). What he sought for himself and urged for his readers was the freedom to keep thinking, keep experimenting, keep striking out afresh.

We commonly imagine Thoreau outdoors, chasing loons on the pond, watching frozen mud thaw, identifying wildflowers, plucking wild fruits. But those excursions were informed and interpreted

during countless hours he spent indoors, reading and writing. The chapter of *Walden* called "Reading" is a hymn to books, as eloquent as any of his tributes to nature. "Books are the treasured wealth of the world and the fit inheritance of generations and nations," he declares, recommending to us not just any books, but the great ones, the classics, those "we have to stand on tip-toe to read and devote our most alert and wakeful hours to" (110, 112). Such effort, he promises, will be abundantly repaid:

There are probably words addressed to our condition exactly, which, if we could really hear and understand, would be more salutary than the morning or the spring to our lives, and possibly put a new aspect on the face of things for us. How many a man has dated a new era in his life from the reading of a book. The book exists for us perchance which will explain our miracles and reveal new ones. The at present unutterable things we may find somewhere uttered. These same questions that disturb and puzzle and confound us have in their turn occurred to all the wise men; not one has been omitted; and each has answered them, according to his ability, by his words and his life. (115 – 116)

Besieged as we are by advertisements and the cult of consumerism, racing to keep up with our gadgets, rushing from one sensation to the next, we need more than ever to ask the questions posed in *Walden*: What is life for? What are the necessities of a good life? How much is enough? Do we own our devices or do they own us? What is our place in nature? How do we balance individual freedom with social responsibility? How should we spend our days? Whether or not *Walden* speaks to your condition, I tell my students, there are other books that will do so, giving voice to what you have felt but have not been able to say, asking your deepest questions, stirring you to more intense life.

- ¹ Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, ed. Jeffrey S. Cramer (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2004), 2. Originally published in 1854 under the title *Walden; or, Life in the Woods*, Thoreau's most famous book has gone through many editions. Cramer's edition, with an introduction by Denis Donoghue, is the most authoritative currently available; it has the additional virtue of being inexpensive and well suited to classroom use. All subsequent quotations from *Walden* will be taken from this edition, and the page numbers will be shown within parentheses following the quotation. All italics within quotations are in the original.
- ² The words *experiment*, *experiments*, and *experimentalists* appear seventeen times in *Walden*, a sign of Thoreau's respect for the methods and prestige of science. By calling his stay at Walden Pond an experiment, he may also have wished to present it as a one-man alternative to the communal experiments – most of them, like Brook Farm and Fruitlands, short-lived – that were springing up across the United States and Europe in the 1840s and 1850s.
- ³ Such an encyclopedic ambition has resulted in many a bloated, shapeless tome, of course, but it also gave us *Moby-Dick* and *Leaves of Grass*, which were published, respectively, three years before and one year after *Walden*.
- ⁴ Italo Calvino, *The Uses of Literature*, trans. Patrick Creagh (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986), 127.

On Reading & Rereading Freud's *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*

Steven Marcus

I am going at least at first to write autobiographically. My justification for doing so is that I regard my experience as relatively typical and hence as bearing some fraction of non-negligible, if perhaps oblique, interest. I first read Freud sixty-five years ago. I was eighteen years old, and the occasion arose in what was then offered in my intellectually conservative college as a new course. The subject was in the humanities, and it consisted of works selected from some of the many masters of mid-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century literature and thought. Included among them were such figures as Melville, Flaubert, Dostoevsky, Nietzsche, Henry and William James, George Bernard Shaw, D. H. Lawrence, Joyce, Proust, and Kafka. Inserted somewhere in the second half of the chronological list was Freud's *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, which he originally delivered between 1915 and 1917.¹ Hence the context in which Freud was presented, and presented himself, to my largely bewildered late-adolescent sensibility was that of Western cultural, intellectual, and literary modernism. It was an advantage, I believe, to have read him for the first time among other immensely distinguished minds, writers who were in the course of radically departing from what had been generally accepted as canonical forms, conceptions, and conventions of representation – and of norms and values, including the values of civilization and of life itself.

Part of this advantage of reading and experiencing Freud as one cultural preeminence among others was

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to “place” him so to speak in a specific community of grand creative purposes. To take up one week after another such realizations as “Bartleby the Scrivener” and “Billy Budd,” *A Sentimental Education*, *Notes from Underground*, *Portrait of a Lady*, *Women in Love*, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, *Beyond Good and Evil*, *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, *Swann’s Way*, *The Trial*, and so on was in point of fact to set oneself up for regular spiritual violence – for being repeatedly knocked over the head and simultaneously observing the ground disappear beneath one’s feet. In this setting and company, Freud appeared as neither an oddity nor an anomaly. (Another element in these favoring circumstances had to do with the instructor who had devised this innovative course of reading. He was a youngish, very intelligent, genial, and ironic professor of English and comparative literature who made no bones about his wholehearted recognition of the power and genius of modernism, but who would from time to time temper his admiration by reading to the class a particularly choice passage from Flaubert or Dostoevsky or Freud and then pointedly ask, “Doesn’t this shock you? Do you really believe what it proposes? Can you imagine yourself speaking or behaving like this?” – in effect attempting to solicit from us relatively undefended responses to the radical existential and moral challenges that modernism represented.)

As for the reading of Freud himself, it was anything but a simple matter. In the first place, he shared with the other eminent modernists a radical skepticism about overt moral claims and protestations of shock, innocence, and propriety raised by both social institutions and individuals. He was suspicious of rationalizing or exculpatory explanations of behavior and beliefs, even as he seemed to exemplify the extension of reasoned observation into the other-than-rational sectors of our ex-

istence. Among the heirs to the Enlightenment, he was at the same time a participant in the crisis of reason in which modernism in literature, culture, and thought has continued to occupy a historically exemplary place. He founded a discipline that he affirmed, and that affirmed itself, as a science while occupying itself with the other-than-rational, the more primitive, childish, marginal, and dysfunctional manifestations of mental life. He undertook to investigate certain encrypted and occulted operations of the mind; but he did so outside the clinic and the laboratory, outside of the university and academic psychology, outside of test scores and statistics, and either outside or on the margins of certain communal, professionalized, and generally settled protocols of hierarchy and respectability.

But there was something else that was peculiar about this first acquaintance with a text by Freud. As I was reading along, I found myself repeatedly pausing and for a moment inwardly remarking, “Oh, this really seems to be true! It *is* true!” Or at another stage, “This is something like truth,” if not *the* truth. And simultaneously I had a virtually physical sensation-perception-feeling that my mind was turning, or being turned, although I was unable to articulate the direction of the movement. It was certainly not an entirely conscious or entirely continuous succession of mental (and quasi-physical) events. Nor was I concerned at the time with understanding it. It did not belong, however, to an order of experience that one has very often in an intellectual life. I myself have had it on only four other occasions: before Freud, when I first read Plato and Shakespeare; and a year or two later when I read, again for the first time, Dickens and Wordsworth. However, these later readings had the advantage of being already mediated by or filtered through the vivid, indelible deposit left behind by the expe-

rience of the first three. That is to say: the effects were organic, cumulative, developmental, and at the same time no more than fragmentarily conscious. Moreover, this reading, like the others I have referred to, seems to have worked in such a way as to stimulate me to read other texts more coherently, with what appeared to be firmer grounding. Such enabling was, in part, by way of preparing in my youthful mind an embedded and preconditioning context of qualities and references, a range of verbal, affective, and conceptual markers, soundings by which I might grope my way along in the obscure, the less than fully perspicuous universe, of written articulations. To my youthful sensibility, the experience of reading such special masterpieces seemed to recruit them as personal auxiliaries and stabilizers. They appeared to help me maintain what eventually turned out to be a quite factitious sense of equilibrium and proportion as I eagerly, uncomprehendingly, and apprehensively staggered through one after another world-creating and world-annihilating intensity of literary-cultural imagination.

In some measure these occasions resembled what has been described as “the shock of recognition,” but in some measure only. The recognition was not altogether a recognition. I was not quite the slave boy in Plato’s *Meno*, who under the suggestive prodding of Socrates “remembered” his geometry. I discovered later on a closer analogy in the *Introductory Lectures*. It occurs in Freud’s discussion of slips of the pen and misreadings. In the latter instance, Freud observes, “What one is going to read is not a derivative of one’s own mental life like something one proposes to write” (70). For me, however, this initial reading of Freud had what I have to suggest was the pseudo-effect of making me feel, at least in a certain weak measure, as if the text were, so to say, deriving and

shaping itself in some weird dimension from my own mental life. I was not in the least delusional; not for a moment did I think that I was the source of such insights or memorable formulations. To this extent, at the same time, I *did* resemble Socrates’s slave boy. To rearrange the terms of the discourse, and to borrow a well-known insight, it was as if this magisterial work by Freud, in common with other modernist masterpieces, was reading me. Though they as a rule found me a less than engrossing subject, they awakened in me a peculiar inkling or suspicion that I, too, was somehow and in some way a text to be read, interpreted, explained, perhaps even turned into a narrative account. Freud himself, I began primitively to conceive, was a great reader, one of the cleverest ever. And his readings, along with my misreadings and readings of others might in some alternative understanding be in fact derivatives of a common mental life.

How then did I respond to this experience as a whole? How did I integrate it into my rudimentary graspings of the world? The truth is of course that I didn’t integrate it and that I had virtually no consciously organized intelligence of my experience as a whole. It floated there as a huge unasimulated block of personal, literary, and cultural presentiments, a kind of textual iceberg, nine-tenths below the surface, to which I only dimly sensed I was going to return.

One further passage hints at how this event came to work its suggestiveness on me. It occurs in Lecture XXVII, on “Transference.” Freud is discussing how “intellectual insight” is not strong enough or free enough to fight through the unconscious resistances that favor a repetition of the failed solution to an inner conflict by means of repression. Indeed, what turns the scale for the patient “is simply and solely his relation to the doctor. . . . [I]t clothes the doctor with authority and is

transformed into belief in his communications and explanations” (445f). At this, I now recall, my own resistances were mobilized; all the hard-won autonomy of an eighteen-year-old was quickly brought to bear. Who is this Svengali? I remember saying to myself. Who has authorized this self-arrogation? As if he expected such a rebuke from his interlocutors, Freud goes on to repeat what he has just asserted. “In the absence of such a transference, or if it is a negative one, the patient would never even give a hearing to the doctor and his arguments.” My ruffled feathers began to settle down. Freud then goes on to state, “In this his belief or faith is repeating the story of its own development; it is a derivative of love and, to start with, needed no argument.” Once again I registered this sentence with virtual or quasi-physical animation; it was as if I had turned or been turned in another geographical direction, or as if a new actual perspective had begun to materialize. In this moment of a sudden amplification of insight and deepening of understanding, what had first manifested itself as an alteration of the external visual field continued to reveal itself as, in addition, an accession from within. Suspended in inner space, I continued reading:

Only later did he allow . . . [such arguments] enough room to submit them to examination, provided they were brought forward by someone he loved. Without such supports arguments carried no weight, and in most people’s lives they never do. Thus in general a man is only accessible from the intellectual side too, insofar as he is capable of a libidinal cathexis of objects; and we have good reason to recognize and to dread in the amount of his narcissism a barrier against the possibility of being influenced by even the best analytic technique. (446)

One of the things that had happened was that reading Freud’s *Introductory Lectures*

within the frame or context of modernist literature, and in a certain sense *as* literature, had provided considerable latitude for responses that were not primarily intellectual or exclusively cognitive: the experience of this reading, I realized quite a bit later, was at least as much quasi-transference as it was intellectual. It was by no means un-rational, but neither was it distinctively rational much less rationalistic in the understanding that it followed standard or rigorous procedures of logicity.

Freud drove home this point again on the same page, when he veered off into his own intellectual past and brought in Bernheim, hypnotism, and suggestion/suggestibility: “it must dawn on us that in our own technique we have abandoned hypnosis only to rediscover suggestion in the shape of transference” (446). So this descendant of the Enlightenment did preserve in his practice an imp of Svengali-like “influence,” if not his mystification. And it then began gradually to dawn on me, a young student of literature, that interpretation and suggestion are affiliated and contiguous, and that they are for both practical purposes and in principle inseparable. All interpretations contain elements of suggestion. They are by intention components of an agreed upon verbal exchange between two subjectivities. In psychoanalysis the two agents do not stand on an equal footing of authority, although the relation between them is nonetheless a collaborative construction. But at this juncture I will break off my recollected account, for I realize that especially in these last several statements I am certainly conflating later reflections and readings into a layered and excessively coherent narration of what was at the time a memorable and complex but existentially inchoate series of graspings, clutchings for connections and intelligibilities, along with random dissociations during which

the circuits of my system of mental lighting flicked on and off.

I have chosen this personal anniversary year as an opportunity to revisit this formidable work and to test myself against it once more. There can be no doubt that this historic text has become a different phenomenon and, more pertinently, a different experience. It and I have both changed. It is, for example, a different text because of what Freud wrote subsequently in the twenty years that followed its first publication. It is also different because of what has taken place in the world historically, in developments in psychoanalysis itself (in whose history it occupies a non-trivial place), in the varied influence that it (as part of psychoanalysis itself) has exerted on Western culture and society, along with the global changes in both science and culture that have extended across an interval of sixty-five years. I, too, have changed along with this book. I read more slowly and deliberately than I once did, and my responses have lost some of their youthful extravagance. And of course I have read more Freud along with other things. Rereading the *Introductory Lectures* today, I was first alerted by what I recall was an earlier impression, an impression that others have also commented on. There is an ease and general elegance in Freud's style and habit of exposition and his deployment of argument that seem unique. From the outset he imagines, projects, and incorporates his audience (or readers; today the two are one) into the flow of discourse. In a clearly Socratic maneuver, he anticipates their skeptical doubts and querulous objections by inserting them into the organic movement of his disquisition. It is almost as if the reader himself were a participant in the carefully constructed theatrical scene. One easily tends to forget that an academic lecture is also a piece of theater, and that Freud's

original interlocutors (as well as subsequent readers) had the double experience of imagining and hearing themselves being represented mimetically in the very discourse that was at the same moment being launched directly at them. In addition to the superiority entailed in periodically informing the audience that he already knew all about what they were thinking, Freud tries periodically both to disarm them and to take them into camp by confessing to and complaining about his own inadequacies. He is appropriately modest, but only *sub specie aeternitatis*.

Freud's predisposing habit in this text (and elsewhere) tends to reveal itself through expressions and figures of movement. The lectures themselves constitute a connected series; accordingly, Freud frequently begins by recapitulating or retraversing the course he has most recently covered. Such rehearsals, however, are not as a rule simple repetitions; they tend, rather, to be imaginative paraphrases. In these introductory transitions, as well as in the body of each lecture, Freud regularly introduces new terms and variables, alters perspectives and emphases without warning, and sometimes abruptly shifts the level of abstraction that his argument has been maintaining. The motion or movement in question is only intermittently straightforward or linear. It tends to figure as a spiral, perhaps a corkscrew, turning in arcs that simultaneously alter the plane or level at which his discourse is functioning. Such windings, adjustings, and retrospective rewordings are evidently allied to Freud's regular and reiterated confessions to the audience that he has fallen short, that he is inadequate to the challenge, the great task that he has set for himself. Perhaps it might be less circumpect to call them pseudo-confessions, because one of the indisputable results of these rhetorical strategies is to ratchet up the reader's intimation of the inordinate complexity of what Freud has in mind.

Steven
Marcus

Sometimes, however, the opposite is the paradoxical outcome. For example, when he is nearing the end of the lecture on “Wish-fulfillment,” Freud steps back, as it were, to deliver a truly conclusive conclusion (224). The one “*indispensable*” element in a dream is an unconscious wish for whose fulfillment the dream is given its particular form. “A dream,” he stipulates, “may thus be any sort of thing in so far as you are only taking into account the thoughts it represents – a warning, an intention, a preparation, and so on; but it is *always* also the fulfillment of an unconscious wish.” A dream, he continues, is a group of mental representations, “translated into the archaic mode of thought by the help of an unconscious wish and transformed to fulfill that wish.” This “one characteristic, the wish-fulfillment,” is “*invariable*.” (Emphases have been added in the preceding sentences.) Skepticism, moderation, restraint and intellectual tact, scientific and scholarly evenhandedness have all gone out the window. Freud is at this moment of development in his argument delivering himself of utterances that are universal, absolute, dogmatic in their certainty, and on the face of it incredible. I can imagine a member of the original audience silently demurring: you must mean “most dreams” or “many dreams” or “dreams as a rule.” You don’t allow for the mere possibility that a dream can exist without a wish-fulfillment in and behind it. Not even one? After all, this isn’t geometry or elementary physics. And anyhow, who are you to address the universe with such presumption? Moreover, Freud was at other moments sufficiently instructed in the philosophy of science. According to contemporary philosophers, he was aware of problems entailed in the framing of hypotheses and duly resourceful and competent when it came to theory construction.² Indeed, in the lectures on parapraxes he directly ad-

resses the subject: “It would be a mistake to suppose that a science consists entirely of strictly proved theses, and it would be unjust to require such a degree of probability.” Genuine scientists, he remarks, are able “to find satisfaction in these approximations to certainty . . . and pursue constructive work further in spite of the absence of final confirmation” (51). And he insists repeatedly that he is not asserting that “every single slip that occurs has a sense. . . . It is enough for us if we can point to such a series relatively often. . . . It is in general true that only a certain proportion of the *errors* that occur in ordinary life can be looked at from our point of view” (60; emphasis in original).

When it comes to dreams, however, Freud will not budge; he rejects any suggestion short of certainty and refuses to give his interlocutors a millimeter of latitude. To the question of why must all dreams contain at their core a wish and its fulfillment, he can only reply: “I don’t know why they shouldn’t. I should have no objection. As far as I’m concerned it could be so. There’s only one detail in the way of this broader and more convenient view of dreams – that it isn’t so in reality” (222). That may be charming in its candor, but it is still not terribly helpful; and it is not the manner in which Freud customarily either contends or deals with critical probings, especially when his own proposals have caused them to be brought forward. It is not conducive in persuading his audience to sustain its willing suspension of disbelief, for that is indeed among the range of requirements that his grand idiom of discourse includes. My reading of these passages is supported, I believe, by how Freud concludes this section of the lecture. He turns to address the audience/reader directly:

I can understand all this very clearly; but I cannot tell whether I have succeeded in

making it intelligible to you as well. And I also have difficulty in proving it to you. That cannot be done without carefully analyzing a great number of dreams... [and it] cannot be convincingly represented without what is coming later. It is impossible to suppose that, since everything is intimately interrelated, one can penetrate deeply into the nature of one thing without being concerned oneself with other things of a similar nature. (224)

In the first place, Freud seems at this point to be addressing himself almost as much as he is his audience. He is quite aware that he has been less than entirely convincing. Since in the situation he has conjured up “everything is intimately interrelated,”³ and since it is not feasible to represent this “most critical and important point” without reference to what is coming later, both parties in this projected scene seem to be caught up or bound in a process from which there is in principle no egress. Both analyst and analysand are engaged in scampering around a hermeneutic circle until one or both are exhausted, bored, or satisfied sufficiently to cry out: *Basta!* Time out! Or, more familiarly, our time is up; we’ll continue with this in our next session. The whole and the parts in the endless flux and reciprocity of interpreting a sacred or great historical text or an individual human utterance or association perpetually occupy the foreground of our focused attention.

Moreover, since we proceed under the assumption that “everything is interrelated,” it is virtually as if we were playing chess in an unspecified multiplicity of dimensions. And finally our perplexity is further enhanced by the circumstance that we cannot in the present comprehend matter of considerable pertinence without referring to a future (in the evolving analytic situation) that we cannot know or adequately foretell. We are for this interval proverbial dogs in pursuit of our own tails.

I have brought forward this material to help characterize the less than linear, the irregular, the restless and mobile qualities in Freud’s style of enquiry and exposition. Even when, as here, he seems to be temporarily floundering around, when he is locally inconsistent and advances incompatible formulations, something of more than usual interest is going on. Despite his scientific aspirations and convictions, he also seems to have come into the world with the unconscious purpose of living with the undecidable and irresolvable. He is among the royalty of the kingdom of *Aporia*. He once remarked to the effect that although something is a contradiction, this constitutes no impediment to its existence. Part of his achievement has to do with the circumstance that he was one of those few outstanding minds who was able to juxtapose and accommodate this peculiar style of thinking, which one finds mostly among creative writers and artists, with the central traditions of Western civilization and with the leading ideals of the Enlightenment.

I will adduce another passage that bears usefully on this constellation of tendencies. It occurs at the opening of Lecture XXIV, the ninth of thirteen discussions of the neuroses. Freud once again shifts perspectives and addresses his audience directly:

I am aware that you are dissatisfied. You pictured an “Introduction to Psycho-analysis” very differently. What you expected to hear were lively examples, not theory. . . . [I]nstead I gave you long-winded theories, hard to grasp, which were never complete but were always having something fresh added to them; I worked with concepts which I had not yet explained to you; I went from a descriptive account of things to a dynamic one and from that to . . . an “economic” one; I made it hard for you to understand how many of the technical terms I used meant the same thing and were merely being

interchanged for reasons of euphony; I brought up such far-reaching conceptions as those of the pleasure and reality principles and of phylogenetically inherited endowments; and far from introducing you to anything, I paraded something before your eyes which constantly grew more and more remote. [...]

Why did I not begin my introduction to the theory of the neuroses with what you yourselves know of the neurotic state. . . . Why did I not lead you step by step from an understanding of the simpler everyday forms to . . . [their] enigmatic, extreme manifestations? (378)

This passage and what follows is, in my judgment, more winning, more persuasive and resonant than its predecessors. Like a considerable number of Freud's more arresting *scientifico-pedagogical* moments, it seems addressed almost as much to himself, or to the winds, or to the gods on Mount Olympus as it does to what was once an actual audience. It is a bit late in the day, he realizes, to examine the problem that the second half of these discussions (or Part III as he names it) is as a mode of expository discourse disjunctive from the first. There are very few interpositions of illustrative stories to help the audience along. Instead his listeners and readers have to follow by themselves the implicit narrative lines, the curves, angles, tangents, backtrackings, and hiatuses of theoretical argumentation. Moreover, the theory being quasi-systematically expounded is itself in a perpetually unfinished and incessant state of change; it is open-ended, fragmentary, unpredictably evolving, organismic. Its complex and polysemous character (along with the exigencies of coherent expression) has also induced him to interpolate new conceptual elements before he has had a chance to explain what they are. He has without warning shifted the terms of his account

from one substantive register or category to another. Still worse, he has made things less than intelligible for his audience by throwing out a baffling array of different technical terms while using them to mean the same thing and interjecting some of them apparently solely "for reasons of euphony." Who is this "projector," this self-confessing intellectual swindler and con man?

But he is still not quite finished with his self-arraignment. He has bartered specific and concrete analyses for experience-remote and quite dubious speculations – on such matters, for example, as phylogenetically inherited mental capacities. In fact, the very idea of an "introduction to psychoanalysis" has gotten lost in the shuffle while he has been spending time parading back and forth on one or another of his numerous hobby-horses.

Indeed . . . I cannot even disagree with you. I am not so enamoured of my skill in exposition that I can declare each of its artistic faults to be a peculiar charm. I think myself that it might have been more to your advantage if I had proceeded otherwise; and that was, indeed, my intention. But one cannot always carry out one's reasonable intentions. There is something in the material itself which takes charge of one and diverts one from one's first intentions. Even such a trivial achievement as the arrangement of a familiar piece of material is not entirely subject to an author's own choice; it takes what line it likes and all one can do is ask oneself why it has happened in this way and no other. (379)

He concurs in the silent complaint of his auditors: his expository capacities are not transcendent; his analytic knowingness cannot transform infirmities in procedure and execution into charming idiosyncrasies. Indeed that was not his original plan, which somehow miscarried, despite all his "reasonable intentions" to the

contrary notwithstanding. “Something in the material itself,” he suggests, overcame his conscious purposes, usurped his conceptual autonomy, and diverted his expository account into unanticipated and, from the audience’s perspective, obscure channels of theoretical meanderings. Even trivialities such as how to rephrase entirely familiar material manages, at least in part, to circumvent “an author’s own choice.” The material in question goes ahead in its own way, and one can only “ask oneself after the event why it has happened in this way and no other.”

This is not the first occasion on which Freud has commented on the associative and logically discontinuous, the incontinent preconscious and even unconscious tendencies of his scientific and creative thinking. He includes them as a relevant agency in even his most abstract conceptualizations, and attributes to them both peremptory and inscrutable powers of will and insight. As far back as 1898, Freud took deliberate notice of it. He seems to have sent some draft pages of material pertinent to *The Interpretation of Dreams* to Wilhelm Fliess. In the letter that accompanies them he remarks, “It was all written by the unconscious, on the well-known principle of Itzig, the Sunday horseman. ‘Itzig, where are you going?’ ‘Don’t ask me, ask the horse!’ At the beginning of a paragraph I never knew where I should end up.” That this kind of proceeding should with some regularity eventuate in actual new discoveries about the human mind, discoveries that can in turn be enlisted in the service of science and truth, is almost unheard of and virtually unprecedented. The material itself has elements in it that are outside of personal and logical control. It is in the nature of the case that it is diversionary and follows its own other-than-conscious course, which cannot be ascertained beforehand. Freud is offering himself in both instances as an

illustration of how even highly sequential discourse can be influenced in form and structure as well as in thematic substance by currents of mental activity that are not accessible (at that moment) to inspection and examination. He is treating himself as if he were an Other, as if he were no more than merely one more writer, a novelist, a dramatist, a critic, or even a psychoanalyst. He is also implicitly soliciting the reader to treat him as if he were in fact no more than merely one more writer. In this passage there is an uncommon blending of authenticity and audacity, and Freud succeeds in transforming what was expressed in the first place as a formal error of composition, accompanying a loss of discursive consistency and coherence to better account. What began as a self-arraignment has been transformed in the course of its interpretative articulation into an apologia as well.

Freud’s notice of the diversionary tendency of both the material he deals with and his own particular manner of collaborating with that tendency returns us to certain locutionary constellations in this work. They have to do with suggestions, notions, images, intimations, metaphors, and other imaginative projections of movement, of motion through space. This is, to begin with, especially pointed in the applicable scenes for such discourse. The lecturer and his audience or auditor; the writer and his reader; the psychoanalytic dyad and its setting – they are all in good part characterized by utterances combined with types and degrees of stillness and attentiveness. The lecturer speaks, and the auditors try to listen responsively and well, not simply to listen. The reader strains silently to read as well – that is to say, as openly and yet alertly – as he can. The patient or analysand tries to listen, perceive, and report on the silent verbal and visual mental presentations that appear

in some semblance of serial succession in his deliberately relaxed and unfocused consciousness. And it is the psychoanalyst's turn to listen well and then respond, optimally, in an appropriately elucidatory way. But the accent throughout falls on the movements of thought and feeling, while both collaborators remain relatively motionless. This idea of moving along permeates the local life of Freud's discourse. I can on this occasion call attention to a limited number of instances. Freud favors such expressions as "we might direct our interest elsewhere and enquire" (32). And he will often follow such a suggestion by stopping to state: "But before carrying out this intention I should like to invite you to follow me along another track" (36). He will frequently change direction in trailing or tracking a quarry or leading a hunt. Commenting on slips of the tongue he mentions the influence of sounds, the similarities of words and the "familiar associations" they arouse.

These facilitate slips of the tongue by pointing to the path they can take. But if I have a path open to me, does that fact automatically decide that I shall take it? I need a motive in addition before I resolve in favor of it and furthermore a force to propel me along the path. (46)

He takes overt pleasure in choosing and setting the vectors along which his discourse will move. For example, he opens his first lecture on dreams by mentioning how, historically, both neurotic symptoms and dreams were both linked and found to have a sense or meaning. "We will not, however, follow this historical path, but will proceed in the opposite direction" (83). And he begins the next lecture by remarking, "What we need, then, is a new path, a method which will enable us to make a start in the investigation of dreams" (100). This new path or method entails in the first instance making a

number of assumptions as matters of faith and good will. If you can make this moderate leap, he continues, "you can follow me further" (101). Although Freud's manner of dealing with his auditors in these lectures is in general Socratic, the *mise-en-scène* that he silently constructs as one of the frames for his discourse is peripatetic. Moreover, the surface that he traverses with his interlocutors is not the evened stones of the Lyceum, but something rougher and less worked and worked over. Indeed, he continues, he has had no intention of presenting "a smooth account with all the difficulties carefully concealed, with the gaps filled in and the doubts glossed over. . . . I wanted to show you our science as it is, with its unevennesses and roughnesses, its demands and hesitation . . . [its] difficulties and incompletenesses" (102). In addition he has "laid down premises" that underlie the entire jerry-built undertaking, "and if anyone finds the whole thing too laborious and insecure, or . . . is accustomed to higher certainties and more elegant deductions, he need go no further with us. . . . in this quarter he will find impassable the precise and secure paths which he is prepared to follow." We are at this moment climbing in the Alps; and one of the attractive features of this entire cautionary traverse is that it applies with equal pertinence to both parties in the psychoanalytic joint effort.

At this point, it should be noted that, among other things, the path that Freud invites us to follow is also linked to the epic path pursued by Dante.

Nel mezzo del cammin de nostra vita
mi retrovai per una selva oscura,
che la diritta via era smarrita

One comes to oneself in the course of a journey, but only after one has been confounded in darkness and discovered that the straight way has been lost. The path is perilous, and one needs a guide and com-

panion to usher one into and through this enigmatic, terrifying, and undiscovered world.

Accordingly, the path is almost never straight-ahead. At each stopping place or interval one arrives at wherever one is going “by shorter or longer detours” (110). But the path also leads along lines of resistance and is hence unstable and variable in length, and a “greater resistance means that the unconscious material will be greatly distorted and that the path will be a long one from the substitute back to the unconscious material” (117). There is a passing allusion here to the Labyrinth, and to the unwinding of Ariadne’s thread of associations that will lead us backward to the Minotaur, half-man, half-bull and all ferocious, unconscious desire. In addition, another constraint on the forward movement of Freud’s discussion of dream interpretation is that for the most part “one has to give so many explanations . . . bring up so much material in the way of associations and memories . . . follow up so many by-paths, that a lecture about it would be quite confusing and unsatisfactory” (185). In theory there is no end to the associative by-paths. By-paths are not only indirect routes; they tend also to be rarely used and often overgrown. Like their successor by-passes, they may also lead us around a particular area of dense interest without ever offering us access to it, when such access was the very purpose behind our choice of either by-way or by-pass.

In other words, the textual expressions of movement tend as the lectures proceed to become increasingly foregrounded. Regression in the dream-work, for one obvious instance, is not “only a formal but also a material” (211) displacement backward in Freud’s conceptualizations of space-time. Or at another point he typically opens a new session by casting a retrospective eye over “the ground we have covered so far . . . [o]f how . . . we came up

against the distortion in dreams, of how we thought we would begin by evading it . . . [o]f how, after that, armed with what we had learned from that enquiry, we made a direct assault on dream distortion and, as I hope, overcame it step by step. We are bound to admit, however, that the things we have discovered by one path and by the other do not entirely correspond” (213). The figuration here begins with military maneuverings – in 1916 how could it not? – and then shifts back to the idiom of mountaineering, itself in considerable part derived from the activities and lexicon of warfare. The paths are now plural and seem not to concur or swing toward one another. And as happens as a matter of course in Freud’s expository procedures, new discoveries “only signify the beginning of fresh enigmas and fresh doubts” (211). The hesitations can also lead to stoppages and dead ends. The path can be blocked – “No Thoroughfare” – the open road ahead transformed into an immovable *Stau*, a word that visitors from abroad rapidly learn. One of the terms Freud enlists to describe such frustrating and paradoxical experiences, or motion without movement, or movement brought up short, of idling in senseless suspension, is fixation – not only in the abstract categories of time and space but along actual paths of development in individual lives.

As a consequence, as the lectures proceed, the path becomes increasingly sinuous, convoluted and indirect, and Freud turns to attaching modifiers to it as it recurs in his exposition. The path now tends to be referred to as “circuitous” or “round-about.” The interpretation of symptoms is itself one of such circuitous routes because it does not seek, in a final resort, to ascribe forbidden wishes and desires to present consciousness but to a repressed and therefore unknown domain of mental activity, the unconscious. In pressing this strategy, Freud is figuratively putting

the symptoms into reverse. The “repudiated libidinal trends . . . succeed in getting their way by certain roundabout paths . . . or by submitting to some distortions and mitigations. The roundabout paths are those taken by the construction of symptoms; the symptoms are the fresh or substitute satisfaction which has become necessary owing to the fact of frustration” (350). Freud’s disposition of psychoanalytic procedures has mimetic bearings on what brought our troubles about in the first place. Among much else, it contains elements of undoing but also of reiterating, of tautological circling around, of resuming after long interruption, and of continuously taking up unfinished business. And just as Dante’s *Purgatory* reproduces by mimetic inversion the form and structure of the *Inferno*, so the experience of Freud’s psychoanalysis in terms of memory and through the transference repeats through these distorting though unavoidable mediums, and by means of mimetic reflection, refraction, and inversion, the crooked ways by which we have come to ourselves – and to be ourselves.

Moreover, as Dante needed Virgil as an advisor and escort through hell, so Freud had already invoked that same Virgil in the epigraph to *The Interpretation of Dreams*, his own heroic account of a journey underground. In addition, he is offering himself as a fused or combined embodiment of his two epic predecessors, one pagan, one Christian, and Freud the *tertium quid*, related to both but distinct from both – and, I will add, distinct from us as well. That distinction is never more palpable than when we reflect on our own perspectival location as we accompany him along the way. On occasion we are companions strolling with him along the path. Most of the time, however, we are followers as he leads the way. Indeed, a significant part of the enduring experience, at least for me, of reading this great work

is that Freud is always several steps ahead of the reader – namely, in the first instance, to be sure, of me. No matter how often I consult this text, Freud always beats me to it. I cannot keep up with him, and I can almost never anticipate what is beyond the next turn in the path. It is in vain that I follow his track as closely as I can, that I tediously dog his heels; he is reliably there, just around the corner, on the other side of the turn, ready to step out and quietly exclaim “Surprise!”

It is also in this connection plausible to suggest that Freud enjoys startling and ambushing his audience. He enjoys occasionally setting them up so he can move them back several paces. In English we have an expression called “leading you down the garden path.” It involves the deception of another, albeit in a domesticated and civilized setting. Freud is a master at this entertaining and slightly insidious game. He is always leading us down the garden path, luring us circuitously forward, and then “having us” in the sense that he has already figured out where we will have to emerge. Sometimes, to be sure, Freud himself cannot find the way forward and confesses to being nonplussed – but that simply adds spice to the exercise.

More frequently, however, he resorts to a variety of persuasive manipulations to keep his audience in tow. For example, in Lecture X, “Symbolism in Dreams,” he puts on what in 1916 must still have been a virtuoso performance, including numerous illustrations, mostly of sexual symbolic representations, many of them amusing and some impossible. He also refers to a range of quasi-anthropological speculations on the origins and development of human language, including the hypothetical “primal language.” In his unswerving adherence to nineteenth-century evolutionary naturalism, Freud had in this instance been

himself led astray. For both anthropological and theoretical linguistics were about to abandon historical and evolutionary paradigms in favor of systematic pursuits of how all languages and societies function in a present world – that is to say, from synchronic perspectives. Why and how Freud found himself attached to what would turn out to be anachronistic conjectures drawn from other “scientific” disciplines is another matter altogether. In any event, having just completed his high-wire routine on dream-symbolism, Freud turns to the audience and asks it a rhetorical question: why is it that this topic always entails “the problem of how it can meet with such violent resistance in educated people when the wide diffusion of symbolism in myths, religion, art and language is so unquestionable. May it not be that what is responsible is once again its connection with sexuality?” (168f).

Well, maybe so. But there are corollary considerations as well. The rhetorical craftiness here is associated with the circumstance that by the end of this dazzling display of widespread learning, ingenuity, and witty associations, the audience is so fascinated and mesmerized, so as we say “softened up” that they must be ready to jump on Freud’s bandwagon while asking for “more.” In addition, the audience should be securely “hooked” by the tacit flattery and equally invidious quality of the comparison passed before them at the end of the passage.

In the main, however, Freud prevails in tracking the circuitous route – “the roundabout path via the unconscious and the old fixations” – following the libido (another of his shadow fellow-travelers and guides) that “finally succeeds in forcing its way through to real satisfaction, although the pleasure attained “is extremely restricted and scarcely recognizable as such” (360). If in following the allusive track, as I have earlier suggested, neurosis is Hell, then

psychoanalysis at its most efficacious is Purgatory. In addition, there is one further roundabout path that “leads back from phantasy to reality” – the path, that is, of art. Freud’s ideal-type of artist is more than usually oppressed by “excessively powerful instinctual needs.” He cannot achieve their satisfaction. A convergence of numerous capacities and circumstances, including sublimation and the weakness of certain repressions, facilitate his access “to the half-way region of phantasy.” He “possesses the mysterious power of shaping some particular material until it has become a faithful image of his phantasy.” By means of his successful deployment and exploitation of both artistic means and unconscious wishes, he elicits pleasure, gratitude, and admiration in his audience; and he has “thus achieved *through* his phantasy what originally he had achieved only *in* his phantasy – honor, fame, and the love of women” (376f; emphasis in original).

This sketchy and curtailed discussion of one local feature in what may be described as Freud’s intellectual style is, however, connected to a larger structural tendency. From the beginning, Freud’s intention is to represent the workings of the mind as a preponderantly connected array or series of conflicts – images and scenes of cross-purposes, contradictions, disagreeable oppositions, even of veritable warfare, and of enmity, vengeance, and deadly spitefulness permeate and crowd the text. Slips of the tongue represent “a conflict between two incompatible inclinations” (62). The dynamic model that constitutes the substructure of slips, dreams, and neurosis (that is, the actual agenda of these lectures) is fundamentally conflict-driven. A wish or desire occurs consciously or not, and meets with disapproval, censorship, and rejection; it is barred from expression, but it nevertheless persists. A compromise is struck between the contend-

ing agents; this deal is half-successful and half-failure and is manifested in the strange phenomena of slips, dreams, and neuroses. The dynamics of this interplay of forces is also evident in the return of the repressed in a disguised and compromised set of shapes, a regular manifestation of both internal forces, the wish itself and that which repudiates it. Neurotic symptoms, dreams, and the like represent both the repressed impulses and the repressing intentions; and the compromises are between opposing currents of mental activity that mutually and concurrently interfere with one another. It is a situation that seems pre-made for a nearly universal tonality of ambivalence. This group of overlapping hypotheses constitutes the underlying theoretical structure of the *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*.

The lines of thinking to which this important dimension of Freud's discourse obtains is often regarded as something of an offshoot in the mainstream of Western culture. Despite Freud's unbending materialism, naturalism, and realism, his principal innovative means of representation and analysis do not find their sole distinctive affiliations in the styles of intellection that we sum up by referring to the Enlightenment. His ways of dealing with mental phenomena have more to do with those figures represented by a reaction against the Enlightenment, by the great Romantic poets, nineteenth-century novelists, and certain philosophers. Or as the Devil in William Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* robustly declaims, "Without Contraries is no Progression."

In addition, there is a particular group of German cultural-philosophic minds that Freud can be pertinently associated with: Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, and Max Weber. Each in his own magisterial and unmistakable manner and idiom places the conceptions of conflict, opposition, and negation both at the center and along the axes of his

work. Each was post-Enlightenment, not merely by way of chronology but in the settled conviction that the world, at any rate the human-social world, does not gather to harmony or resolve itself into benign order: there are no choirs of angelic voices. And whenever two of them, Hegel and Marx, invoke heavenly music it turns out to be inauthentic, out of tune, utopian whistling in the dark, projected into the silent, echo-less future. Considered together and in company with the great poets and novelists of the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century they make up the most formidable association of social and cultural criticism and commentary in and of Western civilization. In a number of understandings they constitute among themselves a kind of second mainstream in our culture. They all incline toward the oppositional and the negative, the subversive, skeptical, radical, and suspicious, the dialectical and ironic modes of sensibility and representation. They are anti-reductionist to a turn and a scandal to positivistic rules and regulations. They are all masters of reasoned argument and disputation, the centers of whose investigations focus upon the irreducibly un-rational, the contradictory and antagonistic components of individual, social, and cultural existence.

Each of them embodies a different configuration of what Max Weber called "the disenchantment of the world." Heirs to the Enlightenment of the West, they all had thoroughly interiorized the double disenchanting legacy of reason and science. The Prince kisses an entranced Sleeping Beauty, and she is delivered from the spell cast upon her by wicked elders. The touch of reason liberates us to deal on an equal footing with religious and social authority, and even to a considerable pragmatic extent with nature. By the same token, however, the world has lost its old magic. It is no longer under the guidance or the benign interventions of the Deity – much less

of minor divinities and spiritual entities – and its wonder-making mysteries have been drastically diminished. We are alone with one another in a universe that was not made for us, which as far as we are concerned is both purposeless and indifferent. There is no genuine substitute for the old magic, but in something oddly analogous to the place it occupied, these seminally important figures have placed the non-rational and the irrational with all their contrarities and irreconcilabilities in both individual and collective senses. Their general attitudes toward the other-than-rational seem to be similar in sustained ambivalence. They recognize it as an indisposable part of our human existence. They tend to deplore it in its excesses, and they equally deplore our also less than rational efforts to deny it, eradicate it, or divert attention away from it. They are all cognizant of its demonic powers, but they are in addition cognizant of the comparably demonic potencies of what we commonly take to be the counterforces of reason, rationality, and rationalization as we invest these with authority in our institutions and internalize them in our individual lives.

In this connection, the history of reason and disenchantment completes a cycle, catches up with itself, and hence, like transference, repeats the story of its own development. At one of the notable moments of its inception it was regarded as sorcery. The perplexed Meno accuses Socrates of “exercising magic and witchcraft upon me and positively laying me under your spell until I am just a mass of helplessness.” He compares the effects of Socrates’s application of dialectic to the paralyzing touch of the stingray. “My mind and my lips are literally numb, and I have nothing to reply to you.” Reason, logic, and science here put in an early appearance as another form of the black arts. In the course of historical time, they came to be generally affirmed as

emancipatory white magic, self-inventions that we are reasonably obliged to exploit. But also in the same course of that successful exploitation, the white magic has itself revealed that it has its own dark sides. Freud and the figures that I have conjecturally placed him among perceive that a holding action must be undertaken if we are not to be returned to spiritual darkness and bondage at higher stages of development. At this time, it remains uncertain whether that holding action will be effective.

These are a few of the considerations that I have learned to take into account in my reading and rereading of Freud, in this instance for a rereading of the *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*. I first read him as a modernist writer and a modernist source of truth. I subsequently learned to read him as a historical figure, whose writings and personality dominated a significant era in the development of modern psychology, medicine, and cultural theory. I also learned to read him as a clinical innovator, who developed a method for helping people to help themselves. In addition, I also first read him here in the United States, at a time when he and his institutional creation occupied positions of unrivalled influence and cultural authority. That time is past. Psychoanalysis is no longer, if it ever actually was, an institution with a single master theory and many tributary ramifications and subdivisions. It has currently devolved, at least in North America, into a plurality of mini-orthodoxies whose principal similarities sometimes seem to be their differences with one another. Its aspirations to become a general psychology have evaporated. Academic experimental psychology, neuroscience and the study of the brain, along with cognitive studies and neo-evolutionary biological theory have long since gone off on their own extraordinary courses of discovery. If

there is to be some convergence of these sciences and psychoanalysis it most probably will not be a result of developments in psychoanalysis itself.

In one area, however, Freud and his psychoanalytic method continue to prosper. You can scarcely enter a school or college in America today without running into a “counselor.” The same holds true for urban and suburban communities at large. These counselors (along with some circulating social workers) are for many intents and purposes psychotherapists, practicing without much or any training or certification. At the same time, however, empirical studies indicate that some version of the talking cure, along with appropriate medication when necessary, seems to be the most effective means of dealing with a large range of psychological and developmental problems. This is no mean feat. As a rule, people nowadays no longer see their analysts or visit their shrinks. They show up at their therapist’s office or check in for advice with their counselors. However watered-down a treatment or routine of this kind may be, it is a version of a good thing, and considerably better than what existed before, which was more or less old-fashioned punitive discipline or, for the most part, nothing.

In any event, what persists and remains is Freud as an intellectual and cultural figure, a mind of heroic force and scope who appeared at a special juncture in modern history. Eminent among the eminent others I have adduced, he is a permanent accession to Western culture. He will continue to be read as far as we can see into the foreseeable future, or for as long as people continue to read – which may not be forever. His writings possess a special quality of some works of genius: they remain continually rereadable, in part because of their capacity to masquerade as somehow contemporary with our current interests and problems, although they do not thereby lose their particular historical density either. What I am saying, I suppose, is that Freud is a classic, that his writings continue to live by virtue of a conjunction of certain qualities of singular creative intensity expressed through an idiom of compelling and beautiful originality and inimitable individuality. The thematic and conceptual spectrum of his work coherently captures, summarizes, and carries forward a group of themes and problematilities that remain with us as salient to life in its individual vicissitudes and to human life as we collaboratively experience it as a species with a historical existence.

ENDNOTES

Author’s Note: I want to thank Patricia Spacks for the idea that rereading is an experience and a conception that has been underexamined in the study of literature and of written expression in general.

- ¹ All quotations from and references to the lectures are from *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. and ed. James Strachey et al., vols. XV and XVI (London: Hogarth Press, 1953–1974). Page numbers are noted parenthetically within the main text.
- ² See Patricia Kitcher, *Freud’s Dream: A Complete Interdisciplinary Science of Mind* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1992).
- ³ Freud has already earlier asserted that “everything is related to everything, including small things to great” (27). In his work as a detective and tracker of clues, this is a reasonable assumption. But connection by correlation and connection by causality are distinct entities in which the linkages are of different qualities.

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