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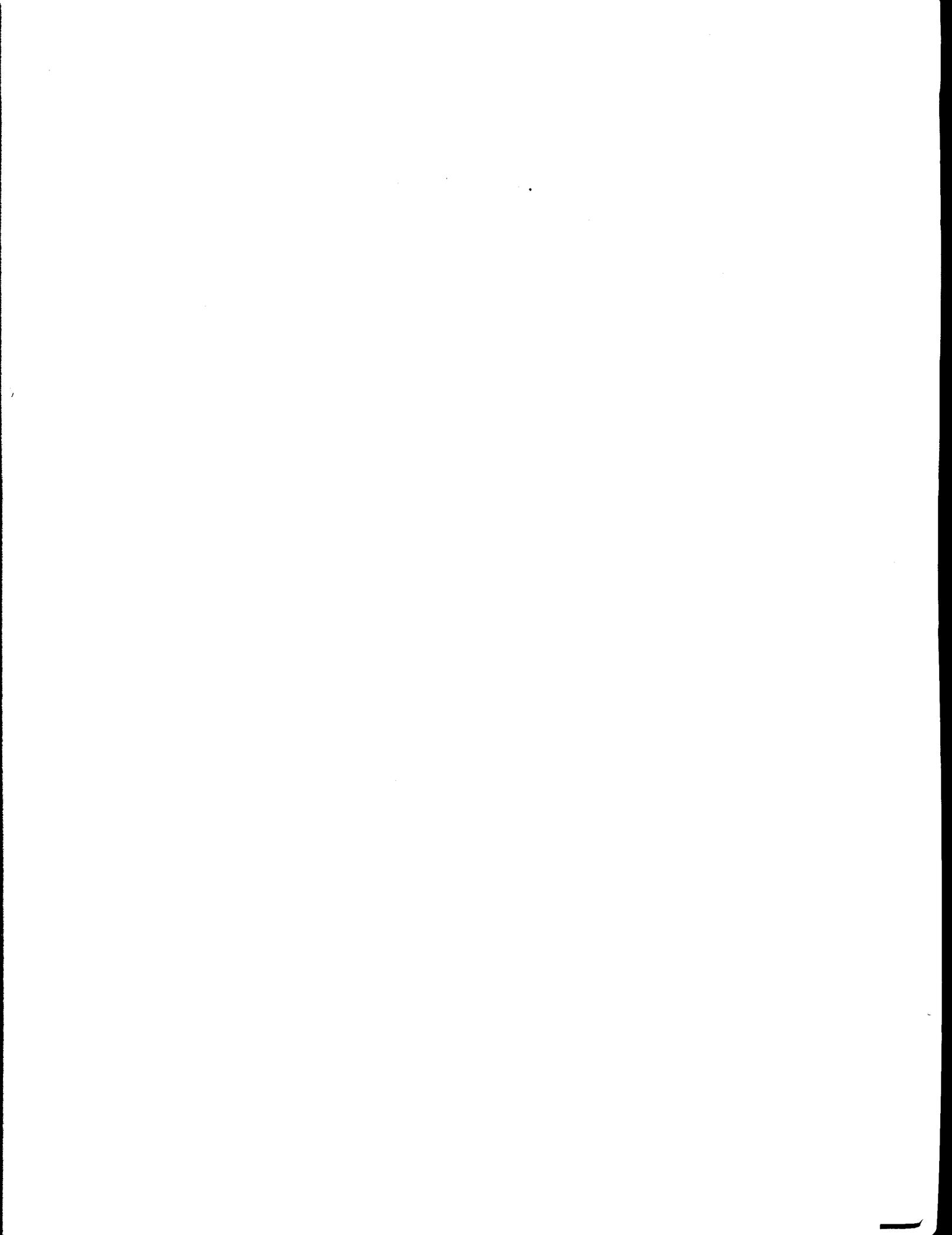
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NARCISSISM FROM BAUDELAIRE TO SARTRE:  
EGO-PSYCHOLOGY AND CULTURAL HISTORY

Soon after the concept of the narcissistic personality was developed by clinical psychologists, it gained currency in the study of contemporary culture and society.<sup>1</sup> The work of Christopher Lasch in particular incisively demonstrated how narcissism pervades what he calls our "age of diminishing expectations."<sup>2</sup> By comparing contemporary goals and values with the classical image of 19th-century values and the Protestant work ethic, Lasch is able cogently to unite a broad range of cultural phenomena—from business managerial styles to professional sports, from theories of education to relations between the sexes—under the rubric of the culture of narcissism. I say the classical *image* of 19th-century values and the Protestant work ethic, because Lasch's account of the historical origins of cultural narcissism has inspired a great deal less confidence than his description of the phenomenon itself in post-World War II society. While Lasch's historical derivation of narcissism from the decline of the family has provoked controversy, nonetheless few would deny that his work has shed considerable light on contemporary culture in America.

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<sup>1</sup>Among the first social commentary articles were Peter Marin's "The New Narcissism" (*Harper's* Oct. 1975) and Tom Wolfe's "The 'Me' Decade and the Third Great Awakening" (*New York* 23 August 1976). The central clinical study is Otto Kernberg's *Borderline Conditions and Pathological Narcissism* (New York: Jason Aronson, 1975), along with Heinz Kohut's earlier *The Analysis of the Self* (New York: International Universities Press, 1971). Kernberg's formulations differ from his predecessor's (Kernberg himself addresses their differences explicitly in Part II, Chapter 9, "Clinical Problems of the Narcissistic Personality") in that Kernberg considers narcissism in relation to "both libidinal and aggressive drive derivatives" (271), whereas Kohut "concentrates almost exclusively on the role of libidinal forces" alone (xv). The resulting divergence is considerable: Kohut sees pathological narcissism on a continuum with normal, infantile narcissism, whereas Kernberg considers narcissism a distinct pathology with a structure and dynamic of its own.

<sup>2</sup>Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: Norton, 1978). This book has been the focus of several symposia: see *Salmagundi* 46 (1979) and *Telos* 44 (1980).

But there is a curious omission from Lasch's anatomy of our narcissistic age: he never mentions the popularity in this country of Sartre and Camus, indeed never discusses existentialism at all. Yet existential philosophy directly addresses many of the issues Lasch raises in connection with narcissism, and when today we re-read *Nausea* or *The Stranger*, what we see is in fact a proto-typical narcissistic hero. If there is any recent fictional character who—to quote from Lasch's portrait—"sees the world as a mirror of himself and has no interest in external events except as they throw back a reflection of his own image," it is Sartre's Roquentin (*Culture* 47). And virtually the entire catalogue of narcissistic personality-traits apply: who is unable to form lasting commitments to other people and institutions, if not Roquentin? He may get excited about his fits of nausea, but in relations with other people, he is as affectless, as unemotional as is his counterpart, Meursault, at the funeral of his mother or when he shoots the Arab on the beach. Roquentin may appear more anxious or bored than placid Meursault, but Camus' prose on the other hand conveys strikingly the remarkable emptiness of Meursault's inner life. Except for their indifference as to others' opinions of them (a central tenet of existentialist philosophy), both existentialist heroes are practically type-cast narcissists.

Moreover, existentialism achieved extraordinary popularity in this country at just the same time that narcissism was forcing itself on the attention of the therapeutic community: in the 1950s. Why, then, does Lasch overlook existentialism? Perhaps the important philosophical movement would give narcissism a good name. Or perhaps it emerges too early for his account (Sartre's *Nausea* first appeared in the 1930's), disrupting the convenient contrast Lasch repeatedly refers to—often only by implication—between post-war narcissism and the culture of solid 19th-century values and virtues he pictures preceding it. This anomaly by itself would be far from damning: pervasive cultural narcissism can

hardly be expected to have appeared overnight. But if, as I shall argue, Sartre's "narcissistic" philosophy and characters in fact derive from aesthetic developments of the mid-19th century, then Lasch's account of the origins of narcissism in 20th-century decadence would appear very suspect indeed.

To raise the question of historical origins is to pose the problem of historical causality. Many critics have attacked Lasch's use of the 19th-century nuclear family as a model and ideal standard of comparison for the very different families of today, asserting for instance that the decline of the bourgeois-patriarchal family cannot serve as grounds for condemning contemporary narcissism because such a family-type has always been the exception rather than the rule, or because it was not a worthy ideal in the first place.<sup>3</sup> The family is indeed the linchpin of Lasch's account, and not only because of his earlier study of the family, *Haven in a Heartless World*.<sup>4</sup> For one thing, even in *The Culture of Narcissism*, Lasch maintains an orthodox-psychoanalytic emphasis on the family as prime determinant of psychic life:

The emergence of (narcissistic) character-disorders as the most prominent form of psychiatric pathology . . . derives from quite specific changes in our society and culture . . . and in the last instance from changes in family life . . . . Psychoanalysis best clarifies the connection between society and the individual, culture and personality, precisely when it confines itself to careful examination of individuals.

(33-34)

This position, let us note, is a good deal more orthodox than Freud's own, for Freud insisted that psychoanalysis be not confined to individual analysis and family romance, but applied to culture and society as a whole—a particularly appropriate strategy, one would think, if the family has succumbed to corrosive social influences as Lasch suggests it has.<sup>5</sup> But more important, Lasch

<sup>3</sup>See, for example, Michèle Barrett and Mary McIntosh, "Narcissism and the Family: a Critique of Lasch," *New Left Review* 135 (Sept. -Oct. 1982): 35-48, especially pp. 39 and 43.

<sup>4</sup>Christopher Lasch, *Haven in a Heartless World: the Family Besieged* (New York: Basic Books, 1977).

<sup>5</sup>In addition to *Totem and Taboo*, *Future of an Illusion*, and *Civilization and its Discontents*, see *New Introductory Lectures* 6 and 7 for Freud's programmatic statements to this effect.

mistakes the 19th-century nuclear family for the last bastion of pre-capitalist values and interpersonal relations, when on the contrary the private space of the nuclear family in fact arose as a *product* of capitalist development, not an exception to it.<sup>6</sup> Only by considering the so-called "demise" of the nuclear family in the context of society and culture as a whole, I want to suggest, may we arrive at a thorough understanding of the historical emergence of cultural narcissism.

Finally, and most important, Lasch dilutes and distorts the very psychological theory upon which his cultural interpretation is based. While drawing heavily (though not exclusively) on the work of Otto Kernberg, Lasch refers indiscriminately to both "narcissistic" and "borderline" disorders in his work, without distinguishing or explaining the relation between them as Kernberg himself does with precision.<sup>7</sup> Nearly all narcissists are borderline, Kernberg reports, but borderline conditions are not necessarily narcissistic—although both depend crucially on splitting as their basic defense mechanism. By analyzing pathological narcissism in relation to the broader category of borderline conditions, Kernberg is able to distinguish three levels of narcissistic disorder, each level manifesting more pronounced ego-disintegration than the last. The level of least disturbance describes the smoothly-functioning, well-adapted narcissist, who often escapes diagnosis as such. The next level is pathological narcissism, which entails an underlying borderline condition. (The majority of patients treated for narcissistic disturbance fall into this category, according to Kernberg.) The third level is overt borderline-narcissism, which sometimes includes outright anti-social traits as well (and of which Dostoevski's *Underground Man* is a pertinent illustration).<sup>8</sup> By disregarding the different levels on this continuum, social critics and cultural historians are able to include a wide range of diverse phenomena under a single rubric, "narcissism." It remains to be seen whether the breadth of scope thereby gained is

<sup>6</sup>See Eli Zaretsky, *Capitalism, the Family and Personal Life* (New York: Harper and Row, 1976) and Mark Poster, *Critical Theory of the Family* (New York: Seabury Press, 1978).

<sup>7</sup>Lasch's failure to distinguish between borderline conditions and narcissism per se is particularly evident on pp. 38-43 and 170-72 of *The Culture of Narcissism*.

<sup>8</sup>On the relation between borderline conditions and narcissism, see Kernberg 13, 16-18, 265-69, 276-84, and 331-34. The three levels of narcissism are outlined on pp. 331-34.

worth the precision lost.

In what follows, I use the term "borderline narcissism" to highlight within the general syndrome the extensive ego-disintegration that underlies narcissism in all but its least consequential forms. For my historical explanation of cultural narcissism emphasizes the social preconditions for the borderline disorders characteristic of the modern narcissistic personality. My aim is to show through concrete historical illustrations how (to paraphrase Kernberg) the pathological grandiose self of the narcissist compensates for the ego-disintegration entailed in the defensive organization of the borderline personality.<sup>9</sup>

It is in this context that I would like to consider the relation of Baudelaire's poetry to the emergence of narcissism. Not that he invented it first, of course, or all by himself. Rather I will argue that his elaboration of a modernist poetics is emblematic of a host of social developments affecting not only the internal structure of the family in the mid-19th century, but the status of social authority as well. Now Baudelaire is usually associated with masochism rather than narcissism—and for good reasons. But my claim is that the shift in Baudelaire's poetics from romanticism to modernism entails a shift from masochism to narcissism—and furthermore that masochism plays a crucial transitional role in the rise of narcissism to cultural predominance. Taking bourgeois social authority as a base-line of comparison (rather than the nuclear family alone), we can better understand the role that a culture of masochism played in preparing the ground for the culture of narcissism that prevails today.

It may seem tenuous to base the characterization of a broad cultural development from masochism to narcissism on one emblematic figure. Critics from René Laforgue in the 1930s to Leo Bersani more recently have agreed, however, on Baudelaire's masochism.<sup>10</sup> Among these critics,

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<sup>9</sup>This paraphrase is from p. 265, where Kernberg states that "the pathological grandiose self [of the narcissist] compensates for the generally 'ego-weakening' effects of the primitive defensive organization [i.e., borderline splitting]."

<sup>10</sup>René Laforgue, *The Defeat of Baudelaire*, trans. Herbert Agar (1931; London: Hogarth, 1932) and Leo Bersani, *Baudelaire and Freud* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977). Most critics used "masochism" with reference to Baudelaire in the sense of "moral masochism"—deriving satisfaction from defeat or adversity. Bersani's work is an interesting exception, dealing instead with the psychodynamics of Baudelaire's poetry and deriving therefrom a new metapsychological definition of the concept of "masochism."

Sartre not only confirms this assessment of Baudelaire, but in his study of Flaubert claims that the novelist, too, and a group of Second Empire writers Sartre calls the "Knights of Nothingness" were masochistic as well, arguing that the "loser-wins" strategy they all employ was part of the "objective neurosis" of late-19th century culture.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, Sartre's historical analysis is corroborated by the immense popularity and international acclaim during this period of Sacher-Masoch himself and his novels, for the same "loser-wins" strategy forms the core of Masoch's own masochistic stance and appears throughout his best fiction.<sup>12</sup> For economy's sake, then, I take Baudelaire's masochism as an emblem of this entire cultural complex.

Yet, as convincing as Sartre's biographical study may be, in its own way, the association of Baudelaire exclusively with masochism is questionable. Other critics have written with equal conviction of the sadism of Baudelaire.<sup>13</sup> And indeed, in the later works, particularly in the prose poems, the poet seems as likely to take the side of violent aggression as of passive submission. This paradox is best understood, I suggest, in light of a shift in Baudelaire's poetics leading in the direction of borderline narcissism. Baudelaire has become a widely-acclaimed figure in Western culture; as Walter Benjamin put it, Baudelaire anticipated a reader who could appreciate a certain structure of experience, and his renown seems to confirm Benjamin's contention that "Baudelaire was eventually to find the reader(s) at whom his work was aimed."<sup>14</sup> Among these readers, I want to include not only Rimbaud, Huysmans, Mallarmé and Proust, but also Sartre and the countless enthusiasts of existentialism whom Baudelaire reached through works such as *Nausea*. For Sartre's existential novel, as we shall see, can be considered a direct descendent of Baudelairean modernism. But first,

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<sup>11</sup>Jean-Paul Sartre, *Baudelaire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1947) and *L'Idiot de la famille*, 3 Vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1972). The "Knights of Nothingness" include Banville, Leconte de Lisle, Mallarmé, and Villiers de L'Isle-Adam.

<sup>12</sup>See Gilles Deleuze, *Presentation de Sacher-Masoch* (Paris: Minuit, 1967), especially pp. 6-9.

<sup>13</sup>See Georges Blin, *Le Sadisme de Baudelaire* (Paris: José Corti, 1948).

<sup>14</sup>Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire: Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, trans. Harry Zohn (London: New Left Books, 1973) 109.

let me give one vivid illustration of masochism in Baudelaire's works and then a brief sketch of the masochistic "loser-wins" operation.

Baudelaire once claimed that the best way to end the *Flowers of Evil* would be an "Epilogue" in which he would address himself to an anonymous "Madame" and exhort her thus:

If you want to please me and rekindle my desires, be cruel, treacherous, licentious, lewd and thievish. . . .<sup>15</sup>

Now the point of actively soliciting such ill treatment, in the masochistic scenario, is not simply to submit to the tyranny of a woman, but to do so in order to invalidate the punishment thereby meted out. Since punishment is willingly sought by the masochist, not merited, the punishment backfires and disqualifies the authority responsible for it. Thus by soliciting unwarranted punishment, the masochist invalidates punishing authority and emerges triumphant. The dynamic of this "objective neurosis" is particularly clear-cut in Cézanne: he repeatedly sent his most avant-garde paintings to the traditional Salon competitions, sure that as long as he was refused, he was on the right track.<sup>16</sup> The masochist submits to punishment, then, in order to invalidate social authority and idealize the martyred self.

Baudelaire's masochism is a commonplace in the critical literature, so I will not dwell on it here. We can trace his evolution from masochism to narcissism, as I have suggested, through the shift in his poetics from romanticism to modernism, a shift that has been the subject of some of the best recent work on his poetry.<sup>17</sup> For our purposes, this complex transformation can be summarized as a combined process of disintegration and distanciation.

Baudelaire begins the *Flowers of Evil* with a se-

<sup>15</sup>In a letter to Victor de Mars (secretary of the *Revue des Deux Mondes*, which published many of Baudelaire's poems), 7 April 1855.

<sup>16</sup>Cézanne to Pissarro, 15 March 1865 (in *Cézanne Letters* [London: 1941] 68-69).

<sup>17</sup>In addition to Bersani's short work (note 10), I refer to Barbara Johnson's studies, notably *Défigurations du langage poétique* (Paris: Flammarion, 1979).

<sup>18</sup>*The Flowers of Evil*, trans. Richard Howard (Boston: David Godine, 1982), hereafter RH; or trans. Florence Friedman (Philadelphia: Dufour, 1966), hereafter FF. Page references to these editions follow citations in the text.

ries of poems that reiterate the familiar romantic theme of the misunderstood artist at odds with society.<sup>18</sup> The opening poem, "Benediction," promises the poet a mystical halo of pure light and understanding in exchange for the suffering he endures (RH 11):

Thanks be to God, Who gives us suffering  
(. . .)  
that best and purest essence which prepares  
the strong in spirit for divine delights!

I know the poet has a place apart  
among the holy legions' blessed ranks;  
(. . .)  
I know that pain is the one nobility  
upon which Hell itself cannot encroach;  
that if I am to weave my mystic crown  
I must braid into it all time, all space . . .  
(. . .)  
for it will be made of nothing but pure light

Subsequent poems depict on one hand an un-  
gainly poet cruelly taunted by uncomprehending  
humanity, as in "The Albatross" (RH 13):

How weak and awkward, even comical  
this traveller but lately so adroit—  
one deckhand sticks a pipestem in its beak,  
another mocks the cripple that once flew!

The Poet is like this monarch of the clouds  
riding the storm above the marksman's  
range;  
exiled on the ground, hooted and jeered,  
he cannot walk because of his great wings.

While on the other hand, poems like "Elevation"  
depict a poet soaring high above the mortifying  
world of earthly existence (RH 14):

Free from the futile strivings and the cares  
which dim existence to a realm of mist,  
happy is he who wings an upward way  
on mighty pinions to the fields of light;

whose thoughts like larks spontaneously rise  
into the morning sky; whose flight, un-  
checked,  
outreaches life and readily comprehends  
the language of flowers and of all mute  
things.

Included in this first cycle of poems is the well-

known sonnet, "Correspondences," often taken as the quintessential expression of the Baudelairean aesthetic (RH 15):

The pillars of Nature's temple are alive  
and sometimes yield perplexing messages;  
forests of symbols between us and the shrine  
remark our passage with accustomed eyes.

Like long-held echoes, blending some-  
where else  
into one deep and shadowy unison  
as limitless as darkness and as day,  
the sounds, the scents, the colors corre-  
spond.

In fact, the aesthetic of correspondences is precisely what the rest of the *Flowers of Evil* will work to undermine and eliminate.

On one level, this revision process involves simply rejecting the romantic myth of the inspired artist communing with nature: the living temple of familiar symbolism in "Correspondences" becomes in a later poem, "Obsession," a ghastly cathedral echoing with sounds of death (RH 72):

Forest, I fear you! in my ruined heart  
your roaring wakens the same agony  
as in cathedrals when the organ moans  
and from the depths I hear that I am  
damned.

The beacons of past artistic greatness ("Guiding Lights" [RH 16]) become the ironic beacon of Baudelaire's conscious evil—la conscience dans le Mal ("The Irremediable" [RH 80]):

Distinct the heart's own exchange  
with its own dark mirror,  
for deep in that Well of Truth  
trembles one pale star,

ironic, infernal beacon,  
graceful torch of the Devil,  
our solace and sole glory—  
consciousness in Evil!

And by the end of the prose poems, as we shall see, the mystical halo awarded to poetic inspiration will be disdained and abandoned by the modernist poet.

But the *Flowers of Evil* do not depict the disintegration of one myth, the romantic myth, simply to replace it with another one. Rather, on a

second level, the process of disintegration undermines the integrity of representation itself—or at least of the kind of essentializing representation expressed in the first cycle of the collection. The poem "Correspondences" celebrated equivalence and synaesthesia through its use of simile and metaphor, promoting a poetic vision able to unite interior and exterior, essence and appearance, in an organic whole. Baudelaire's anti-romantic, modernist aesthetic—presented in the opening poem of the next cycle in the *Flowers of Evil*, "Beauty"—emphasizes exteriority, randomness, mechanical causality and fragmentation instead (FF 40). Rather than look into Beauty's eyes to grasp her inner essence, as it were, the poet now remains on the outside and at a distance: her eyes are now mirrors that only reflect beauty onto objects around her:

For I, to charm each docile devotee,  
Have mirrors that enhance beauty's de-  
lights:  
My eyes, my glorious eyes of quenchless  
light!

Defying metaphoric comparison and totalizing expression, Beauty is now appreciated through her incremental effects on the external world. And in the subsequent poems of the cycle, Beauty appears only in fragments and random images, valued not for or as an essence, but for her contingent impact on the poet. This metonymic aesthetic comes to predominate in the *Flowers of Evil*, as Leo Bersani's study suggests; and its predominance is even clearer in the prose poems, as Barbara Johnson's comparisons between verse and prose versions of several poems have shown.<sup>19</sup>

In the verse poem "Tresses," for example, a woman's hair inspires a whole set of metaphoric equivalences, becoming a forest, then an ocean, and so forth (FF 48):

A whole world, distant, strange and almost  
lost,  
Lives in these depths, this forest fragrant,  
sweet;  
(. . .)  
You hide, O ebony sea, a dazzling dream  
Where sails and oarsmen, masts and pen-  
nants meet—

<sup>19</sup>See Johnson, Chapters 2 and 5. The conclusion regarding "Beauty" depends on close linguistic analysis of the French, which defies translation.

In the prose version, by contrast, her hair merely possesses a series of properties that serve to stimulate the poet's imagination:

Your hair holds a whole dream of masts and sails. . . . In the ocean of your hair I see a harbor teeming with melancholic songs. . . . In the caresses of your hair I know again the languors of long hours lying on a couch in a fair ship's cabin. . . .<sup>20</sup>

Similarly, the metaphoric equivalence between woman and country in the verse "Invitation to the Voyage" (FF 89), a relation inspired by the poet's desire, gives way in the prose version (XVII.32) to a series of banal clichés about foreign travel, and the woman becomes more a casual friend than a young lover:

My sister, my child,  
(. . .)  
Together we travel afar!  
(. . .)  
In lands whose reflection you are!  
The sun that is shrouded  
In skies lightly clouded  
So fair to my spirit appears,  
As rich for surmise  
As your treacherous eyes  
So brilliantly shining through tears.

There is a wonderful country, a country of Cognac, they say, that I dream of visiting with an old friend.

In the same vein, the poetic inspiration that in the early version of "Projects" creates a whole set of imaginary landscapes is replaced in the final version by a process of mechanical repetition by which the poet merely reproduces a series of scenes encountered by chance in the course of an evening walk (XXIV.48). This loss of "inspiration"—a state of mind connected in Baudelaire with the aesthetic of organic wholeness and metaphoric equivalence—this loss of inspiration is itself allegorized in the prose poem "The Loss of a halo," where the poet loses his halo in heavy traffic and then decides against trying to recover it (XLVI.94). As an ironic reference to the mystical halo of pure light granted the inspired poet at

the beginning of the *Flowers of Evil*, this late prose poem reiterates the disintegration of the romantic myth of the poet; but it can also symbolize the disintegration of poetic experience itself, as the poet's allegedly privileged understanding turns out to be mere fascination with proliferating images which are themselves meaningless.<sup>21</sup>

The second development in Baudelaire's poetics—what I termed "distanciation"—is also particularly evident in the prose poems. Johnson's comparison of the verse and prose "Invitation to the Voyage" shows a shift from 1st-2nd person interaction in verse to 3rd person in prose; we no longer see dreams inspired by and addressed to a lover, but hear 3rd-person accounts of foreign lands. Indeed the presence of a narrator distancing us from events and emotions is characteristic of virtually *all* the prose poems; even where the "I" appears, it is often narrating a scene involving others.

Take for example the transformation of an anecdote in Baudelaire's "Intimate Journals" into the finished prose poem "Loss of a halo": in the original sketch, the poet manages to retrieve the halo, but gets the feeling its temporary loss was a bad omen and is left with a sense of foreboding the rest of the day:

As I was crossing the boulevard, hurrying a little to avoid the carriages, my halo was dislodged and fell into the filth of the macadam. Fortunately, I had time to recover it, but a moment later the unhappy thought slipped into my brain that this was a ill omen; and from that instant the idea would not let me alone; it has given me no peace all day.<sup>22</sup>

In the final version, however, the poet decides it was "less unpleasant to lose my insignia than to get my bones broken," and opts instead for a life in which he can "stroll about incognito, do nasty things, and indulge in vulgar behavior just like ordinary mortals." So much for romantic delusions of grandeur. What's more, the poet in the prose poem is recounting the episode to an acquaintance he meets in a brothel; here, in an effort to save face for having lost the halo, he boasts of how he will ridicule anyone old-fashioned

<sup>21</sup>See Irving Wohlfarth, "Perte d'auréole: the Emergence of the Dandy," *Modern Language Notes* 85:4 (May 1970): 529-71.

<sup>22</sup>*Intimate Journals*, trans. Christopher Isherwood (New York: Stratford Press, 1947) 45-46 ("Bribes" Section 17). See also Wohlfarth.

<sup>20</sup>*Paris Spleen*, trans. Louise Varèse (New York: New Directions, 1947), poem #XVII, p. 31; prose poem number in roman numerals and page references to this edition henceforth follow citations in the text.

enough to pick it up and wear it:

Dignity bores me. And besides, I can just picture some poor poet finding it and daring to try it on. What a pleasure, to make someone happy—especially someone who will make me laugh! Imagine X, or Z! That sure will be funny!

The loss of the halo is now not merely the subject of a story: it is an event recounted by a narrator to a listener *within* the story; it has become an occasion for the narrator to exercise an invidious superiority over his fictitious audience. The poet is now at one remove from his own experience: Baudelaire has transmuted the original account and the uneasy feeling it provoked into the snide banter of a world-weary and slightly sullied *roué*.

The hostility latent in this prose poem—and blatant in several others—has led critics such as Charles Mauron and Leo Bersani to equate the appearance of the narrator in the prose poems with a shift to sadism and an identification with a persecutory social self against the original artistic self.<sup>23</sup> But they overlook the numerous prose poems in which the narrator apparently identifies with the artist-figure instead. On balance, Baudelaire identifies with neither the persecuting sadist nor the persecuted artist (as Jean Starobinski has shown): the narrator intervenes precisely to remain at a *distance* from everything, even from his own former selves and from his own experience.<sup>24</sup> The poet of the prose poems has withdrawn from the world, and now only watches it—just as intently, perhaps, but with an unbreachable reserve and at an unbridgeable distance.

What this distance reveals is not sadism, but borderline narcissism. Indeed Baudelaire's prose poem collection could very well served as a textbook illustration of the features—personality-splitting, obsessive self-reference, alternating states of hostility and indifference, and so forth—that constitute the pathology of borderline narcissism.<sup>25</sup> The final version of "The Loss of a

<sup>23</sup>Charles Mauron, *Le Dernier Baudelaire* (Paris: José Corti, 1966); and Bersani, Chapter 12.

<sup>24</sup>Jean Starobinski, "Sur quelques répondants allégoriques du poète," *Revue d'Histoire Littéraire* 67: 178-88.

<sup>25</sup>See Kernberg 25-30, 227-29, 64-65; and also Theodore Nadelson, "Victim, Victimizer: Interaction in the Psychotherapy of Borderline Patients," *International Journal of Psychoanalytic Psychotherapy* 5 (1976): 115-29.

halo," for instance, illustrates its basic defense-mechanism: splitting. Splitting of the self into separate compartments in the prose poem enables the narrator first to detach himself from his earlier attempt to recover the halo, and then to subject others similarly tempted to scorn. This devaluation of others and even of one's own former sentiments is typical of narcissism, as is the narrator's self-inflation that accompanies it.

The tendency toward self-reference after which narcissism is named is strikingly illustrated in the prose poem entitled "Windows" (XXXV.77). This account of someone who takes pleasure in inventing stories about people he glimpses through their windows begins with the following curious but very revealing proposition:

Those who look into an open window never see as much as those who look in through a closed one. . . .

Here is someone who, as Lasch puts it, "sees the world as a mirror of himself," preferring to look through a closed window, "and has no interest in external events except as they throw back a reflection of his own image" (*Culture* 47). Indeed, when challenged at the end of the poem as to the truth of the stories he makes up, the narrator answers,

What difference does it make what external reality may be, if it helps me to live, to feel that I am and *what* I am?

That this exclusive self-reference can become callous and even brutal is clear from the poem "The Bad Glazier" (IX.12). After asking a glazier to carry his wares up six flights of narrow stairs, the narrator berates him for having no colored panes, and shoves him out the door. Then, just as the glazier is leaving the building, the narrator leans out the window and drops a flower-pot on him, knocking him over and of course breaking all the glass. The narrator allows that such pranks are sometimes dangerous and often costly, but concludes that the instant of infinite pleasure is well worth eternal damnation:

Such erratic pranks are not without danger and one often has to pay dearly for them. But what is the eternity of damnation compared to the infinity of pleasure found in a single second?

Moreover, the narrator describes how he is

sometimes compelled to commit such heinous deeds, while ordinarily he feels quite apathetic:

There are certain natures, purely contemplative and totally unfit for action, which nevertheless, moved by a mysterious and unaccountable impulse, act at times with a rapidity of which they would never have dreamed themselves capable.

The narrator here evidences that quintessential Baudelairean emotion (if it can be called that), ennui.

Ennui or apathy, and perhaps even more so, this kind of vacillation between very different and completely discrete personality-types, are basic traits of the borderline-narcissistic personality. Perhaps this propensity for extreme vacillation can help explain why some critics cite Baudelaire for sadism when many poems nonetheless manifest a touching empathy for suffering. Among Baudelaire's prose works, "A Heroic Death" (XXVII.54) and "The Old Clown" (XIV.25) perhaps represent the opposite poles of Baudelaire's vacillations—but they share an aesthetically and psychologically crucial common denominator: the narrator's distance from emotional involvement in the scene he is narrating.

Now the point of correlating poems with symptoms this way is not to diagnose Baudelaire a narcissist, of course, but rather to explain the impact of his poetry on a culture that has itself become increasingly narcissistic. Since I suggested earlier that Baudelaire achieved such an impact in part through the wide-spread popularity of the existential novel, let me sketch the relation between the evolution of Baudelaire's aesthetic and the shape of Sartre's *Nausea*.<sup>26</sup>

The distance Roquentin takes from his own experience is plain throughout the book. With the exception of his experience of nausea itself, he shows very little interest in the experience of other people or his own actions: he abandons work on his biography of Rollebon (97-98), gives up on contact with his former lover, Annie (152-54), and generally lives at one remove from life. Even events of some magnitude—such as the expulsion of the Self-made Man from the library (166-68) or the scene with the flasher in the park (79)—are gripping without being engaging: Roquentin remains frozen in his role of observer. This distance—and the borderline personality-

<sup>26</sup>*Nausea*, trans. Lloyd Alexander (1938; New York: New Directions, 1964).

splitting it implies—is perhaps most dramatically illustrated when Roquentin stabs himself in the arm . . . and then watches dispassionately as his blood trickles across the table (100). Here, the borderline-narcissistic lack of affect distances the character from his own body.

The process of disintegration characteristic of Baudelaire's poetry characterizes Sartre's novel as well—and operates on both levels we identified. For one thing, Roquentin engages in a constant demythification of his social environment—starting with the symbolism of the statue in the square (28), continuing with the portraits of local notables in the Bouville museum (92-93), and culminating in his rejection of the basic myth, what he and Annie called "adventure" (147-48), the myth of narrative itself.

But the central development in the novel is not the disintegration of these interpersonal and social myths, but rather the disintegration of experience itself. The feeling Roquentin calls "nausea" results precisely from his inability to process his everyday experience in the usual way: the codes and categories he uses to classify things, to attribute properties to things so as to make sense of them, no longer function effectively. *Nausea*'s ultimate climax in fact occurs when Roquentin confronts the chestnut-tree root in the park, and finally comes face-to-face with bare existence (129-35). The poetic failure Baudelaire invokes, of no longer being able to portray beauty in terms of metaphor, similarities, essences and the like becomes in Sartre's novel an inability to live everyday life in terms of the standard essentialist categories and codes of reference. Roquentin's experience becomes random, unwholesome, untotizable. *Nausea*, in other words, represents the Baudelairean aesthetic in prosaic terms.

That *Nausea* portrays experience typical of narcissism is clear from psychiatrists' use of Sartre's novel (and his early philosophy) as an illustration of this personality-type.<sup>27</sup> They note in Roquentin certain defensive patterns of response to the disintegration of self and experience that recur frequently in cases of narcissism: a kind of hyper-reflective attention paid to the disintegrating self, as evidenced in Roquentin's obses-

<sup>27</sup>See David Klaas and William Offenkrantz, "Sartre's Contribution to the Understanding of Narcissism," *International Journal of Psychoanalytic Psychotherapy* 5 (1976) 547-65, for an analysis from a Kohutian perspective. It is important to note that Sartre's later philosophy, particularly the Marxist phase where he acknowledges the impact of history and society on human freedom, to a large extent eliminates the narcissism of early existentialism.

sive journal-keeping; an attraction to music and especially to melody, for the sense of temporal continuity it affords an ego whose own ability to synthesize is weak; and finally, two ways of relating to other people, which correspond to the basic forms of narcissistic transference observed in therapy. Roquentin first attempts a form of "idealizing transference" in relation to the subject of his biography, Rollebon, whose imposing figure confers value on his own existence (98). But when he realizes that Rollebon is flawed (just like everyone else), he rejects both the historical personage and the biographical project in a typically narcissistic reversal. Roquentin then takes up a position (akin to narcissistic "mirror transference") of aloof disdain for other people, tinged with a mute and somewhat disparaging pity. Exactly this "projective identification"—where a flaw of one's own is projected onto another, yet still evokes some emotional response—typifies the narrator's stance in Baudelaire's "A Heroic Death" and "The Old Clown," as well.

By presenting borderline narcissism in the texts of Baudelaire and Sartre this way, we are already on the verge of translating ego-psychology into an historical semiotics. As valuable as the work of Kernberg et al. proves in shedding light on the overall shape of late-19th and 20th-century culture, ego-psychology remains notoriously unable to account for historical changes in personality-type.<sup>28</sup> When Heinz Kohut, for example, explains that children become narcissistic because . . . they have narcissistic parents, he simply begs the question of how the parents themselves became narcissistic, of how narcissism

<sup>28</sup>See Norman O. Brown, *Life Against Death: The Psychoanalytic Meaning of History* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1959), especially pp. 204-205; with respect to the alinity of the protestant character, for instance, he says that

orthodox psychoanalytic dogma ends in the same cul-de-sac as the neo-Freudian revisionists: adult anal character is derived from adult anal character . . . called upon to explain a change in the character of a culture, orthodox psychoanalysis can have nothing to offer, because of the iron ring of psychological determinism it postulates. . . . (205)

<sup>29</sup>On this count, Kernberg is not much better:

I do not think that changes in contemporary culture have effects on patterns of object relations (where narcissists have problems). . . . This is not to say that such changes . . . could not occur over a period of several generations, if and when changes in cultural patterns affect family structure to such an extent that the earliest development in childhood would be influenced. (223)

started in the first place.<sup>29</sup> The borderline-narcissist's relative ego-instability is best understood, I would suggest, as an effect of the historical dislocation and disarticulation of social codes that are responsible for the stability of meaning and self-experience in the first place.<sup>30</sup> The poetics of Baudelaire take on significance in this light as an original reaction to the initial installation of unalloyed bourgeois economic rule in France during the 1850's.

Marx said in the *Communist Manifesto* that capitalist market society would tend, in his words, "to strip the halo" from all previous forms of social intercourse.<sup>31</sup> Walter Benjamin's remarkable study of Baudelaire is invaluable because it provides mediations between the underlying motor of historical change in this period—the rapid spread of market relations, of the "cash nexus"—and the effects registered in Baudelaire's poetry. In the *18th Brumaire of Louis-Napoleon*, Marx had shown on one level why the reign of Louis-Napoleon and the age of capital he inaugurated spelled the eclipse of bourgeois social authority—why, that is to say, under democratic conditions capitalists would have to forfeit direct political rule and cultural expression to maintain their economic rule intact behind the scenes.<sup>32</sup> Benjamin goes on to show how, on a second

<sup>30</sup>In the *Anti-Oedipus* (trans. R. Hurley, M. Seem, and H. Lane [1972; New York: Viking, 1977]), Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari mount a devastating post-Lacanian argument against the family's being the principal determinant of the psyche: their emphasis on the social formation's determination of psychic structure is a crucial corrective to Lasch's reliance on ego-psychology.

<sup>31</sup>See Lewis Feuer, ed. *Marx and Engels: Basic Writings on Politics and Philosophy* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1959) 6-41:

The bourgeoisie has stripped of its halo every occupation hitherto honored and looked up to with reverent awe. It has converted the physician, the lawyer, the priest, the man of science into its paid wage laborers. (. . .) The bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionizing the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society. (. . .) Constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air. . . . (10)

<sup>32</sup>In *Marx on Revolution*, ed. and trans. Saul Padover (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1971) 243-328.

level, the poet's loss of his halo reflects a general "atrophy of experience" (as Benjamin calls it) brought about by changes in city life, the mass media, and the development of mass consumption. In reaction to the shocks of increasingly rapid traffic, the sudden transformation of the urban landscape, the fragmentary human contacts typical of crowded city streets, the speed of rail transportation, the invention and marketing of matches and photography, and ultimately the fetishization of commodities itself, Baudelaire adopted what Benjamin calls a shock-defense. This defense-mechanism works to isolate and encapsulate discrete incidents which due to their brevity and/or novelty could not be assimilated into regular patterns of experience. In the same vein, mass-circulation newspaper stories present increasingly discrete bits of information and no longer integrate them into larger and more comprehensive narratives or world-views. The mass media first replace older narration with information this way, and then proceed to replace information with mere sensation, with a culture of images. Finally, the growing fetishism of commodities replaces more or less competent evaluation of goods with superficial fascination by images: exchange-value, in a word, replaces use-value; mindless fashion supplants tradition as the arbiter of taste. Baudelaire's poetry, as Barbara Johnson as well as Benjamin suggest, is the poetry of nascent consumerism.<sup>33</sup>

This disintegration of experience, codes and values produces an unstable self no longer able to integrate the incidents of everyday life into coherent experience. And what I have called "distanciation" supervenes, as Otto Kernberg has explained, when this weakness of the ego is itself used as a defense-mechanism to protect it: the borderline mechanism of splitting serves to segregate incompatible facets of the personality in order to forestall complete breakdown. These are the processes, disintegration and distanciation (splitting), that lead Baudelaire from masochism to borderline narcissism.

We are now in a position to consider the role of masochism in the historical development of today's narcissistic culture. I mentioned at the outset that the isolated nuclear family was not an exception to but a product of capitalist development. In its early stages, the isolation of the family from larger structures of society and social authority (such as the medieval church) called for increasing reliance on internalized authority and

hence magnified the role of the super-ego. Even if we believe the super-ego to be a universal psychic structure, its functions are no doubt considerably increased in early bourgeois culture through the internalized conscience of the Protestant spirit and the internalized rationality of Enlightenment.<sup>34</sup> The family occupies a separate space, but it does so as an agent of social change: at this stage, its values are consonant with the social values of the bourgeois class and actively support the consolidation of bourgeois hegemony. In the culture of narcissism, by contrast, the super-ego has ceased to function as purveyor of social values. Lasch attributes this to narcissists' unwillingness or inability to internalize social directives, and speaks conversely of modern institutions' "loss of ability to command allegiance" (*Culture* 49). But this loss, historically speaking, is not some secondary consequence of the narcissistic personality; rather, it results from the culture of masochism—for isolating the private individual from public values was a primary goal of masochistic strategy. Baudelaire throws his own example of individual corruption in the face of society to prove its malfeasance: by willingly playing its victim to the hilt, he denies bourgeois society its legitimacy and institutionalizes the split between individual and social authority, thereby paving the way for narcissism. Indeed Baudelaire himself proceeds to elaborate the narcissistic grandiose self of the dandy as compensation for and repudiation of his own earlier sacrifice.

Cultural masochism, then, is an essential precondition for the culture of narcissism, and provides the social context for the so-called demise of the nuclear family. Starting in the mid-19th century, what in fact distinguishes family life is the increasing pressure of consumerism it is called upon to bear. Capitalism had earlier separated wage-labor and social production in the public sphere from reproduction and the nuclear family in the private sphere; to this domestic sphere it now adds consumption, spurred by the drive to realize profit on mass-produced consumer goods.<sup>35</sup> The public-private split thus takes

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<sup>34</sup>Norman O. Brown, Chapters XII and XIV; Deleuze, *Présentation* 50-60, 105-115 and passim; Max Weber, *The Protestant Spirit and the Ethic of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (1905; New York: Scribner, 1958).

<sup>35</sup>See E. J. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Capital* (New York: Scribner, 1975) Chapter 13; and Rosalyn Williams, *Dream Worlds: Mass Consumption in Late 19th Century France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).

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<sup>33</sup>See Benjamin, passim; and Johnson 128-39.

on a new dimension: the good realm of domesticity, haven in a heartless world, becomes increasingly distinct from the jungle of capitalist competition, and domestic consumption becomes the compensation and reward in one realm for the oppressive "productivity" of the other. Consumers bent on redeeming their 9-to-5 of toil or drudgery take "Living well is the best revenge" as their slogan. Positive though commodified leisure-time and negative, exploited work-time exist side by side, but without any intrinsic relation between them, separated by the gulf of the market which becomes increasingly difficult to bridge. This rift fosters narcissistic disorder: for borderline narcissism, as the psychologists explain it, results precisely from an inability to synthesize good and bad experience into a coherent, nuanced apprehension of the world.<sup>36</sup> Furthermore, the pressures of consumerism have this additional effect: paradoxically, under the whip of fashion and the imperative to consume—Baudelaire's slogan is "To the depths of the unknown to find something new!"—paradoxically, the imperative to consume makes true satisfaction impossible. Consumer society promises everything, but can allow no one enough satisfaction . . . to stop consuming. What was supposedly a haven from a heartless world turns out, as the locus of consumption, to have denial

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<sup>36</sup>See Kernberg 25-38; and Warren Brodey "The Dynamics of Narcissism," *Psychoanalytic Study of the Child* 20 (1965): 165-93, especially pp. 186-88.

and frustration at its very core. This inevitable frustration, too, contributes to narcissistic disorder: for borderline narcissism results from a contradictory response to desire, and produces the impotent rage of oral aggression against an entire society (not just mothers!) that continually nourishes desires but never finally satisfies them.<sup>37</sup>

What I mean to suggest, then, is that cultural narcissism is a social affliction prepared by the cultural masochism of the 19th century; that it was fostered by consumerism and the split between public and private life, between production and consumption; and that its ultimate source is not just the vicissitudes of modern family life, but the basic structure of capitalist social relations themselves. This is not to say that the nuclear family and other social institutions included in Lasch's account aren't important factors, even immediate causes, of the culture of narcissism—for they certainly are. But their effects would be far less pervasive if they did not resonate throughout a society whose very libidinal-economic structure fosters and continually reinforces the borderline-narcissistic personality. □

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<sup>37</sup>See Kernberg 234-35; and Theodore Nadelson 117.

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Tom Whalen

AUBADE

I remember nothing in the dawn,  
the night only a flourish,  
music without song,  
a story I have unlearned.

A man in a taxi once lost,  
or so he said, a sceptre  
that made time do "whatever  
I want it to, understand?"

I am not one to doubt,  
but what was I to make of the cello  
he held in his lap like a dictionary  
or a loaf of bread or a child

whose sleep is so deep not even  
the head-on collision awakes him?

THE FRENCH LIEUTENANT'S WOMAN AS METAPHOR:  
KAREL REISZ'S NON-PLOT CENTERED EDITING

In discussing the difficulties that he had in arranging for the film version of *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, John Fowles noted that "the chief stumbling block [in the way of finding a writer willing to create a screenplay for the work] was . . . that of trying to remain faithful to the book."<sup>1</sup> Indeed, many of Fowles' readers who saw the Karel Reisz/Harold Pinter adaptation were disturbed that so much had been eliminated, while others were confused by the addition of a parallel love story involving modern-day actors named Mike and Anna who play Fowles' characters Charles and Sarah in a film called *The French Lieutenant's Woman*.<sup>2</sup> In addressing the changes that were made, Fowles has called the film a "metaphor for the novel" ("Foreword" xii), but this has failed to satisfy or enlighten critics like Tony Whall who remarked:

Fowles says he's pleased with the film which he calls a "metaphor," but a metaphor for what he does not say and I for one cannot tell.

(78)

In understanding Fowles' comments, it is important to remember that, just as Fowles is a master wordsmith, Reisz is noted not only for the films he has made, but also for his role as editor of the classic textbook, *The Technique of Film Editing*.<sup>3</sup> It is in the parallel editing between Fowles'

<sup>1</sup>John Fowles, "Foreword," in Harold Pinter, *The French Lieutenant's Woman, a Screenplay* (Boston and Toronto: Little, Brown, 1981) ix.

<sup>2</sup>See, for example, Tony Whall, "Karel Reisz's *The French Lieutenant's Woman*: Only the Name Remains the Same," *Literature/Film Quarterly* 10.2 (1982): 75-81.

<sup>3</sup>2nd ed. (1953, expanded 1968; rpt. London: Butterworth, 1981). In his "Introduction to the Fourth Section of the Enlarged Edition," Thorold Dickinson, representing the British Film Academy, wrote: "In the 15 years since it was first published, Karel Reisz's book on the technique of film editing has proved as successful as any textbook on cinema in the English language. Already, it has achieved 13 reprintings in English. In translation, it has become the standard work on the subject in the Spanish, Czech, Polish and Russian languages" (275).

Victorian story and the modern story created by Harold Pinter that the film achieves its status as metaphor.

Metaphor involves identifying one object with another for the purpose of demonstrating that the tenor shares with the vehicle fundamental similarities that are masked when the two entities appear separately. It is obvious that one of Fowles' interests is in bringing the whole range of social and literary history from the mid-nineteenth century to the twentieth to bear on both his characters and the form of his novel which relies on the interpenetration of two texts, one Victorian, one post-modern. It is also clear that the viewing audience is to compare the experiences of two pairs of illicit lovers, one Victorian, one modern. What has gone unremarked is that Reisz has stated quite explicitly in *The Technique of Film Editing* his interest in reaching back to the principles prominent during cinema's silent era:

The tradition of expressive visual juxtaposition, which is characteristic of the best silent films has been largely neglected since the advent of sound. It will be one of the main arguments of this book that this neglect has brought with it a great loss to the cinema.

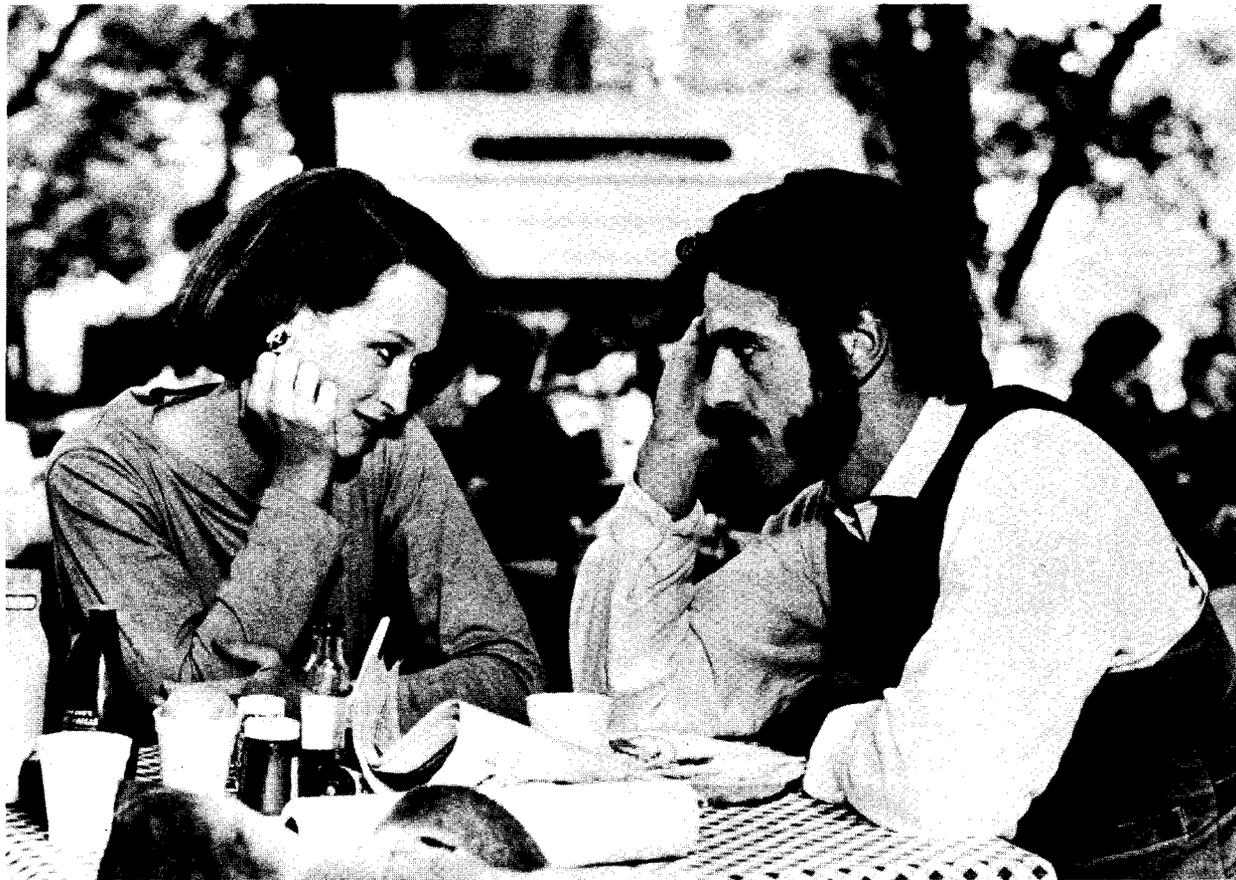
(15)

Lamenting the current (1953) preference for plot-centered filmmaking, Reisz "hopefully anticipate[s] the films of some future director, working in the sound medium, but with the freedom of a Griffith, an Eisenstein or a Dovshenko [to edit for non-literal, non-plot centered meaning]" (66).

In *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, he has made just such a film. Where the work retrieves the depth lost through thematic simplification is in its distinctly contemporary use of a technique rescued from the medium's early history. Non-plot centered editing permits the modern and Victorian stories to interpenetrate, while the double plot solves the problems introduced by sound which cannot be edited with the same freedom as visual images. The editing technique serves two functions: first, it allows the film to

speak directly of and to the emotions below the level of the conscious, rational mind—something cinema has been accused of failing to do as well as literature—and it also alternately blurs and highlights the distinction between reality and illusion, much like Fowles does with his narrative intrusions into his fiction. In this way, Reisz has demonstrated his virtuosity as a filmmaker, exploring and exhibiting the potentiality of his medium just as Fowles has done with his. The

Charles, Mike feels himself, at the beginning of the film, to be in control of his situation whereas Anna, like Sarah, appears to be more insecure. Their relative positions are most evident as the two rehearse a scene from the film in which they are starring. Anna loses her place, and Mike grimaces in annoyance. Then, while he gives cues, she goes through her paces, clearly the novice. But when they begin the scene a second time, something changes in Anna; between the two read-



film is a metaphor for the novel in that while both are love stories, both are centrally concerned with the romance between the artist and the history and craft of his art.

It is one of the novel's ironies that whereas Charles Smithson thinks he is using his superior sophistication and means to lead a helpless woman to better her circumstances, it is in fact Charles who is led out of his comfortable conventional niche in life to face "the umplumb'd, salt, estranging sea" of personal freedom.<sup>4</sup> Parallel editing is responsible for expressing a similar structure in the Reisz/Pinter film. Like

ings, she *becomes* her character, and the amazement on Mike's face has more to do with Anna's stunning transformation than with the fact that the character he is playing unexpectedly stumbles on the character she is playing in the woods. In one of the film's brilliant match cuts, the scene shifts to the actual shooting of the film, so that Mike and Anna are now in costume and in the appropriate Victorian setting, exactly at the place in the script they had been rehearsing. Charles' amazed face replaces Mike's as Sarah (Anna) slips at his feet; the faces are identical, the emotions are identical, and the dialogue from the rehearsal slides easily from the modern to the Victorian scene.

What is most interesting about this cut is the

<sup>4</sup>John Fowles, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (Boston and Toronto: Little, Brown, 1969) 467.

way it submerges the different literal stimuli for Mike's and Charles' reactions in favor of the essential similarity of their reactions on a deep psychological level. At this point, Fowles' novel reads:

This marked a new stage in his awareness of Sarah. He had realized she was more intelligent and independent than she seemed; now he guessed darker qualities.

(119-120)



The screenplay attempts to translate this passage directly to the screen, focusing on the "darker qualities":

He looks down at her face, her mouth

The scene is done in modern dress, and the cut comes several lines later (Pinter 31). However, in the modern story, Mike is already Anna's lover, and so a sudden awareness of her sensuality would hardly cause the psychological wrenching Charles experiences when he begins to think about Sarah in sexual terms. On the literal level, Mike is shocked by something different—perhaps Anna's artistry, or indeed, by that which Charles had recognized about Sarah with less impact: her intelligence and independence. By sharpening the exchange between the modern

and Victorian stories through the match cut and continuous dialogue, the screen version focuses on the essential core of both experiences, the new stage in each man's awareness of the woman. This is precisely the function of metaphor: to go beyond the literal differences to demonstrate fundamental similarity.

A critical difference between literary metaphor and what Reisz is doing here, however, is that while literary metaphor depends on intellectual recognition, parallel editing of this kind relies on



emotional impact. Reisz noted:

when you have any sequence which leads into the next you have all the residue of feeling that remain and you bring these with you into the new sequence. In our film, the feelings from the Victorian story carry over into the modern, the modern into the Victorian.<sup>5</sup>

It is commonplace to suggest that the word is far better equipped to express that which is not seen than the image. That superiority is not at all clear when what is to be expressed are the shifts of human emotion that flicker across the human face.<sup>6</sup>

An even more subtle use of the match cut is

<sup>5</sup>"Karel Reisz interviewed by Harlan Kennedy," *Film Comment* Sept.-Oct. 1981: 28.

used to mark Charles' irrevocable entrapment by Sarah which in both novel and film happens when she asks him to hear a confession of her sins with the French Lieutenant. In the novel, Sarah follows Charles into the woods, and there makes her request. He agrees to meet her again, "albeit with the greatest reluctance—" (145). In the film, her behavior is more outrageous. While Charles and his fiancée are paying an awkward social call on Sarah's employer, the formidable Mrs. Poulteney, Sarah slips him a note requesting a meeting. Although he believes that he is outraged, he

ferent meaning; outrage is one of the components of the look, but much more significantly, both men are experiencing the shock of their altered relationships. Both are unbalanced and suddenly vulnerable. Parallel editing allows the kind of delayed interpretation of Charles' emotion that he himself must have experienced.

The essence of the film's ending resides in the way parallel editing expresses the interplay of illusion and reality.<sup>7</sup> The Victorian story ends as willfully commercial entertainment should end: Sarah and Charles in their rowboat glide out of



does meet her at the designated place, but he walks away having absolutely refused to meet her again. Therefore, when Sarah utters her last line in the scene, "I shall wait," Charles' answering look seems to be at the sheer impertinence of the woman. However, the cut to Mike, late at night, staring into a window pane with the identical amazed look on his face suggests an entirely dif-

ferent meaning; outrage is one of the components of the look, but much more significantly, both men are experiencing the shock of their altered relationships. Both are unbalanced and suddenly vulnerable. Parallel editing allows the kind of delayed interpretation of Charles' emotion that he himself must have experienced.

<sup>7</sup>In commenting on the separate strengths of prose language and film imagery, Fowles noted "the appalling paucity of vocabulary to define the nuances of facial expression" ("Forward" ix). Bela Balazs has noted the ability of the human face in close-up to express a subjectivity even greater than that expressible by words. See "The Face of Man" (from *Theory of Film*) in *Film Theory and Criticism*, eds. Gerald Mast and Marshall Cohen (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979) 290-298.

<sup>7</sup>Reisz has claimed that "the intercutting device isn't about film and life or illusion and reality. It's simply a way of showing two parallel love stories." See "Kennedy" 28. This claim is an odd one, since in fact the film makes a great deal of the illusion-and-reality contrast; a more thorough discussion of this aspect of the film is the subject for another essay.

marks: "A thousand violins cloy very rapidly without percussion" (460). Reisz, on the other hand, allows the period piece to end on a cliché. The counterpoint is provided by the modern story.

Immediately after we watch Charles and Sarah glide into the happily-ever-after, we cut to the unit party which Mike expects Anna to leave with him. Instead, he is left alone on the empty set where the fictional reconciliation has just (for the cinema audience) taken place; when he calls out the window after Anna's departing car, he calls "Sarah"; clearly, illusion has become reality for Mike.

In a final ironic twist, however, the film ends



not with Mike facing an uncreated future as Charles does at the end of Fowles' novel, but with a return to the happily-ever-after ending of the Victorian fiction. In this way, Reisz thrusts his audience back into their awareness that what we have been watching has been *entirely* fiction, not one part fiction, one part reality. The ending of the film is analogous to Fowles' chapter 13 in which he explains, "This story I am telling is all imagination. These characters I created never existed outside my mind" (95).

Any attempt to compress the novel, to attempt "to crush into a small valise all those long paragraphs of description, historical digression, character analysis and the rest that the vast portmanteau of novel form was especially evolved to contain" would surely have resulted in failure ("Foreword" ix-x). Instead, Reisz and Pinter focused on the self-reflexive qualities that distin-

guish the novel. Reisz's comment on his film is as applicable to the novel on which it is based:

We tried to make a film that works as a narrative—one with a rattling good yarn at its center—but at the same time we wanted to subject the audience's perception of that yarn to doubt. We're challenging them by saying, "Look, we're making a fiction here—are you coming with us or not? And what do you think about it." We're colluding with them. When we took on a structure of that kind, then the ambiguities arising from it become the meaning.

("Kennedy" 28)

Turning to the history of his medium just as Fowles did, Reisz made use of film's basic organizational tool, editing, after the manner of the great silent directors who understood the power of emotional linkage between shots. The parallel story created for the film not only solved the problem of discontinuous editing across dialogue, it also provided a cinematic mechanism to replace the literary narrator's ability to comment on the material in the narrative.

In a memorandum he wrote during the first draft of his novel, Fowles wrote:

. . . One cannot describe reality; only give metaphors to indicate it. All human modes of description . . . are metaphorical.<sup>8</sup>

Just as Fowles' novel is a virtuoso performance that stretches the novel form backwards to its roots and forward into an uncreated future, so Reisz's film offers the student of cinema familiar with Reisz's writing and the history of the silent film a similar kind of display. The literal changes and even the thematic simplifications that had to be performed on the text before it could be remade for the screen are far less important than the essential concern of the two works with the language and history of their respective media. □

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<sup>8</sup>John Fowles, "Notes on an Unfinished Novel," *Afterwords: Novelists on Their Novels*, ed. Thomas McCormach (New York: Harper and Row, 1969) 164-165.

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Steinunn Sigurdardóttir

A CONSOLATION

*Translated by the Author and Sebastian Barry*

**L**isten, Dísa, it is still hanging, the moon in Sisteron, and the old angel who drove us with his band-aids and black-eyes is still teaching geography in Lyon unless he has retired or become an invalid out of hastiness. You must not think that the moon has fallen and that the trains have got late. It's not true because the moon is still hanging and the trains are too early if anything.

Richard Easton

## THE RECEPTION

**D**o you, Meredith Ames, take this man . . .” Judge Ninsey was mumbling.

Josh was not comforted that the ceremony marrying his daughter and Sanford Cox was already half completed for the apparition that he had been glimpsing for the past few weeks might yet materialize in the backyard filled with wedding guests. Was it really an angel that had appeared as he insisted? Whatever it was, the creature had certainly been at the rehearsal. Josh, who prided himself on his physical condition at fifty-two, thought he would topple in front of the wedding guests from his apprehension. He wondered if his wife Judith’s stubborn insistence on “living normally,” was a sign that she had been driven crazy by the appearances.

Judith tightened her hold on his trembling arm. Except for her ashen face she actually looked, in her pink silk suit, the composed mother-of-the-bride. He had always thought her docile until five days before, when she had responded loudly to his pleas for sensible behavior in the face of the creature, “I am behaving sensibly. Since December we’ve known there was no place but the garden available for the wedding. I had counted 193 acceptances for the wedding before whatever-it-is appeared. In two days Meredith and Sanford arrive from Denver. So, at three o’clock Saturday we’re all going to be in that backyard no matter what!”

“Do you, Sanford Cox, take this woman . . .”

Even the weather seemed to conspire to fulfill Judith’s designs. In the morning she had ordered the awning man not to erect the large canvas tent, and the day had remained unseasonably hot and dry for early June on Long Island. Clutching her arm, Josh judged that in completing the last minute preparations for the wedding, Judith had manipulated people as well as he ever had at the bank he managed. Had she been concealing her strong will for the twenty-six years of their marriage? She managed the arrivals and departures of the florists, caterers, and equipment suppliers so well, that not one caught

a glimpse of the apparition which every day appeared and then vanished after a seemingly endless visit. When the creature appeared at the hour scheduled for the Friday night rehearsal, Judith managed to prevent anyone from seeing it by insisting that the practice be held in the living room where she had already drawn the drapes. She argued that it was bad luck for the bride and groom even to view the site of the wedding. And bald-headed Ninsey, patting her hand, endorsed the new superstition, indicating that he knew how she suffered since he had managed the marriages of four daughters of his own.

Josh became aware that Ninsey was directing the bridal couple to offer the wedding rings. As he watched the couple exchange rings, Josh felt increasingly uneasy. He had assumed for months without objection that Meredith and Sanford were living together. Owing to the presence of the creature that he feared was an angel, however, he had suddenly begun to wonder if he shouldn’t have objected. In fact, after their arrival on Wednesday night when it became obvious that Sanford wasn’t in the guest room but was sharing Meredith’s bed, Josh had wanted to burst in on them. Judith had stopped him. She had said coldly as she turned away from him in their own bed, “If nothing else, we’ve discovered it isn’t here to announce another virgin birth,” causing Josh to worry that if the creature were indeed an angel whether Judith was being respectful enough. The appearances had also made Josh guilty about his own affair with Ginny Waterford. After the first three days of the appearances he had stopped sneaking across the street to be with the woman. In fact, he was still anxious sometimes about his relationship with her and about Judith’s hurt over their affair—concerns, he knew, he had never felt before.

“I now pronounce you man and wife.”

Josh fidgeted. The odors of grass, flowers, and perfumes stifled him, and he pulled at his cravat. He watched the couple kiss so eagerly that Meredith’s lace hat nearly slipped from her head.

Ninsey shook the groom's hand; the bridal couple turned to face the guests; the drummer of the band tattooed the rhythm of an upbeat version of the wedding march; and the rest of the band joined in. Meredith and Sanford stepped forward. The beat of the music wavered. From the corner of his eye Josh saw the apparition. Despite his anticipation its sudden manifestation shocked him.

The masculine figure stood at least seven feet tall, had a full head of flaxen hair, wide shoulders, and large hands and feet. He had the broad forehead, long nose, prominent cheekbones, and square jaw of a handsome, large-framed human. His blue eyes were piercing. He wore a simple, unsashed white robe that hung in deep folds to his bare feet. And he had what Judith and Josh had termed "wings," which were seemingly arcs of light that curved from the small of his back to two feet above his head. In the sunlight the body had a milky opalescence, and the wings seemed to be shot with red and gold. Josh and Judith had both identified the creature as an angel based on conceptions formed when they were children from paintings and picture books. Though the creature's face was animated and his wings and limbs seemed very mobile, he had never moved or spoken during an appearance. He had seemed to be contented just to hover eighteen or so inches above the ground in the rose and spirea bed. Of course, neither Josh nor Judith, who had always remained in the house when he was about, had ever invited him to move or speak and given him an opportunity to identify himself.

Josh saw startled guests cowering from the creature. Someone cried out. Josh remembered asking Judith how they should respond if it did appear during the wedding, to which she had sarcastically answered, "Run when the rest do." But he was too weak to run. He closed his eyes and wished he would pass out. He felt Judith squeeze his arm, and he opened his eyes and stared at her. Her face was white but for the rouge on her cheeks. She was smiling at the figure, yet there was fury in her eyes. Through clenched teeth she ordered Josh to calm down. He was awed by her audacity. She turned and seized the plump arm of Lucy, her first cousin. "Wonderful effect," she announced to Lucy and to all within hearing.

Josh heard people repeating her words. Unbelieving, he watched Judith raise her gloved hands and applaud the caterer who stood, surrounded with waiters, on the terrace staring at the spectacle in the rose bed. The crowd imitated

her action. Finally the caterer, looking bewildered, raised his own hands and smiling at Judith, applauded her. Josh watched as she, accepting for herself the plaudits of the caterer and guests, nodded and then gestured with her right hand for the band to continue playing. The band played more energetically than before, turning the march time into a definite rock beat. The guests began to sway and clap. Meredith and Sanford walked among the cheering guests toward the site near the terrace that Judith had designated for the receiving line. Josh allowed himself to be pulled along by her behind the bridal couple. She positioned him in the line and ordered him to smile.

From that moment he wondered if only he suffered anxiety about the phenomenon in their midst. He trembled as he stood between Judith and the groom's mother, greeting guests who had formed a queue that, to his astonishment, went around the rose bushes within ten feet of the creature.

"Josh!" Josh was face to face with Esther Carter, his attorney's wife, who exclaimed, "That angel! How did you two dream up such a clever decoration?"

Then Margaret, his next door neighbor, was before him saying, "Don't tell me. The angel will fly away when the bride throws the bouquet. We knew you had been working on something over here, but we never guessed what."

That these people also perceived the creature to be an angel, in what they too readily accepted as a rented decoration, confirmed Josh's own belief. He stared at the creature, expecting it to begin wreaking vengeance on them all. He wondered if Judith would be the first to die. He concluded that that would be fitting. Despite his expectations, however, the angelic figure only hovered peacefully in the rose bed.

As Josh continued to hear remarks about the "decoration," he could not help but feel that he was slightly more perceptive than his friends. At least he had immediately recognized what the creature actually was. He began to wonder if he didn't have a responsibility to enlighten the others in spite of Judith's determination to get through the wedding. Josh spent a moment imagining himself delivering a speech to the wedding guests that would bring them to their senses. He believed that such a speech might also end any threat from the angel. Josh actually raised his arms above his head, ready to begin.

When he raised his arms, Judith elbowed him in the ribs. "Behave normally," she hissed.

"You're going to make a spectacle of us."

Feeling noble, Josh wanted to continue. However, he only stared blankly at Homer Peasy, the person then in front of him for he realized he hadn't thought through what he was going to say. Abruptly, he concluded he had no argument as persuasive as the fact of that angel's presence, and the guests had already accepted the creature as decoration despite its incredible nature. He decided that he could only remain silent. Lowering his arms, he shook hands with the puzzled Homer Peasy. Homer assured Josh that the bride's father always felt better after the wedding had ended.

Josh began to wonder why he alone seemed to understand and to suffer. The fact that the guests were having a good time and that Judith was able to function unsettled him. Despite an effort to control himself, he remembered, as people stepped up to him in the receiving line, slights and injuries he had committed in the past. He wondered if these were causes of his suffering. When Meredith hugged him as the receiving line broke up, he recalled with regret the many arguments he had had with her. When the wedding supper was served, he couldn't force a bite of the food or a sip of the champagne before him. Instead, he recalled incidents when he had eaten and drunk too much. He observed with resentment that Judith was so calm that she was able to eat a little food and that the rest were so indifferent that they swallowed shameful amounts. Then, guilty, he fought to control his resentment.

He shuddered with recollections when, just as people were getting up to dance, Ginny Waterford slipped enticingly onto the chair beside him. He whispered to her that he could no longer come to visit her. "You'll come" Ginny winked, then left him.

When Ginny left him, Josh stared at the angel and hoped because of his commendable thoughts and actions for some sign of mercy. The angel only continued to float serenely, however. Josh became desperate to learn how he might gain a sign of friendship from it. He considered stopping the dancing because he remembered that some sects did frown on the activity, but he could think of no way to explain his action to the guests. By the time Sanford and Meredith left the party to change into their street clothes, Josh was so unhappy and exhausted that he sank into a chair. He thought it might be desirable for the angel to take vengeance on him after all and upon the unrepentant guests as well—simply so his suffer-

ing would cease. With relief he saw Judith coming through the crowd towards him. He thought that she, at least, had ideas about how they should behave in spite of the creature's presence.

Josh noted that Judith looked tired, but that she held her chin high and her back straight as she came up to him. He admired her for that. When a male guest approached them to inquire where he could rent an angel, he also admired the way she handled him. Josh knew because of his weariness that he would never have been able to rid himself of the man; that day he had endured conversations with people whom he usually only allowed a "hello." Judith curtly told the man to consult a waiter, and he moved off.

Josh became aware that she was now contemplating him with evident scorn. Smiling with set teeth again, Judith said, "You're no longer going to bed with Ginny or anyone else for that matter."

Josh was surprised that he felt a familiar surge of anger, even though he had decided the same course for himself. He wanted to spite her by walking over to Ginny. Looking at the angel, he instead struggled for control, took Judith's hand, and whispered, "I thought we could sell this house and start over somewhere, maybe in the South. There will be just the two of us, I promise."

Judith pulled her hand from his. "I like this house and we're both going to remain in it, whether you like that or not." She patted his cheek and then strode away from him.

That was the first time he had ever promised to reform. And what did Judith do but treat him so badly that he wanted to weep. He was so upset that he remained standing in the backyard alone with the angel as Meredith and Sanford departed around the side of the house, pursued by Judith and the guests, who were throwing clouds of rice. Josh stood, contemplating the changes in his life.

He recognized that he would inevitably have to take up the struggle with Judith. Because of the angel, however, he feared that he could never be as assured or as aggressive as he had been, and that she would always hold the upper hand as a result. Had he dared, Josh would have hated that angel for having such an effect on him while not terrifying Judith and that whole pack who had attended the wedding into bowing, squealing conversions.

Then Josh had a sudden revelation of how he must handle Judith. He felt foolish for not hav-

ing thought of it at once. Because of the appearances of the angel, it was the only means of action he could have. He must, of course, "convert" her and thus reduce her to a humility like his own. He blew his nose and squared his shoulders. He considered the scriptural quotations, lengthy sermons, and pious admonitions which

he would use to nag her to his perception of the angel. Josh glanced at the angel warily. It still hovered quietly. Josh decided that if he hadn't found a way to true peace, he had hit on a means to get, at least, a little gratification. Under the circumstances, he was willing to settle for that temporarily. □



FRANCIS PONGE AND THE INFINITE TEXT

"It isn't relating or narrating or describing, but a conquering."

—Francis Ponge

The delicate, simple, seemingly innocuous texts of Francis Ponge are elements in an elaborate philosophy of the mundane—a search for the meaning of the meaningless, an attempt to conquer the everyday. Ponge takes as subject matter that which other writers overlook: the pebble, the cigarette, the spider, the mollusc. If his writings are texts of conquest, they are efforts to conquer the simple bits of reality that otherwise might never find their place in literary history.

*Le Savon* (1967) is an attempt to conquer, to capture, to analyze, and to exhaust the subject of soap.

There is much to say about soap. Precisely everything that it tells about itself until the complete disappearance, the exhaustion of the subject. This is precisely the object suited to me.<sup>1</sup>

Ponge has a great deal to say about soap. He worked on the text from 1943 to 1965 when he brought the piece to an end—if not to a conclusion. In fact, the text could have gone on forever.

Ponge has said: "The poet should never offer an idea but a thing."<sup>2</sup> This is apparently the intent of *Le Savon*—to offer soap, to capture "the real thing," and to exhaust its reality *in words*. An impossible task, of course, the text does not and cannot offer the reader the reality of soap. It offers ideas about soap, words about soap, a text.

And yet Ponge insists upon reaching the thing itself through language, collapsing the differ-

ence between words and things. Again, an impossible task. Language has its tenuous being precisely in this difference. Words are rooted in the absence of things. To use words, to speak or to write, is to speak or write of that which is not there. Even the object that is before us—this book, this table, this chair—is not of us. It is always at a distance. And the word that calls the object forth, that summons it to us as idea, in fact creates that distance between what is said and what is, for what is said is always not-that, always different. And what is is always absent.

But in the text *Le Savon*, Ponge hopes to call forth not the idea of soap but soap itself. He writes and writes, adding to his text year after year, as if the lines of words might join to bridge the distance between idea and thing, as if the growing text might collapse under its own weight, cancelling itself in favor of the reality beyond words that does not need language in order to be.

What kind of impossible text might accomplish Ponge's impossible goal? Theologian Thomas J. J. Altizer has suggested:

Only the pure and total presence of a total and positive infinity could dissolve all real or actual difference . . . .<sup>3</sup>

This is Ponge's project in *Le Savon*—to create a total and positive infinity, an infinite text that would exhaust the language of soap, leaving only the reality that a finite text could never reach. But if this project were to be realized—if this impossible text could be written—it would capture and reveal not only the everyday soap that now lies

<sup>1</sup>Francis Ponge, *Soap*, trans. Lane Dunlop (London: Jonathan Cape, Ltd., 1969) 13.

<sup>2</sup>Francis Ponge, *Things*, trans. Cid Corman (New York: Grossman Publishers, 1971) 48.

<sup>3</sup>Thomas J. J. Altizer, "History as Apocalypse," *Deconstruction and Theology*, ed. Carl A. Raschke (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1982) 154.

somewhere beyond language. It would capture all of reality by dissolving the difference between text and being.

Soap is precisely the beginning of this impossible project, though in fact Ponge might have begun anywhere. The poet understands what he is about.

Be sure, soap is only a pretext.  
Could you have ever thought otherwise?  
(52)

And why is soap the starting point of this project, the goal of which is infinitely distant? Because, as Ponge explains, ". . . there is much, almost infinitely much, to be said about soap . . ." (28).

Soap, then, serves as the pre-text—that which comes before the text and which underlies and gives rise to the beginning. Beginning with soap, Ponge hopes to construct a text that will generate itself indefinitely, that will speak beyond the author's act of speaking, that will become its own authority and encompass (conquer) in words all that is not itself. Soap marks the beginning of this impossible project. But, in this case, the pretext is pre-text to that which cannot begin. Indeed, the infinite text, if such a thing were possible, could have no pre-text. A pre-text is the concept that opens the text which, in its turn, escapes the pre-text to become something other. The pre-text, then, is outside the text, but the infinite text has nothing outside itself—it exhausts all possibilities, taking all that is external into itself. The pre-text establishes boundaries within which the text begins, but the infinite text has neither boundaries nor beginnings. The infinite text has always already begun.

Ponge's infinite text—impossible to complete—is impossible to begin. And so it begins again and again and again. In fact, *Soap* is only a series of beginnings, from the opening (?) page titled "Beginning of the Book" to the final (?) passages: "I am only at the beginning" (82). The text is a chain—an endless chain—of attempts to break in upon itself, to force entry into the seamless text that has neither beginning nor ending, that in fact has no points of entry precisely because there is nothing outside itself. *Soap* is always already the text it cannot begin to be.

Ponge must begin writing a text that cannot begin and that has already begun. And so he repeats himself:

You will be startled perhaps—as it is not very

usual in literature—by the frequent, the tedious repetitions which the present text contains.

(9)

Such repetitions—of phrases, sentences, whole paragraphs—seem to offer Ponge entry into a text that has already begun, for each repetition announces, indeed proves, that something identical has come before. To repeat is always to repeat the past, a past which already contains the future that repeats it. And in *Soap*, the past that Ponge repeats is, in part at least, the past of his own writing. Commenting on the author's repeated use of "etc." in the *Soap* text, translator Lane Dunlop explains:

It should be noted that when Ponge says 'etc.' he is often referring to, often quoting exactly from, some passage in earlier work.  
(47)

Ponge enters a pre-existing text by quoting himself, repeating himself, re-writing his own earlier texts word for word. In doing so, he collapses past, present, and future—the past writing, the present re-writing, the future possibilities of re-writing. By quoting himself, Ponge continues a text that has already begun but he does not enter a text that, at each point, has *always already begun*—that is infinite.

And yet it is the repetition within the text of *Soap* that generates the possibility of infinite repetition. Each of Ponge's "tedious repetitions" reflects other repetitions and is reflected by them in turn, like parallel mirrors reflecting each other to infinity. Each sentence, each phrase, each word contains the possibility of infinite repetition, for each can be repeated, can point forward to the repetition of itself and backward to that which it repeats. Even at the "beginning," even in the "first" word, the *Soap* text is repeating itself, re-writing itself.

*Soap* uses the same elements again and again in new contexts, extending itself while feeding on itself. One such element, "Prelude to Soap," begins:

For the toilet of the mind, a little piece of soap. Well-handled is enough. Where torrents of simple water would clean nothing. Nor silence. Nor your suicide in the darkest source, o absolute reader.

(28)

Though Ponge calls this section "Prelude,"

each phrase is already a repetition of phrases from earlier in the *Soap* text, and each is repeated in turn, doubling and re-doubling itself again and again. ("Well handled, we guarantee it is enough, where torrents of simple water would clean nothing, nor silence, nor your suicide in the darkest source, o absolute reader" [61].)

In its potentially infinite repetition, *Soap* multiplies itself by itself over and over. But *Soap* is also open-ended—potentially infinite because it can be extended indefinitely in any direction. Remember that Ponge added to the text year after year, tacking on new variations on the theme that were both additions and repetitions. Thus, in the dramatic version:

THE POET. For the toilet of the mind, a little piece of soap? . . .

FIRST CHIMNEYSWEEP. Well handled is enough . . . (The young CHIMNEYSWEEP is already under the pump, working it.)

FIRST PHILOSOPHER (pointing to the small boy). Where torrents of simple water . . .

SECOND CHIMNEYSWEEP (chasing the small boy). Would clean nothing . . .

THE ABSOLUTE READER (bent over the spring). Nor silence . . .

SECOND PHILOSOPHER. Nor your suicide in the darkest source, o Absolute Reader!

(35-36)

The texts within the text of *Soap* bear many titles—"Theme of Soap," "The Exercise of Soap," "Dry Soap Before Use," "The Spontaneous Confusion of Soap in Tranquil Water"—and each text extends *Soap* by re-writing, by repeating the others. Ponge could have added to *Soap* indefinitely. The five appendices at the "end" of the text indicate that a sixth appendix could have been added, and a seventh, an eighth, and a ninth.

*Soap* also goes beyond itself to incorporate other texts by other authors. In the early 1940s, Ponge sent the first *Soap* texts to his friend Albert Camus. Camus replied, and Ponge includes his letter in *Soap*. The Camus letter opens the text of *Soap* to any and every text. And, since Camus has contributed to Ponge's open text, so it would seem could any other writer. Even the present text extends and is absorbed into (and repeats again and again) the text of *Soap*.

Ponge's text is one of infinite repetition and yet infinite variety—an admitted attempt to exhaust

its simple subject by exhausting language, by reducing words to silence, to nothingness. Should the words disappear, the reality behind language would be unveiled, in particular the reality of soap which, like language, becomes real as it vanishes.

It is necessary—and it is enough, but necessary—to have in hand (in the mouth) something more material and perhaps less natural, something artificial and voluble, something which displays itself, develops, and which loses itself, uses itself up at the same time. Something which is very much like speech employed in certain conditions . . . .

. . . In a word: *a little piece of soap*.

(24)

For Ponge, soap and language share the same essential nature. But is this true? Can language, like soap, be used until it dissolves away? Can the text speak itself into silence, exhaust itself by being itself to infinity?

Language—written language—leaves a trace, not like the trace of soap left in standing water, but an indelible trace that remains and is repeated on page after page in volume after volume. How can Ponge force his text to go against itself, to speak itself into oblivion, to expand to infinity and to consume itself at the same time?

As the *Soap* text seems about to come to a tentative halt, Ponge makes an extraordinary request of his readers:

Now, be so kind (after having 'caught your breath' a minute) as to read again from its beginning the long text which precedes this. . . .

(93)

The text circles back to its infinitely distant beginning, only to return to this point—"how it does bite its tail in these last lines"—and begin again (97).

Ponge's text which already multiplies itself to infinity and opens itself to infinite addition tries to erase itself as well by becoming a perfect circle, by turning (its) back on itself, by turning itself inside out, like the snake oroborus that becomes a symbol for the infinite only by taking its tail in its own mouth and consuming itself. But the attempt to silence the text by closing it off fails. Instead, the text only re-repeats itself in total and does so indefinitely. Ponge contemplates

and realizes on the textual level the thought that Nietzsche dared to think on the metaphysical plane—the Eternal Return of the Same—a thought that eradicates time by collapsing infinity to a single moment. Ponge generates the Eternal Return of the Text in which the infinite is spoken by each word. If there is silence here, it is the silence of the Tibetan prayer wheel that, in turning, eternally repeats the same silent prayer again and again and again.

At this point, Ponge can abandon his text, for like the written text of a prayer wheel that has been set spinning, *Soap* can and will continue on its own. Having set his text spinning, Ponge's language can speak itself into being. This is a result Ponge has anticipated.

Thoughts and words and actions are neither controlled by nor obedient to man: they play themselves out.

(*Things* 13)

The *Soap* text plays itself out by addition and multiplication, by self-reflection, by circling back on itself, and by reaching beyond itself in the same movement. But does this text—can it—play itself to infinity? And if such an effort were possible, would even an infinite text speak itself out of existence and reveal the reality behind language? Could the infinite text—an actual infinity—transcend itself as text?

There is no way of knowing, for the infinite text has never been accomplished and never could be. Ponge's text holds out the promise of infinity and, paradoxically, the promise of silence, though it is neither infinite nor silent, for, as text, it cannot reach the silence that might remain once language has been exhausted. In his attempt to reach a theoretical reality in the silence beyond speech, in his attempt to conquer infinity, to realize the infinite text that would create itself and erase it-

self at every point, Ponge creates instead an arena of infinite contradiction, of infinite paradox and "the infinite ambiguities inherent in any work that aspires to 'nothingness.'"<sup>4</sup> And this is what Ponge wants: to generate first nothingness out of somethingness, then something (the reality of soap) out of nothing.

"But isn't this too much talk to say nothing?" Ponge asks (*Soap* 64). Indeed, *Soap* is not "nothingness." It is a text designed to be finished with soap ("One would never be through with soap" [38]). It is also a text designed to be finished with textuality, though it offers instead an unending questioning of texts by exposing the paradoxes inherent in any attempt to explain reality in words.

In the end, it is the author/reader, not the text of soap, that is exhausted in this slim volume which promises infinity and oblivion but which realizes neither. And what is gained in this strange encounter with the infinitely paradoxical language of soap?

One may . . . soon be done with it, yet this adventure, this brief encounter leaves you—this is what is sublime—with hands as clean as you've ever had . . . . And you will perceive, then, that the exercise of soap will have left you cleaner, purer and sweeter smelling than you were before. That it has changed you for the better, requalified you.

(22, 43)□

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<sup>4</sup>Lucy Lippard, *Ad Reinhardt* (New York: Harry Abrams, 1981) 146.

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Jan Newman

## BABIES ARE CRUEL PEOPLE

They expect me to live like this.

I climb these creaky old stairs every day as if I got good sense. At the beck and call of that old man. And me only twenty-seven years old. I got better things to do. So why aint I doing them? Good question.

I keep telling Steve things can't go on like this. I can't go on taking care of that old man day after day without help. It's been a month now since his last nurse and I don't care if old Grandad complained and cried about her. Let him. I didn't go get my GED to sit around the house admiring it. I got my own life to live.

"I know that, Callie," Steve says. "But this is his house and we owe him something for letting us live here for practically nothing all these years."

"Practically nothing? You call all the work, the cooking, the cleaning and picking up I've done nothing?"

"Callie, you know what I mean."

"No, I don't think I do."

"You know as well as I do there's times we wouldn't have made it except for living here and not paying rent."

So I'm supposed to die of gratitude? When I find my backbone, Steve Larkin, you watch out.

"I'm coming," I holler up the stairs as the ringing of that little tinkly bell keeps on and on. He knows it irritates me. That stupid bell. It's one of those that Steve's cousin, Modene, brought back from some tourist trap in Pensacola, Florida—and what wouldn't I give to spend a week there—and it's got a map of Florida painted in orange on the handle with a fat green star where Pensacola's suppose to be. Steve, God bless him, decided the old man needed it to call me with so to save his voice. Never mind my nerves.

When I get upstairs all he wants is attention. Pure attention. Fix his pillow. Bring him a drink. I grab the bell out of his hand and set it out of his reach on the chest of drawers.

He lies there in that old black metal bed day after day. I understand he gets lonely, but Jesus! I aint responsible for that. It aint my fault all his friends are dead and his daughter don't care enough to drive down from Houston to see him sometimes. It aint my responsibility to keep him

entertained. It shouldn't even be me and Steve who take care of the old man. We ought to put him in a nursing home. We ought to send him to his daughter. Steve says Grandad'd be miserable anywhere else but his own home. Well, what does he think I am? I'm not but twenty-seven. Me and Steve been married eleven years and never had nothing.

"Any mail?" Grandad wants to know. Plucks at those blankets like I've seen him pluck at a slice of bread before he stuffs the pieces in his mouth. I've seen pictures of him when he was Steve's age. They could be brothers. Now he's got no hair. He's all wrinkled and he smells like pee and old man. As clean as I try to keep him.

"Do you pee in your pants?" I came out and asked him once. He got real red and he threw the bell at me. But I swear he smells of it. Though I never found him wet or anything. Today I don't bother asking him, I just sneak a feel as I fix his covers.

"I'm dry," he snaps at me. "Damn you."

"Damn me, huh? I'd like to see where this family'd be if I got damned. Nobody to answer your pretty little bell."

"Steve. Steve'd take care of me. Better'n you."

"Yeah? Quit his job, huh?" By that time I'm just making conversation. But his old chin starts to quivering and his wet eyes get wetter. "Come on, Grandad. Don't do that now. Want me to bring you a Twinkie? How about a Twinkie? I got some last night"—because of course I can't get away to go shopping during the daytime—"and Rory didn't eat them all yet."

"Naw, I don't want nothing. Leave me alone."

"O.K." What can you do with somebody that holds a grudge?

Later I'm out back working in the garden. This garden I guess is my biggest comfort. I like nothing better than to watch how the okra fills itself out into a nice-sized pod. And the tomatoes balloon out and turn red-green. I got green peppers, purple hulls, cabbages, carrots and strawberries too, all in their season. Mrs. Beasley across the back fence says I got too much in too small a place. But she don't know. She's as old as Grandad. A tiny lady with yellow gray hair and nothing better to do than criticize me. Aint there

nothing but *old* people in the world?

Even our house is old. It's two stories and it used to be painted blue a thousand years ago. It sags like the old man's skin. It smells of pee no matter how many gallons of Lysol I use on the bathrooms. Steve says it don't smell like nothing, but he wouldn't smell his own if you rubbed his nose in it. The yard's no better either except for my garden. There's two giant oak trees in front of the house that would be O.K. except the city cut them back so they wouldn't get the power lines messed up. Now the poor trees look a lot like crazy people with one half of them all full and leafy and the front half bare showing naked stumpy branches. I feel ashamed for them.

Trees are determined things, though. Up at St. Thomas' on West Main. It's got this big old lot with all these live oak trees that somebody planted all in a row except—why, there's Steve. I wonder what he's doing home.

"Callie, what the hell's the matter with you?"

He surprises me so that it takes a minute to figure out he's jumping-up-and-down mad at me for something. He comes tearing out the back door still in his Shell uniform. He smells like grease and gasoline and that used to drive me crazy in the nicest way a thousand years ago.

I straighten up from sprinkling sevin dust around the garden. I don't even feel like smiling much at him anymore. Even when he's not mad.

"What'd you put the bell on the chest of drawers for where he can't reach it?"

"Oh that—"

"Oh that. He coulda broke his other hip trying to get it."

"Did he get up after it?" I'm a little worried. Then Steve says, "Naw, but he's been hollering for you for an hour."

"For heaven's sake! You didn't have to carry on like he really hurt himself, did you? Scared me half to death. Twenty minutes tops since I left him, Steve." I start to go inside.

Steve grabs my arm. "You don't put that bell where he can't reach it, Callie."

Well we've come to a sorry pass when my own husband will holler at me and manhandle me in our own back yard with old Miss Nosey Beasley probably got her hearing aid up full blast at her back door not twenty feet away and hell knows who else listening in. This neighborhood is full of old nosey people.

"You gonna let go my arm?" I ask him *real* polite.

He's got a nice face, Steve does, when he aint mad. His nose got broke once and healed

crooked, and he's too skinny for his own good. But his eyes are what you call hazel, big and round and soft. Was a time he could talk me into a lot with those eyes and his wide, full mouth. Now he looks so grim all the time. Sad and worried. Half the time I don't think he knows what he's worried about. Right now I have to remind myself not to say anything ugly to him. It's one thing to think it. But if I say it, it won't make anything better. Not really.

He lets go my arm.

"Thanks," I say. "I put the bell on the chest of drawers and forgot it there. He was fine last time I saw him. Twenty minutes tops. O.K.?"

"Just be more careful next time." He's already looking sorry but not ready to say it yet.

He ought to be sorry.

"What're you home for anyhow?" I give my arm a rub. Just once.

"I forgot my medicine," he says.

Steve's thirty. He has an ulcer. Would you believe it? So he goes in the house for the medicine. The screen door slams behind him.

"I don't know why I don't just leave you," I hiss after him. Boy, would he be sorry. I amuse myself for a few minutes imagining him trying to do all the things he expects me to do all the time. Then Steve pushes open the screen door and pokes his head around it. He's got his cap with the Shell symbol on. It covers up his bushy black hair that always looks like it needs a cut. "I'm going back to work now, Cal. Listen for Granddad, will you? He don't feel too good today."

"What time you coming home?" I ask.

"Not before eight."

So I got three hours more by myself to tend Granddad, get supper and keep up with Rory. Which reminds me. I go back in the house and fix a peanut butter and jelly sandwich and a glass of milk. If I don't Rory'll come in and grab a handful of candy and popsicles. If it's left up to him that boy's teeth'll rot out of his head or he'll die of malnutrition.

At 5:20 he comes in, running up the street—he never walks, not even in church—from his catechism lesson. He's got hair just like his dad's except it's light brown like mine. His eyes are small and plain brown like mine too. But his coloring otherwise is dark. Olive they call it. Not like mine which is very pale. Rory's stocky too like my side of the family. Sometimes I think old Granddad broke his hip because he had no meat to cushion himself on.

"Aw! I wanted a popsicle." Rory throws his books on the table and drops in the chair. You'd

swear I'd just told him he couldn't eat for a week.

"Hello to you too, son. After supper you can have a popsicle. Wash your hands first."

"I'm not hungry." He heads for the back door.

"Then put the milk up and wrap the sandwich for later."

He doesn't say anything but he sighs. Not as bad as it could be.

"Do you have any homework?"

"Nuh-uh."

"So what's your books for?"

"I don't know. I just brought 'em."

"Rory, if I find out later you have a test or something tomorrow—"

"I don't got no test, Mom. I'm going out to play."

"There goes the bell. Rory, go see what Granddad wants."

"Aw! Mom, why can't you go?"

"I *said* to see what your Granddad wants! Just do it for one time without no sass."

There. I've gone and lost my temper with him not five minutes after he's home. But dammit we sat down and *told* him. We *explained* to him that we'd need his help with Granddad after school. And he promised—listen to me. What're a ten-year-old's promises worth? Especially one who's a spoiled only child. We never had much money to give him things so we gave him a lot of freedom. I know it's hard to take it away from him now. But he has to learn he isn't the only person in the world.

I should've saved my temper. Rory's calling from upstairs that Granddad has to go to the bathroom. Rory can't help him with that and of course Granddad can't save it for Steve. No, he's always asleep when Steve's around. All Steve usually has to do is read the paper to him, listen to him complain, or help me change sheets. If that's all I had to do, I wouldn't hurry about a nurse either. Who bathes him because he has to have his bath at seven-thirty, an hour *after* Steve leaves for the station? Who lugs trays of food up and down the stairs because he cried so about moving his bedroom downstairs? Who empties urinals and half the time wipes off the soft, saggy old butt? I know well enough *who* does it, I just wish I knew *why*.

Rory's in a good mood after supper. His favorite tv show's not on yet because the president's making a speech on every channel. So Rory doesn't fuss about helping me clean the kitchen. It's quiet for a change. No noise from the

tv or upstairs. I don't even turn on the radio. It's so nice.

Rory decides to tell me he made a B on his math test today. "Miss Horne caught Eilene Stein cheating, so she took her paper and gave her an automatic F."

"She did? Well good. That oughta teach old Eilene."

"Yeah, she's all the time cheating. And Mom . . ." He just goes on and on chattering about his day. I feel something tight in me loosening up. By the time I give him a big hug and kiss for helping me, I feel almost human. He hugs me tight around the waist and it doesn't seem like he'll ever let go. Just wait till Steve comes in the back door, though. Then it'll be all Daddy, Daddy. He worships Steve.

Steve's a good man. I was barely sixteen when we met and fell in love. We met in the country on my daddy's farm. Steve came in from Pointe Sales to bale hay for a few days. I was sitting on the back steps with a bowl of Mama's homemade peach ice cream in my hands and legs sprawled all over the steps—I was wearing a pair of Bermuda shorts—and this tall boy with hay dust clinging all over him, sweating to beat hell, no shirt, torn jeans, no shoes, comes up and plops Daddy's water cooler at my feet, barely missing my left big toe. The cooler was still about a quarter full. I could tell by the watery clank the aluminum made.

"Your daddy sent me for some fresh." He didn't talk like no east Texas boy. Later I learned he was out of Oklahoma.

"What's it to me?" I said, knowing if Mama heard me she'd tell Dad and he'd whip me, sixteen or not. There was something about this boy's sweaty self that made me all prickly and ornery and sweet inside. I wanted him to look at me. Look at me. And like what he saw. Without for a minute thinking he could have it.

I guess I should've given up being such a good Catholic girl about that time. I guess that once I knew he saw what I wanted him to I should've given in, had a rip roaring affair with Steve, then let him go on. I think we'd've both been happier. But I'd never had a regular boyfriend and none who ever made me feel like this. So I called it love and wouldn't listen to nobody. Even Steve. He took me to the show one night except it wasn't the show, it was a lonely little lane in the woods about a mile out of town. And he started on me.

And I fought both of us. Him and me and that feeling between us. Because I might've been stu-

pid. But I wasn't dumb enough to think he'd marry me after. Mama said they never did unless they got you in trouble. Then they threw it at you for the rest of your life. I believed her. Talk about dumb.

Yeah, if I had it to do over, I'd've taken that sweet feeling and drank every drop I could. I would've believed Steve when he said he wouldn't get me in trouble. And I would've learned in time that I wanted more out of life than just taking care of his grandfather and his smart-aleck kid.

But I didn't learn in time, so we got married the Christmas after we met. It seems to me that no time at all after that Rory was born crying. He aint ever stopped since. I was so happy about the baby. I felt proud and so did Steve. Look what we did. As if it was something new. It was new to us. So barely a year after we got married there was Rory and we were pleased right up to the time it finally hit us he wasn't going to stop crying, puking, never sleeping and getting constantly sick with ear, nose and throat infections. Whatever he wanted from me, he never got enough of. I never rocked him long enough. I never gave him enough attention, cuddling, playing. Nothing ever pleased him. Not his food, not his bed, not his playpen. Not being held, not being put down.

Nobody ever told me babies are cruel people. Or that you could love a baby and hate it at the same time until Rory's pediatrician and I had a talk one day. The way that happened was I'd gone several days without much sleep when Rory had one of his sick spells. When I brought him in for a check-up, Dr. Davis told me he needed his tonsils out. That was just too much for me. I started crying like a wild woman and I couldn't stop myself. Dr. Davis was so nice. She was this short, fat woman with piggy eyes and thin blonde hair. But she had a soft soothing voice and more patience than I ever saw in anybody before. No use to say, we'd gotten pretty well acquainted since Rory was her patient. She quieted him down then gave him to a nurse to take away and feed or something. Then she sort of ignored her other patients and while they fussed and bawled and whined in the other rooms waiting for her, she listened to me fuss and bawl and whine. I told her about how the baby was always sick and I never got any rest and Steve wasn't no help.

"Even my mamma," I said. "It seems like she turned against me. I can't say a thing about how tired I am and how much trouble Rory is to me. She feels so sorry for him, but she says this is the

life I chose and it's no use complaining about it now."

"Well, I'm sure your mother means well," said Dr. Davis, "but this isn't really the life you chose, is it? You fell in love and got married and you had a whole different idea of what it would be like. This isn't it, is it?"

"No, ma'am." Then I felt like I had to explain. "But Dr. Davis, I do love Steve and Rory. I really do."

"That's good," she said. "Sometimes we just need to get away from even those people we love most. Can you send Rory to stay with a relative for a day or two so you can get some rest? Or is there anyone to help you out sometimes during the day?"

I shook my head and felt like the world was closing in. "I'm the only one Rory's got."

"No, Callie," she said. "Rory has a father too." She looked at me thoughtfully for a while. "Callie, get out of the house and away from Rory at least a few hours during the week. Let Steve take care of him. You go out. Take a walk. Go to a movie. Go sit in the park and watch the trees grow. Go get a hamburger with a girlfriend."

I left Dr. Davis' office feeling better. But at home I started worrying about what I'd say to Steve and how he'd take it. All through the afternoon I rehearsed what I'd say when he came home.

*Steve, I'd say, I was talking to Dr. Davis today—no, no, that wouldn't do it. What about—Steve, I took the baby to the doctor today and she said he was doing O.K., but I looked sort of tired. So I said I sure was, what with being up with Rory all the time—no, that would make Steve look bad.*

I went on and on for an hour or so, but I figured out there was no way I could put it so Steve would like my having spilled my guts to Dr. Davis. He'd take it personally that his wife had to confide in an outsider, especially if he thought I'd complained about him. No need to say that by the time he came home I was a nervous wreck. He kissed me and smiled at me kind of funny. "You O.K., Cal?"

"Fine. Fine. I'm O.K. The baby's O.K."

"Great, so what's for supper?"

Of course I'd fixed his favorite meal—chicken and candied yams and a green bean salad. Suddenly, just as Steve opened a beer and went to take a shower, it hit me. And I almost fainted with relief. I didn't have to tell Steve anything about Dr. Davis. I need never tell I'd said a word to her. That made everything lots easier, I thought.

So at supper I said, "Steve, I'm pretty tired of

being stuck in the house all the time."

"Yeah, I know how you feel," he said. "I get awful tired of working all the time. Seems like I never get a chance to get my breath. Damn, I'm so tired now I can hardly eat." He was too. When I took a good look at his face I saw he was done in. "And this sure is good, honey." He squeezed my hand. "We just gotta do what we gotta do. That's all." He managed to pick up another forkful of potatoes.

"You're right, I guess," was all I had left to say on the subject.

Steve stayed pretty busy at the station, especially after he became manager. Some days he'd come home looking like he didn't know where he'd been or where he was going. It wasn't that he was a workaholic, but it's hard to get good help at a gas station. He was always worrying those high school boys he hired would rob him if he left them alone. At home he'd try to relax but Rory was usually demanding his attention or carrying on so that Steve had hardly a chance to read the paper. I felt sorry for him. I tried to keep Rory out of his way sometimes. We lived in such a small place though that there was no place to go to get away from the baby except out. I felt selfish for the time I took to myself. But somewhere along the line Steve stopped complaining about all of it and coming to me for comfort. So I felt like I had to be as strong as he was and do the same. We both did what we had to do, just like he said.

As time went on, Rory stopped being as sick and he slept more. Once he got potty trained he was easier to take places. We got by. It was still hard. Sometimes I wanted to leave and never come back. That always made me feel guilty. But I stuck it out. I adjusted. When we had a good spell—meaning Rory was sleeping and not crying too much about every little thing and he wasn't sick—Steve and I sat on the couch holding hands and talking about how things would be when the baby was old enough to really be nice to have around. And we could go more places, have more money. It wasn't the same eager, excited dreaming and planning we'd done before, but I figured we were growing up at last and when you're all grown up you never get *real* eager and excited about much anymore.

It went on like that for almost six years. We talked off and on about having another baby and Steve was more for it than me. But we both said we couldn't afford it anyway. Besides, if we had another one like Rory—it didn't seem worth

thinking about!

Then Steve got the idea of us moving in with Grandad. It didn't sound like such a bad idea to me. The old man needed a housekeeper. We needed a bigger place to stay. I wasn't crazy about the house and there weren't many kids for Rory to play with. Still, it gave us more room, more money and it worked out O.K.

Rory started school. Grandad was kind of grumpy, but I did his things the way he wanted and he taught me how to do in the garden. When Rory got on his nerves I'd send him to the playground at St. Thomas' or just let the old man lock himself up in his room. Shoot, I could only do so much with the kid.

I sort of wanted to get a job. I clerked sometimes at Young's Curb Mart if they'd give me some hours when Rory was in school. I didn't like it much but it got me out of the house. Steve complained that I was getting paid by Grandad's pension to keep house, so what'd I need to clerk in a store for? You got to explain *everything* to Steve, with color pictures. No imagination. I stuck it out, though it's hard to go against the wishes of somebody you got to live with. I also started studying for my GED. I have to admit, Steve was proud of me for that.

What can I say? It was too good to last. Grandad had to break his hip and go senile in one swoop. I used to waste time wondering if I'd still feel this—this caught if things had worked out better. If things could've gone on like they had been. I'll never know.

"Things're quiet tonight," says Steve when he comes in at eight-fifteen.

I just roll my eyes and go back to my magazine. Steve presses his mouth on the back of my neck and slips a hand in my blouse. He has to wait until I'm too tired. Why can't he ever be home early when that might do some good? Can't he see I'm too tired? Doesn't he ever get too tired? And he can be such a baby when I say no.

"Dad. Come 'ere."

So Steve goes to see what Rory wants.

"You want some supper?" I holler after him.

"No. I got a chicken basket at six. Thanks, hon."

Good. I tuck my magazine under my arm, turn out the light in the kitchen and climb the stairs. I look in on Grandad. He's asleep, grimacing at something in his dreams, I guess. Or maybe his hip hurts him some. His hard old discolored hands twitch on the covers. They make me want to cry. They're going soft now. I remember them

just last year in spring, how they used to take little green tomato and pepper seedlings and put them so gently in a hole in the garden then cover up the roots. Like they was babies. Or even younger. Unborn things that need care or something horrible would happen to them.

I remember that now. It makes me cry. I stand there looking at him sleeping just like I used to look at Rory sleeping. It's easy to pity and love them when they're asleep. There's no trick to that. You see their weakness and helplessness then. They aren't demanding things you'll never be able to give. Sweet Jesus, why isn't it one fourth as easy—just one fourth as easy when they're awake? I look out the window at the garden I planted by myself this year but there's no answer there.

Oh Steve, why has it always been a matter of me learning something first then telling you? The old man's got to be put in a nursing home at least until he can get around again. Or he's got to get a nurse. I'm sorry, but he don't get the proper care from me. He knows I hate him. Like Rory knew when he was a baby. Why do you think they both want you all the time, even when it's me who does all the real things for them? It's no good, Steve. I guess it would be nice to be Superwoman and Supernurse and Supermom and

still have something left over for you.

How would you feel if you knew I wanted to be free, really free, of all of you?

I hear Steve putting Rory to bed. He forgets my night-night kiss. I turn out the lamp quickly and when Steve comes into our room he goes quietly to get his drawers and pj's for a bath. Then later he comes to bed quietly too. He sort of brushes my back with his fingers. Soft. He sighs once, shifts around a little, then he goes to sleep, snoring lightly.

It's a quiet night in our quiet neighborhood. There's only a dog barking a few blocks away. Light from the corner street lamp leaks around the window blind and over the top of the curtains. I'm so tired that I think I might sleep myself.

Lying here, I think about the trees at St. Thomas' again. St. Thomas, the doubter. The trees in his churchyard can't grow straight. Somebody planted them too close together so they got to bend and twist around each other. Because, like everybody else I guess, they'd rather fight for the light than give up. I don't know what that means, but I'm crying again. I don't even try to stop.□

Michael Vannoy Adams

## PSYCHOANALYTIC CRITICISM AND THE ARBITRARINESS OF INTERPRETATION

In 1957 William Phillips, one of the founders of *Partisan Review*, edited a collection of essays in psychoanalytic criticism. The contributions that Phillips chose to include in *Art and Psychoanalysis* were representative, at the time, of the very best theoretical and practical essays of the kind.<sup>1</sup> Mere mention of the names of some of the contributors confirms the scope and quality of the selections. Among the analysts were Freud, Erich Fromm, Ernest Jones, Theodore Reik, Ernst Kris, Otto Rank, Géza Róheim, and Franz Alexander; among the critics, William Empson, Simon O. Lesser, Thomas Mann, William Barrett, Kenneth Burke, Leslie Fiedler, Stanley Edgar Hyman, Lionel Trilling, and Edmund Wilson. A more formidable array, a more impressive display, of analytic and critical acumen would have been difficult to imagine. *Art and Psychoanalysis* remained for many years the most convenient, the most comprehensive—in a word, the most intelligent—collection of essays in psychoanalytic criticism.

Recently, Phillips has collaborated with Edith Kurzweil, now the executive editor of *Partisan Review*, on what would appear—to anyone unfamiliar with the collection of essays that Phillips compiled almost thirty years ago—to be a brand new book, *Literature and Psychoanalysis*.<sup>2</sup> For the most part, it is a new book. Both *Art and Psychoanalysis* and *Literature and Psychoanalysis* contain twenty-six essays, but only seven of the selections are the same. In another sense, however, the new book is simply a rather extensive revision of the old one. Curiously enough, Phillips and Kurzweil never so much as footnote that fact—a fact that merits mention if for no other reason than that it situates the new book in his-

torical context and provides a comparative perspective from which to evaluate it.

Phillips' introduction to the old book bears the subtitle "Art and Neurosis." This is both an acknowledgment of the influence of Trilling's justifiably famous essay by the same name (which, incidentally, is also included in the new book) and an indication of the sort of questions that psychoanalytic criticism asked and tried to answer at the time. The issue that dominated what Phillips now identifies as the first phase of psychoanalytic criticism was the precise nature of the relationship between the presumably neurotic author and the literary work. At a time when the New Criticism was emphasizing the "text itself" in splendid isolation from any context, biographical or otherwise, and trying not to commit the "intentional fallacy," psychoanalytic criticism was inferring a context (or as Jung called it, a "complex") of unconscious intentions, or ulterior motives, and interpreting the text in terms of it. The method was psychobiographical or, as Freud preferred to call it, pathographical. In short, the explicit purpose of psychoanalytic criticism was to specify the exact relationship between life and art.

Most psychoanalytic criticism at the time was speculative rather than scientific by any stretch of the imagination. But at least the intent was to produce interpretations that were, if not exhaustive, as accurate as humanly possible. The assumption was that a literary work was like a dream, and that the explication of a text was like the interpretation of a dream. Today, when so much psychoanalytic criticism derives inspiration from the work of the French analyst Jacques Lacan, in the name of a "return to the real Freud," it is apparently easy to forget—one might say "repress"—one of the most cogent reasons why psychoanalysis originally excited such enthusiasm. It was not simply that psychoanalysis emphasized sexuality and appealed to certain prurient interests, nor was it merely that psychoanalysis promised a cure for certain complaints. It was that Freud claimed that he had discovered a method of interpretation by which,

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<sup>1</sup>Criterion Books, 1957.

<sup>2</sup>Columbia University Press, 1983, 403 pages. This book should not be confused with another recent collection of essays by the same title, *Literature and Psychoanalysis: The Question of Reading: Otherwise*, ed. Shoshana Felman, originally published as a double issue of *Yale French Studies* 55/56, and then published as a book by the Johns Hopkins University Press in 1982.

at least in principle, the unconscious meaning of any dream could be objectively determined.

Before long, Freud began to apply this method not only to dreams but also to other kinds of texts, including literary ones, on an analogy between dreaming, daydreaming, and creative writing. In time, the method became an established approach in the practice of literary criticism. Psychoanalytic critics interpreted texts by associating recurrent images and themes with what they argued was evidence of unconscious conflict in the lives of authors. In doing so, they implicitly accepted Freud's assertion that, like dreams, literary works exhibit in disguised and sublimated form the repressed desires and fears of authors, that such texts have hidden meanings, and that these meanings can be objectively determined, or proven to be true by an appeal to evidence of a biographical nature.

What was truly novel about Freud's method of dream interpretation was his insistence that, in the final analysis, it was not the analyst but the dreamer who was responsible for interpreting the dream, for only the dreamer was in a position to supply the free associations necessary to an accurate interpretation. It was, after all, the dreamer's dream. The dreamer was the author of the text, and, according to Freud, only he could say what he had meant, or what he had had in mind.

When it came to interpreting literary works, however, psychoanalytic critics, including Freud himself, disregarded what was most original and persuasive about the psychoanalytic method. They never, or hardly ever, took the trouble—and the risk—of asking living authors what free associations they had to the works they had written. Instead, they "psychoanalyzed" the works of authors who were conveniently dead and buried—most of whom no doubt rolled over in their graves at the result. As early as 1933 Bernard DeVoto said all there was to say on the subject:

The method cannot make mistakes: it is, in literary hands, infallible. You have what the dead man wrote, what it is said he said, and what some people have said about him. Your method dissolves all doubts, settles all contradictions, and projects the known or guessed into absolute certainty about the unknowable. . . . Psychoanalysis cannot come into effective relationship, into any relationship, with a dead man.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>"The Skeptical Biographer," *Harper's Magazine*, Jan. 1933: 181-192.

In short, psychoanalytic critics violated the first principle of the psychoanalytic method, which was to ask the dreamer—or in this case the author—what free associations he had to the text, and to refrain from imposing an interpretation *ex cathedra*.

Lacking the associations that a living author might have supplied, had he been asked, the critics themselves associated, all too freely, to the literary work—with the consequence that the "interpretations" they produced often revealed more of psychoanalytic interest about themselves than about the author they pretended to analyze. That many of these interpretations were conjectural in the extreme said more, of course, about the uncritical attitude of the critics than about any intrinsic deficiency in the method itself, properly applied. The fact is that the critics never bothered to put the method—and Freud's analogy between dreaming, daydreaming, and creative writing—to a real test.

In the introduction to *Literature and Psychoanalysis* Phillips notes that psychoanalytic criticism has now entered a second phase, which he correctly categorizes as "the French appropriation of Freud and its application to the domain of literature." When Phillips calls this development a "new ideological enterprise," he evokes, deliberately or not, Frederick Crews' recent repudiation of psychoanalytic criticism and indeed of psychoanalysis itself.<sup>4</sup> And when Phillips admits that he personally finds it "difficult to pin down the meaning" of this phenomenon, he is unintentionally ironic—for the problem that preoccupies psychoanalytic criticism and literary criticism in general today is whether it is merely difficult, whether it is utterly impossible, or, if possible, whether it is even desirable to "pin down" *any* meaning of *any* text.

Phillips remarks that contemporary psychoanalytic criticism actively encourages "the free exercise of the imagination on the part of the interpreter"—in other words, the license to be as whimsical or capricious, as subjective, as one pleases. In a phrase reminiscent of Trotsky's notion of a permanent revolution, he observes that this position apparently entails "a permanent revision of meanings." Phillips is uncomfortable with this attitude toward the text, for he recognizes what the implications are: no ostensible difference between an interpretation and a misinterpretation, only an excess of ever more ingenious reinterpretations.

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<sup>4</sup>"Analysis Terminable," *Commentary*, July 1980: 25-34.

In an attempt to rectify the situation Phillips emphasizes not the imagination but the competence of the interpreter. Unfortunately, he never specifies the criteria by which one might recognize the competent, let alone the proficient, interpreter. He merely declares that such an interpreter exists—at least as an ideal. (To identify the competent interpreter would, of course, reinvolve critics in a serious effort to define what constitutes a logically structured, sincerely asserted argument based on evidence amassed to prove beyond a reasonable doubt the truth of a proposition—and this is hardly the sort of problem that engages the interest of contemporary critics, many of whom care not a whit for argument except as a purely rhetorical exercise.)

Phillips also invokes Stanley Fish's notion of "interpretive communities" in order to allay any apprehension that the word "meaning" now means everything and nothing. But in doing so, he presumes that such communities are made up of competent interpreters, or "informed readers." And on this point Phillips himself is either an uninformed or a misinformed reader, for Fish claims merely that readers who belong to one interpretive community or another are "skilled" only in the sense that they have been educated (or persuaded) to accept the assumptions that that particular community just happens to share. In short, the notion of interpretive communities evades the issue of whether an interpretation is subjective or objective. (Although when Fish says, "Interpretation is not the art of construing but the art of constructing," he would seem to suggest that all interpretations are subjective, he says elsewhere that the controversy is specious and irrelevant.)<sup>5</sup> Rather than solve the problem, Fish simply displaces it from the individual onto what is in effect an interest group, the members of which interpret texts in accord with certain intersubjective values. (Incidentally, the notion of interpretive communities appears to be a revelation only to critics ignorant of the philosophy of science. As long ago as 1946, in *Science, Faith and Society*, Michael Polanyi discussed the subject with a sophistication that should embarrass literary critics who imagine that they have suddenly discovered a new idea.)

In spite of what Phillips asserts to the contrary, the fact remains that the question of the arbitrariness of interpretation—is all interpretation arbitrary, must it be, should it be?—has not

been satisfactorily answered. Phillips is right to remark that the question arises in part as a result of French influence. But the account that he furnishes of this phenomenon is perfunctory and impressionistic. Before one presumes to judge, one should master the subject, and in this instance Phillips displays only the most superficial knowledge of contemporary French criticism, psychoanalytic or otherwise. For example, he implies that Jacques Lacan, Jacques Derrida, and Tzvetan Todorov have virtually the same attitude toward the interpretation of texts, and this is simply untrue. Although they all practice psychoanalytic criticism to one extent or another, the methods they employ are very different. For Lacan, the method is a combination of structuralism and semiotics; for Derrida, it is deconstruction; for Todorov, it is rather traditional scholarly research in symbology.<sup>6</sup>

"Lacan, of course, is central," Phillips says. (If so, one wonders why Phillips and Kurzweil have not included even one contribution from him in the new book.) According to Phillips, the approach that Lacan adopts to the text is a willful form of free association that perverts the original aim of Freud. Lacan indulges in "ideological fantasies as he reinterprets and co-authors the text." To read a text is, in effect, to rewrite it. Although Lacan advocates a return to the real Freud (a project that might seem to suggest that an objective interpretation of Freud is both possible and desirable), Lacan has promoted a variety of psychoanalytic criticism that Phillips maintains "is almost a reversal of the intentions of Freud and the early analysts."

In one sense, this is an accurate version of events. In contrast to Freud, Lacan does not employ the psychobiographical method to interpret texts; he does not interpret literary works in terms of a putative neurosis on the part of the author. But in another sense, Lacan is merely doing what most psychoanalytic critics, of whatever persuasion, have done all along—and this is to free associate to the text. The difference is that Lacan does it on purpose and assumes responsibility as "co-author" of the text, while earlier critics erroneously imagined that they knew as well—or better—than the actual author of the text what his real, unconscious intentions were and were empathetic enough to free associate in his stead or on his behalf.

<sup>5</sup>*Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Harvard University Press, 1980) 327.

<sup>6</sup>See, for example, the chapter "Freud's Rhetoric and Symbolics" in Todorov's *Theories of the Symbol*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cornell University Press, 1982).

One should also take into account the analytic (rather than critical) function of the essays that Lacan has published. He originally delivered them as lectures in the context of "seminars" that he conducted for French analysts. These presentations were not addressed, as such, to literary critics; they were meant as practical demonstrations of how (to quote Lacan) "the unconscious is structured like a language" and of how this language is overdetermined, or literally *riddled*, with puns and other rhetorical figures such as metaphor and metonymy. Lacan is not known for clarity of expression, but neither is the unconscious—and this is precisely the point. In this respect, Lacan has performed a valuable service that Phillips and others have yet to appreciate properly. The stylistic confusion that Phillips finds "incomprehensible" in the literary critics who imitate Lacan is, for Lacan, a device to exercise the wit of analysts who have to contend with dreams and other "difficult" texts and try to render them intelligible. Thus what Lacan means by a return to the real Freud is a return to what he regards as the most important contribution Freud made, whether Freud realized it or not: that the analytic problem is fundamentally a linguistic one—a matter of understanding and more often misunderstanding the expressions that the unconscious employs simultaneously to conceal and reveal what it means.

The influence of Derrida is another matter. Phillips evidently does not have a very definite idea of what Derrida means by the word "deconstruction," for when Phillips uses it, he does so in the most indiscriminating manner. As Phillips defines the term, deconstruction is only another word for reinterpretation, "for taking apart and recreating philosophical ideas, literary works, and historical events." This definition only perpetuates the erroneous notion that Derrida is an irresponsible proponent of willfully subjective interpretations, and this is simply not the case.

Although Derrida is neither an analyst nor a literary critic but a philosopher, he has (as I have observed elsewhere) criticized the "art and neurosis" phase of psychoanalytic criticism:

In this regard, Jacques Derrida says, "The reading of the literary 'symptom' is most banal, most academic, most naive. And once one has thus blinded oneself to the very tissue of the 'symptom,' to its proper texture, one cheerfully exceeds it toward a psycho-

biographical signified whose link with the literary signifier then becomes perfectly extrinsic and contingent." In other words, Derrida takes exception to the conventional psychoanalytic assumption that an author's work (the literary signifier) is necessarily symptomatic to his life (the psychobiographical signified). Derrida does not deny that a psychological relationship exists between an author's work and his life, but, by the same token, he does not believe that this relationship is a simple matter, either in theory or in practice. What Derrida objects to is the facile reduction of an author's work to a "syndrome" and his life to a "complex," the former merely a function of the latter.<sup>7</sup>

Like Lacan, Derrida does not apply the psychobiographical method to texts, but there the similarity ends, for Lacan does not, as Phillips implies, practice deconstruction.

To deconstruct a text is not to reinterpret it—or to free associate to it. It is to expose to scrutiny certain metaphysical (usually positivistic) assumptions that sustain the activity of interpretation. According to Derrida, no interpretation can justifiably claim to be exhaustive, or definitive. (This need not mean, of course, that no interpretation can be "objective"; it merely means that none can be "complete.") Derrida argues that all interpretations are "always already" selectively partial. Inevitably, an interpretation excludes from consideration certain factors that, from another, perhaps equally valid perspective or in a more comprehensive context, would alter the "truth" of the interpretation. In effect, Derrida's "incompleteness principle" resembles Gödel's theorem, which posits an infinite regress of interpretations and which, in the philosophy of science, occupies a position of irrefutable respectability. At least in this regard, deconstruction should neither perplex nor offend anyone familiar with the history of philosophy in the twentieth century. In short, Derrida is much more conventional than most critics, including Phillips, realize.

That some critics have misunderstood what Lacan and Derrida have done, and why they have done it, and used it as a convenient excuse to produce interpretations that are not only deliberately arbitrary but also so baroque as to frus-

<sup>7</sup>"Pathography, Hawthorne, and the History of Psychological Ideas," *ESQ: A Journal of the American Renaissance*, 3rd Quarter 1983: 113.

trate any sincere attempt to understand them, is, of course, no reason to accuse Lacan and Derrida of irresponsibility. If anyone is to blame, it is those critics who have renounced any effort at an argument based on clear and distinct ideas and articulated in the plain style. The unease that Phillips expresses in regard to recent developments in psychoanalytic criticism (he admits that they are, at least to him, "unforeseen and bewildering") seems for the most part to be a reaction to the obscurantism characteristic of much contemporary criticism in general.

Phillips yearns for a time when psychoanalytic criticism was not so complex. The interpretations of contemporary critics leave him, he confesses, "helplessly nostalgic for Freud's own simpler observations." In this respect, he says that "the original aims have been sidetracked, when not completely transformed," and doubts whether "either literature or psychoanalysis has been advanced or illuminated in the process." The adjectives that Phillips uses to describe interpretations that imitate the stylistic excesses of Lacan and Derrida are hardly complimentary. He calls them "esoteric," "idiosyncratic," and "captious." But if Phillips really feels this way, and no doubt he does, one wonders why he and Kurzweil ever bothered to revise the old book and to include in the new one a section with the title of "The French Connection," which comprises examples of the very sort of criticism that Phillips evidently finds so objectionably arcane, eccentric, and sophisticated—and so remote from Freud's original intentions.

As for Freud's original intentions, they are quite obvious—if too commonsensical to excite the interest of critics who prefer extravagance to mere intelligence. A return to the real Freud entails more than a recognition of the important contribution he made to linguistics. It also requires an appreciation of the contribution he made to hermeneutics, the science of interpretation. Freud was perfectly conscious of the issue that preoccupies contemporary psychoanalytic criticism: the arbitrariness of interpretation. He made every effort to counter the suggestion that an interpretation was simply a conceit, or projection, on the part of the analyst—hence the emphasis he placed on the free associations of the dreamer, the real interpreter of the dream.

In this regard, it is actually not quite accurate to say that Freud's method of interpretation invariably relied on the dreamer's free associations. Freud admitted one exception to the rule. According to Freud, although free association

was always desirable, sometimes it was futile and inefficacious. In particular, it was often of little or no use when trying to interpret symbols—by which Freud meant images that have a typical (Jung would have said "archetypal") meaning. What Freud had to say on this subject bears quoting at length:

As a rule the technique of interpreting according to the dreamer's free associations leaves us in the lurch when we come to the symbolic elements in the dream-content. Regard for scientific criticism forbids our returning to the arbitrary judgement of the dream-interpreter . . . We are thus obliged, in dealing with those elements of the dream-content which must be recognized as symbolic, to adopt a combined technique, which on the one hand rests on the dreamer's associations, and on the other hand fills the gaps from the interpreter's knowledge of symbols. We must combine a critical caution in resolving symbols with a careful study of them in dreams which afford particularly clear instances of their use, in order to disarm any charge of arbitrariness in dream-interpretation.<sup>8</sup>

A particular interpretation might be arbitrary, but it did not *have* to be—if the analyst was conscientious, meticulous, and prudent enough. Freud would never have countenanced what is virtually a commonplace of contemporary criticism: that, like it or not, all interpretations are arbitrary and bound to be so. He would have been appalled at the very idea, and properly so.

Actually, the notion that all interpretations are arbitrary is in part the product of an arbitrary (that is, erroneous) interpretation on the part of many contemporary critics who have an interest in semiotics. Semiotics is the science of signification, of how images (signifiers) are related to concepts (signifieds)—and ultimately to objects. Ferdinand de Saussure, who along with Charles Sanders Peirce originally defined the subject of semiotics, argued that the selection of an image to represent a concept (and in turn the object to which it finally refers) is initially an arbitrary decision. (The famous example is that a tree, as both object and concept, is a "tree" only to those who just happen to speak English; to those who speak French, a tree is, arbitrarily, an "arbre.") *Initially*

<sup>8</sup>The *Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), *Standard Edition*, trans. James Strachey (Hogarth Press, 1953) IV: 353.

is the key word, for Saussure also observed that once a culture has made this arbitrary choice of an image, it eventually employs the image as a conventional device to convey meaning. In other words, only in the very beginning is the relationship between image, concept, and object strictly arbitrary; in the end, it is conventional—and “conventional” does not mean “arbitrary,” it means “customary” or “habitual.”

What many critics also fail to do is to distinguish between semiotics and hermeneutics, between signification and interpretation. Semiotics describes how meanings are expressed; hermeneutics, how they are understood or, it may be, misunderstood.<sup>9</sup> For example, the selection of images that a dreamer makes unconsciously in an attempt to express a meaning may be conventional, or the choice may be entirely arbitrary. *But this fact has absolutely no bearing on whether the interpretation of these images is arbitrary or not.* That all depends on whether the interpreter has understood the unconscious intention of the dreamer. If the interpreter is able, on the basis both of the knowledge he has acquired of symbols and the associations the dreamer has spontaneously produced, to determine the principle of selection (however arbitrary it may be) that the dreamer has employed, if he is able to determine *why* the dreamer has chosen just these images and no others, he is then in a position to assert with conviction that the interpretation is objective. Inasmuch as analysts subscribe to this method they belong to a community of competent interpreters.

The problem of arbitrariness does not derive, as Phillips suggests, “from conceiving of criticism—and therefore psychoanalytic criticism—principally as interpretation.” Quite to the contrary, the problem exists because critics use the word “interpretation” in the most indiscriminate way to refer to all kinds of critical methods that have nothing to do with interpretation as Freud defines the activity. Phillips is quite right to say that “interpretation is only one of the functions of criticism,” but when he adds, “particularly when it leads to over-interpretation,” he misuses a technical term in a pejorative sense. By “over-interpretation” (which, incidentally, does not mean the same as “over-determination”),

Freud did not mean, as Phillips implies, an excess of perfectly superfluous, presumably subjective interpretations. He meant simply that a text may have more than one equally valid interpretation. The difficulty with contemporary psychoanalytic criticism is not merely that critics have adopted what Phillips calls “a new linguistic-psychoanalytic method and terminology that complicates simple questions and creates an aura of discovery around things that are known.” It is that, in the process, they have abandoned the principles that enable critics as well as analysts to interpret the unknown, which is, in this case, the unconscious. These critics have not returned to the real Freud, they have turned away from him and the method that originally made psychoanalytic criticism seem credible.

To deal adequately with the theoretical and practical issues that Phillips raises, *Literature and Psychoanalysis* would have to have a very different table of contents. For example, it is inexcusable that the section on early psychoanalytic theory, which includes Freud’s “Creative Writers and Daydreaming,” does not also include Jung’s “Psychology and Literature” and “On the Relation of Analytical Psychology to Poetry.” That many contemporary critics are contemptuous of Jung, ignorantly so, because they have never bothered to read him, is no reason to pretend, as Phillips and Kurzweil do, that Jung never existed or criticized Freud (and rightly so) for being too reductive in interpreting literary works simply as substitute gratifications, in accord with the “art and neurosis” model. By arbitrarily excluding Jung and Jungian critics from the new book, Phillips and Kurzweil perpetuate what is, in effect, a cult of personality and a conspiracy of silence that regards the only true psychoanalytic critics as Freudian ones. In contrast, the old book *Art and Psychoanalysis* at least included two essays in Jungian criticism—Stanley Edgar Hyman’s “Maud Bodkin and Psychological Criticism” and Leslie Fiedler’s “Archetype and Signature.” Phillips and Kurzweil seem to be utterly unfamiliar with the work of such Jungian analysts as James Hillman, Patricia Berry, and Paul Kugler, whose *The Alchemy of Discourse: An Archetypal Approach to Language* is a recent, important Jungian attempt to address the very issues that interest Lacanian analysts and critics.<sup>10</sup>

On the subject of “art and neurosis,” it would have made sense to include in the new book a section that dealt exclusively with the question.

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<sup>9</sup>On hermeneutics and psychoanalysis, see Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, trans. Denis Savage (Yale University Press, 1970) and Jurgen Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests*, trans. Jeremy J. Shapiro (Beacon Press, 1972).

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<sup>10</sup>Bucknell University Press, 1982.

Phillips and Kurzweil do include two essays on the problem—William Barrett's "Writers and Madness" and Trilling's "Art and Neurosis"—but one wonders why they decided not to include Edmund Wilson's "Philoctetes: The Wound and the Bow" (which Phillips included in the old book) and what is a direct response to Trilling's essays on Freud, the chapter "Art and Eros" from Norman O. Brown's *Life against Death: The Psychoanalytical Meaning of History*. Such a section would have emphasized the difference between earlier and later psychoanalytic criticism.

Why, indeed, since the new book contains a section on early psychoanalytic theory, does it not also contain a section on recent theories, if Phillips believes, as he says he does, that these developments deserve so much attention? One would expect such a section to include not only examples of French theory like Lacan's "The Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious or Reason since Freud" but also contributions to the theory of identity—perhaps the chapter "The Life Cycle: Epigenesis of Identity" from Erik Erikson's *Identity: Youth and Crisis* and Norman Holland's "Unity Identity Text Self."

A section specifically on art and psychoanalysis would also have served a useful purpose. In it, Phillips and Kurzweil could have included W. H. Auden's "Psychology and Art Today" and E. H. Gombrich's "Freud's Aesthetics" (which they include in the new book), as well as Franz Alexander's "The Psychoanalyst Looks at Contemporary Art" and Ernst Kris' "The Contributions and Limitations of Psychoanalysis" from his *Psychoanalytic Explorations in Art* (both of which Phillips included in the old book), and perhaps a chapter from Jack J. Spector's *The Aesthetics of Freud*.

And why not a separate section on Freud as a literary figure? Phillips and Kurzweil include in the new book Steven Marcus' "Freud and Dora: Story, History, Case History." They could also have included as a companion piece the chapter "The Interpretation of Dreams" from Hyman's *The Tangled Bank: Darwin, Marx, Frazer, and Freud as Imaginative Writers*.

The new book contains two sections on individual authors. The one on Lewis Carroll, which includes William Empson's "Alice in Wonderland: The Child as Swain" and Gilles Deleuze's "The Schizophrenic and Language: Surface and

Depth in Lewis Carroll and Antonin Artaud," is especially useful. The juxtaposition of these two selections permits one to compare an early essay in psychoanalytic criticism with a recent effort in the French style. One wishes that Phillips and Kurzweil had included more sections of this sort—for example, one on *Hamlet*. Phillips and Kurzweil include in the new book the passage from Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* that compares *Oedipus Rex* to *Hamlet* as well as Ernest Jones' "The Death of Hamlet's Father." For the sake of comparison, they could have included Lacan's "Desire and the Interpretation of Desire in *Hamlet*" and Daniel Sibony's "*Hamlet*: A Writing-Effect." Likewise, a section on "The Purloined Letter" would have been a worthwhile addition. Phillips included in the old book an excerpt from Marie Bonaparte's psychobiographical interpretation of Poe's works. Had Phillips and Kurzweil included in the new book that selection, or preferably another excerpt strictly on "The Purloined Letter," they could also have included Lacan's "Seminar on the 'Purloined Letter,'" Derrida's "The Purveyor of Truth" (which is a direct response to Lacan's essay), and Barbara Johnson's "The Frame of Reference: Poe, Lacan, Derrida."

*Literature and Psychoanalysis* is not a bad book. It is just not nearly as good a book as *Art and Psychoanalysis*. And one would have expected Phillips and Kurzweil to improve on the original. A collection of essays on the theory and practice of psychoanalytic criticism—one that would put the approach in the proper historical perspective, permit critical comparisons, and allow the reader to be the judge of whether recent developments in psychoanalytic criticism are anything more than rather disingenuous exercises in ingenuity—would be a valuable reference book. It would be a different book from *Literature and Psychoanalysis*; it would be a much bigger and better book. And to do justice to the subject, it would need an editor who knows much more than Phillips and Kurzweil do about contemporary psychoanalytic criticism. □

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Mark Nepo

THE MOON IS TWO DAYS INTO SCORPIO

She had a premonition and made Thomas swear  
not to let the candle out.

Stillbirth is such a breathless phrase.  
Four years before, a lighted autumn night,  
the boy wriggled for an instant,  
then limp and flush across the farmhouse bed.  
They called him Matthew, and now the name's used up.

Thomas wanted the doctor to stay the while,  
but he had this and that and so and so to see.  
She was a month off, but it was Matthew's night  
and Thomas believed in watchfires and omens.

She began to push, and Thomas paced, "Hold off,  
hold off." She felt herself tipping as if adrift,  
"Thomas, show me the candle. Keep the wick lit!"  
He crouched over her, lifting the scone like a beacon,  
both thinking and thinking of names and dead names.

He held her legs together  
and she settled for a while.  
She drifted off and he rubbed her moist calves  
watching shadows form and split  
with each flicker.

He knew this one would die, too,  
if she couldn't hold off. She woke to the crimping circle  
inching tighter, eating slack.

While tight-lipped and breathing hard, she had a vision:  
she was older and frail, and feeling dizzy,  
she reached for a chair or wall  
and a young woman steadied her  
then sat her down and brought her tea.

"Thomas, Thomas, this one will be a girl.  
I've dreamt it several times."  
Thomas froze, then slipped her legs apart. She moaned  
and the bed began to creak. She was pushing  
and pushing, half-swelling at sea-  
his aimless hands at her hips,  
the unseen life twitching, pulsing,  
working its way free.

She felt the tight fist pumping hard and  
the bedpost grew hot from the working of her hand.  
Thomas wiped her stomach,  
felt her stretched skin stiffen.

She turned from side to side  
arching her climactic hips  
and she was at sea, rising, falling,  
an ocean through her legs.

She fought no more. Early was not bad.  
She tried to focus on the little breathing she heard.  
A tiny form quivered. Such a will to be born.  
Thomas placed the fetching warmth above her breast  
and the plum-colored soul shook,  
dizzy from this thing called air.

F. J. Sypher

## THE BAKER

One of my friends had come back to West Africa from his vacation and left word for me to meet him at an outdoor café by the beach.

It's good to be here again. How have things been?

Look around. The maitre d' is as fat as ever, the menu is the same, there's plenty of Bière Bénin. The only thing that happened was that it rained all summer. The roads are a mess. I hope you found everything in good shape at your house.

Koffi was staying down the road looking after Frank's place, so it was easy for him to keep an eye on mine too. Everything is the same, almost. I was asking Koffi about it this afternoon and his answer made me realize where I am.

What?

The baker's gone. We call him the baker. Actually he brings the bread. When I got here last year I had no idea how important he was.

Tell me. I want to hear news from New York too but that can wait. I have a feeling that your baker is going to make us hungry. Let's get a plate of brochettes and some ablo and sauce.

I flew in on a Friday evening. The person I was replacing was still around, partly because he hadn't sold his car.

So that's how you got that rusty deux chevaux.

Rusty and worse. When I went to take it out the next day the battery was dead. I was stuck for an August weekend on the edge of the bush with no food to speak of except a half-eaten box of crackers and some cans of tuna I had with me. Word got out that someone new had come and people began to ring the bell, selling souvenirs, asking for jobs, bringing bills to be paid. There were always voices outside. Tom-toms rumbled all night from the bar down the way, Anyigba—La Terre. At dawn the doves went *cucu roo coocoo, cucu roo coocoo*.

You still haven't said anything about this baker.

That's coming. A squawking horn passed by around seven in the morning. It was the baker. Since getting food was not easy out there, you might wonder why I wasn't glad to see him. Before coming to Lomé I was warned that anything from the market might be unfit to eat. I remembered a New York restaurant where food was never touched by human hands. Compare that to our ablo here, covered with prints from the fingers and palms that made it. Bread was supposed to be put in a hot oven to kill bacteria that might have got on it in handling. There was no gas for my stove, so I avoided the baker.

One evening I came out and found the baker and his bike blocking my way. On the back was a crude wooden box. Its corners were dirty from handling and the lid was almost black. Someone was buying bread from him. I went over and peered through the twilight at the rows of baguettes, and without a word turned away and went inside. Just like Africa, I thought. The ocean is too dangerous to swim in. You can't buy in the mar-

ket because there are no prices and everyone will cheat you. You can't eat the food, can't drink the water, can't stay in the sun, and can't go out at night because of the mosquitoes.

A few weeks later I was outside trying to guess what the weather would be like, when the baker wheeled up and people gathered around him to buy bread. He waved to me and said bonjour. I went up to ask how much, expecting that he would want a high price and that I would then have the satisfaction of rejecting his bargain and showing that I was not to be taken in. Thirty-five francs, he said. Obviously that was right. It was too low not to be. I asked where the bread came from. His answer wasn't clear. All I knew was that the bread was there, everyone around was eating, and I was invited to share. I bought one loaf and took it inside. Having paid for the bread, I felt I had to eat it. I tasted bits at a time, the way one takes new medicine, expecting unpleasant side effects. There were none. The bread was good.

Have another beer.

I became one of the baker's regular customers. I would listen for the horn to sound as he turned the bend in the road to come towards my house, and I would go out and stand by the side with the others waiting my turn as he passed out loaves. I often got four at a time, but there was no need to take thought for the morrow. He came by several times a day and there was always enough.

He was large and could have been almost any age between thirty-five and seventy. One reason his age was hard to tell was that he wore a fatigue cap, green, with a broad visor, pulled tight over his head, the sides creased from being stretched back above his ears. The brighter the sun was, the deeper the shadow was on his face. He wore a loose shirt, short pants, and sneakers, all an earth color which could have been dyed into them or simply acquired from the dust in the air. The black bicycle had rust on it but it was well built, with rod brakes and a steering column supported by two bars, one of which curved upwards. Over the rear wheel sat a carrying rack where the breadbox was mounted, held on by two elastic cords crossed and looped over the upper rear corners where they would not get in the way as he opened and closed the lid. The corners and edges were not dirty so much as dark from the touch of hands. His were strong, toughened from years of work. As I felt them in placing coins in his palm or receiving loaves, the lined skin conveyed a knowing acquaintance with things and people. Our talk consisted of brief ceremonies. After a while he would hand me four loaves and say one-forty instead of cent quarante. I never knew where he was from.

Weather meant little to him. You know how African rains are—better than I do. Even when rain poured down he came on time, although he didn't have a watch. His clothes were the same and looked the same, drenched or dry. Over the box he placed a loose plastic cover that never blew off, and the bread seemed as if it had just come out of the oven. When he began his rounds he had a heap of bread on top of the box too, but it stayed fresh and he kept his balance.

Once I heard the horn too late to stop him. I think I must have been out the night before and overslept and been in the shower when he passed. I threw on some clothes, or maybe it was just a towel around my waist, and

rushed for the door, but he had come up the driveway and as I ran out I found him silently waiting.

Sometimes I would go into town early and come back to get lunch and realize that there was no bread in the house. The roads are long and winding, but I would find him nearby, maybe standing next to the bike talking to someone, or resting under a tree where the box stood out in the shadows, or pedalling along with the heels of his feet. He would stop before I was close, and wait for me to catch up.

The horn was tucked under one of the cords that held the box and he had to reach behind with one hand to squeeze the bulb while he guided the handlebars with the other. One morning instead of quick even notes I heard a wavering honk. There was the bike and the box and the bread, but someone else was in the baker's place. Where was he? *Il est parti au village*. His substitute came at odd hours or not at all, but finally the chief returned.

Just before I went away I took some photos. I wanted one of him. Rains had washed the sky and the few clouds intensified the light. I bought two loaves and paid him seventy francs and asked if I could take his picture. He rode up the driveway while I went inside to put down the bread and get the camera. When I came out he stood off the seat and signalled to me to wait while he opened the door on top of the box and reached in. It was not one of the baguettes that he pulled out, but a big round loaf, and he held it high. The picture had a flaw which I guessed as I took it and which showed up in the U.S. when the prints came back. Because of the shadow cast by the visor on his cap, his face was hidden, dark with excessive bright.

Planning my return I thought how different it would be from my first arrival. I would get in late and there would be no food in the place but in the morning the baker would come. I opened up the closets, took out a sheet, made the bed, lay down and listened to voices and drums. In the earliest dawn I heard brooms brushing leaves away from the dust in front of the houses. Finally the baker's horn sounded, but it was weak, like the hand of the driver who had replaced him before. A hatless figure with a blank face sat on a different bike. The box was the same, and the bread, and the price. The bell of the horn had broken off. Where is the other man? *Il est parti*.

This afternoon Koffi and I sat down to talk about the summer. The baker was on my mind, but I didn't think it would be right to say anything about him before we had settled our accounts. Finally I asked.

By the way, where's the baker?

*Il est là tousjours.*

But this one is different. I mean the other one. The one who was here before.

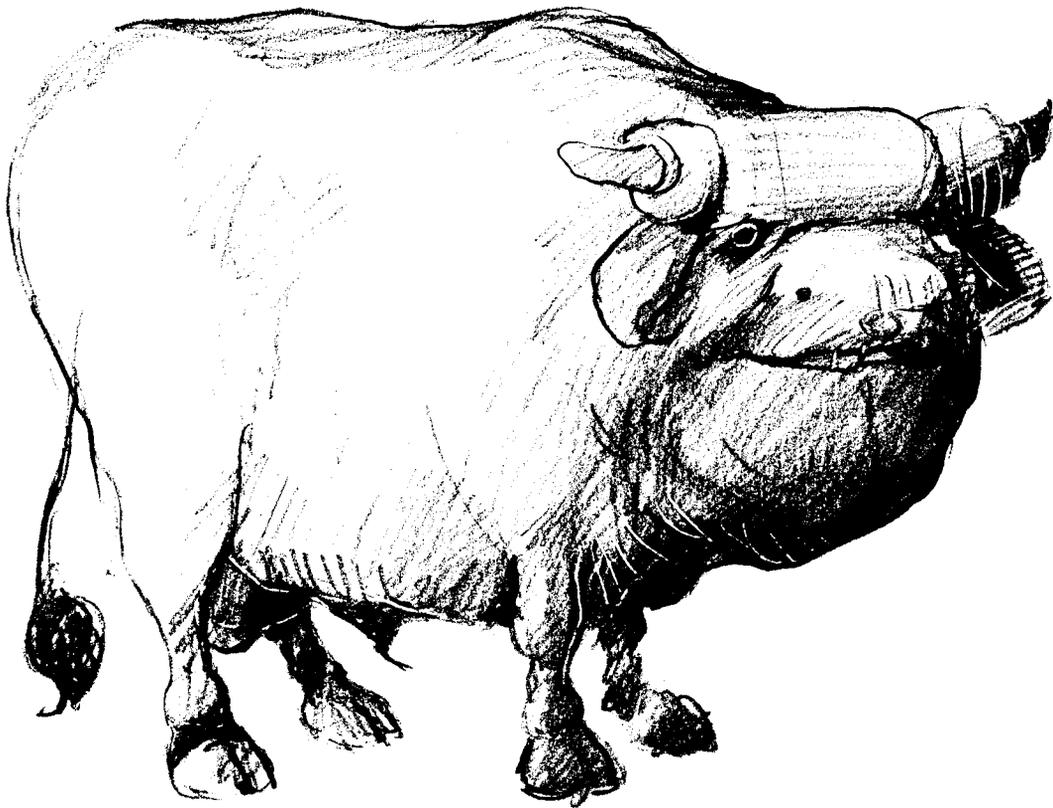
He looked back at me, then at the table in front of us. His fingers played along the edge. Smiling deliberately, he turned his eyes again straight at me.

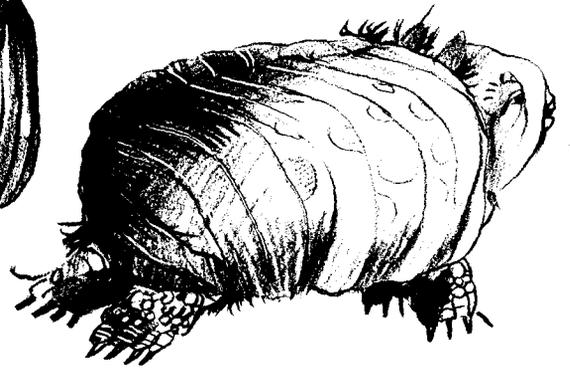
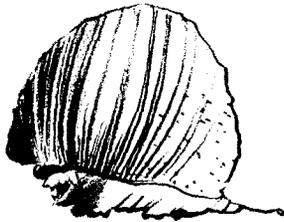
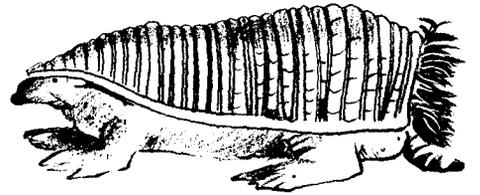
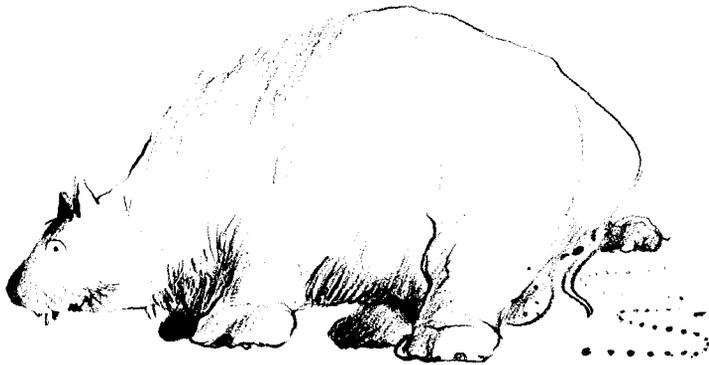
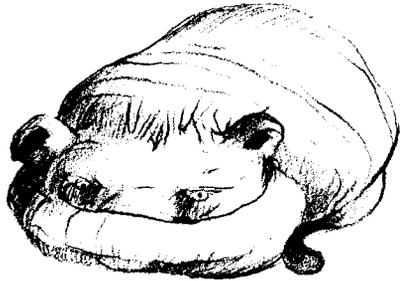
*Eh bien, puisqu'on ne le voit plus, il faut croire qu'il est parti.*

I weighed his words one by one and translated them in different ways. Since we don't see him any more we have to believe that he's gone. I take it as a lesson, administered with perfect African grace. □

José Maria Cundin

PORTFOLIO



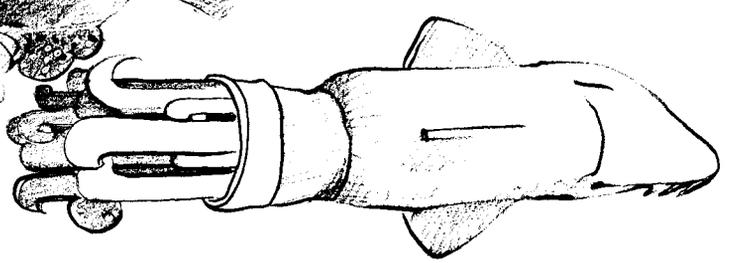
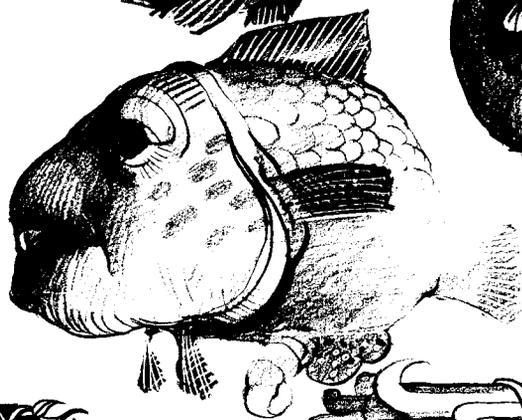
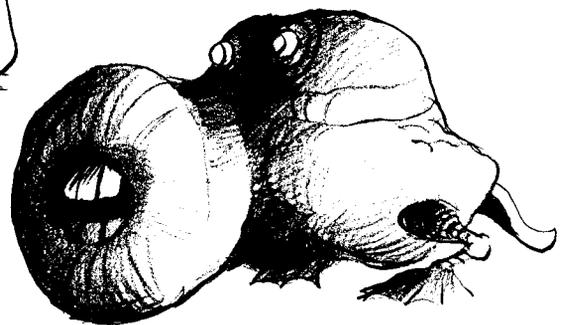
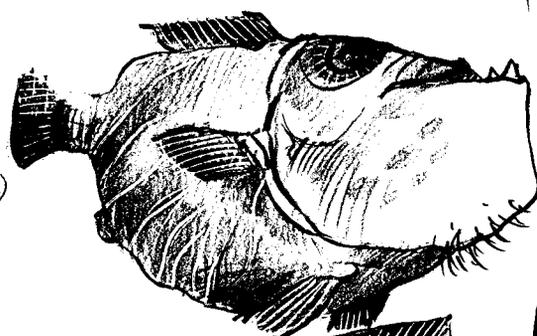
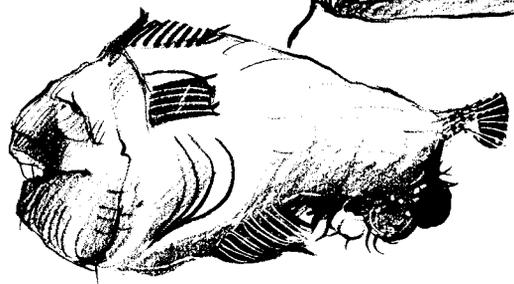
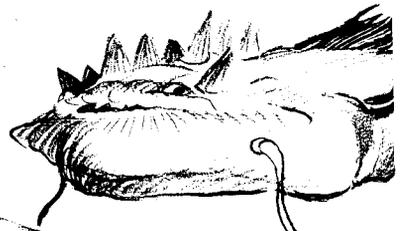
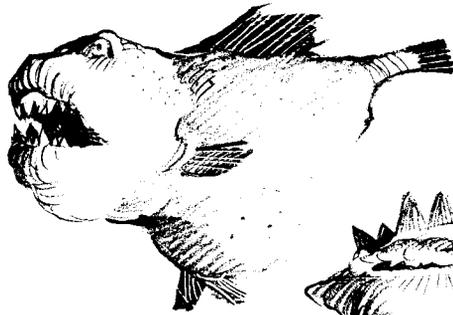
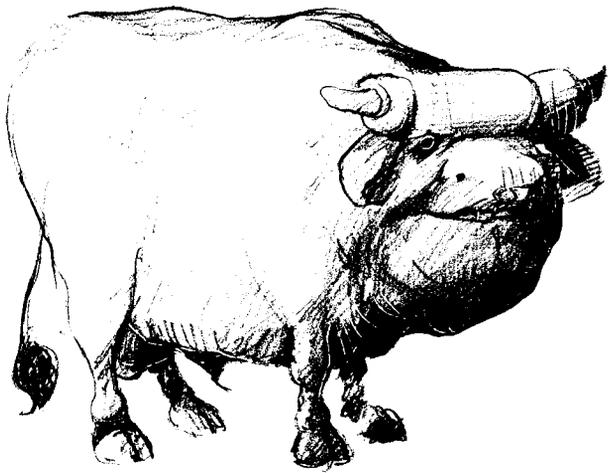


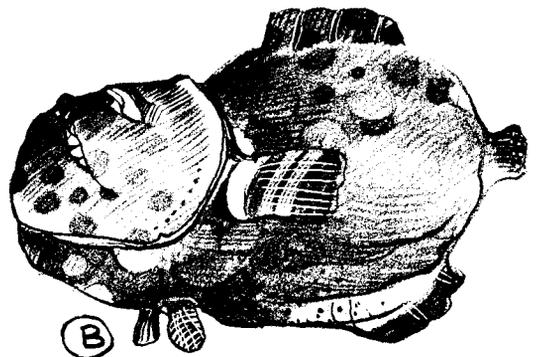
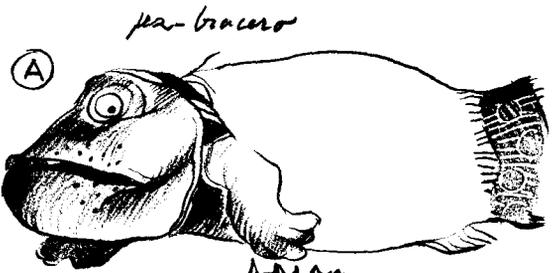


*La loca de Aniquibat*

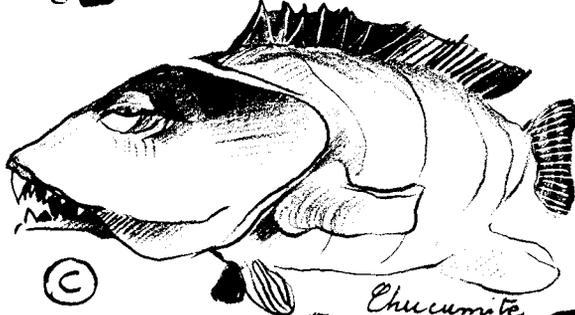


*Figuras para el notable doliente del tiempo perdido*





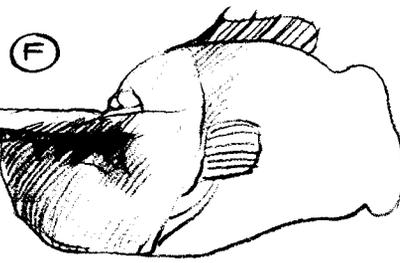
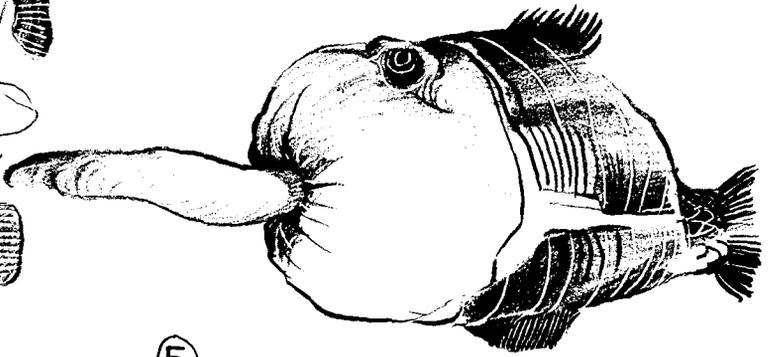
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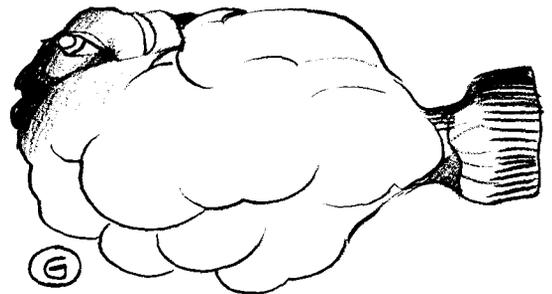
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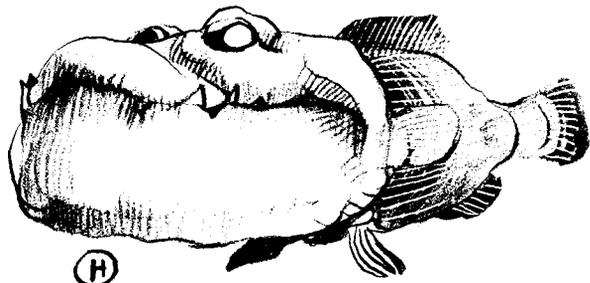
Cajón



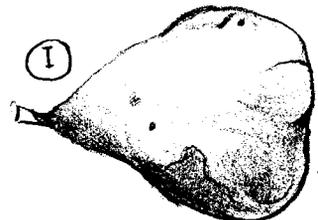
Pez-picudo



Huevoín



Pez-telo day

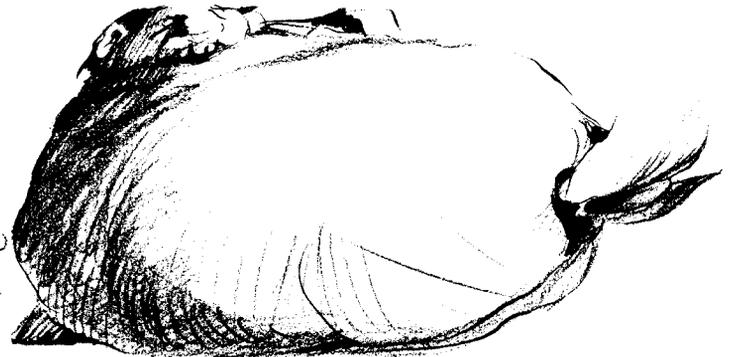
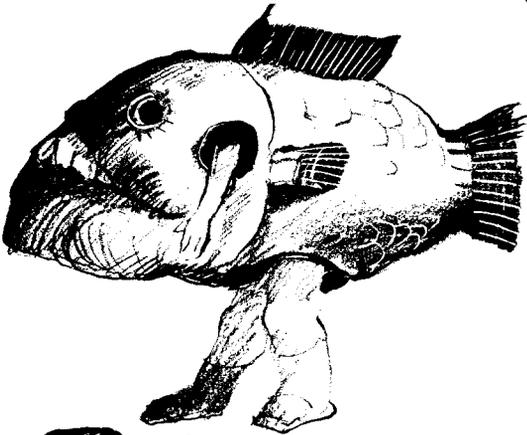
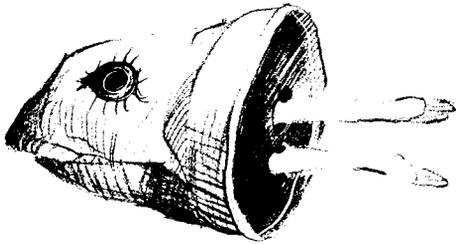


Pez-pera

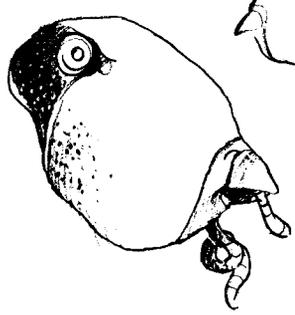
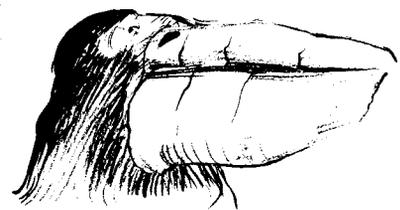


Pez-punto

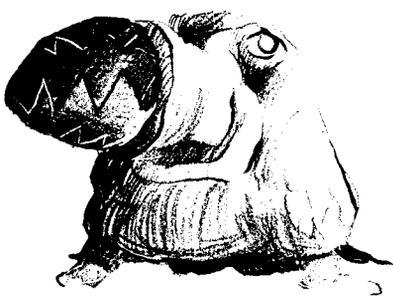
Del Catálogo compilado por mi compadre José Manuel Pintado

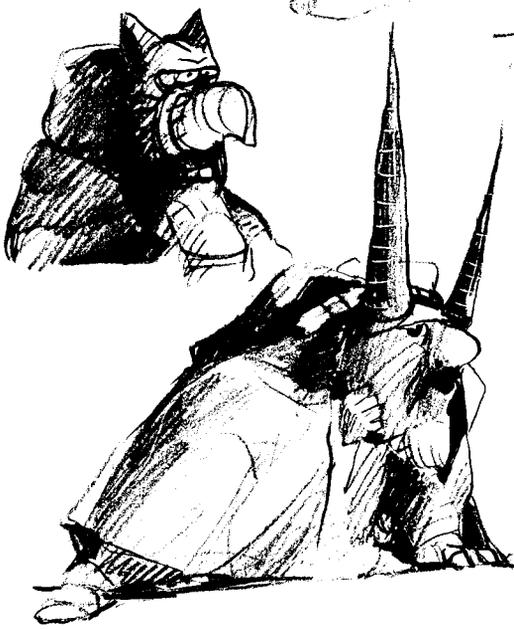
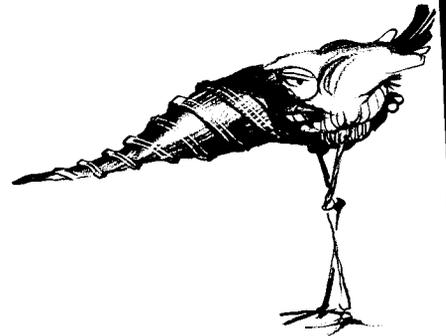


Joni Meir Austin 85



*pájaro Huy-Huy*





THE CAMERA VISION: NARRATIVITY AND FILM

In this discussion of filmic narrativity, I will attempt to address the question of whether or not it is possible to create a narrative voice which wholly identifies the viewer with the protagonist, a narrative voice that operates effectively in the filmic "first person." This is not a new problem: it is one which film theorists have wrestled with either mentally (in proposed screenplays), or physically (on the set), for about eighty years. I can think of no better summation of generally accepted research-to-date on the subject of filmic narrativity in the first person than an excerpt from *Film Art*.<sup>1</sup>

Most interesting is Albert Laffay's point, because it seems to go straight to the center of what can go wrong with the technique of subjective camera. First-person camera promises "personal," one-to-one contact. And if the viewer sees

the film by him or herself, then this illusion of "actual participation" is slightly intensified. But in a public theatre, surrounded by other patrons, the viewer realizes instantly that he cannot "kiss the beautiful blonde," because the experience of a first-person kiss is being given equally, and withheld equally, "to" and "from" every person in the theatre. When the viewer realizes that there is no physical "kiss" to accompany the image, any illusion of first-person participation ceases immediately. This is participation without risk (essentially what movies are in the action/adventure genre, or in any other genre to a lesser extent); but the subjective camera promises us personal risk, and then fails to deliver. It is good for a "scare": nothing more. Laffay is right: the perceptual assimilation is inherently possible. The subjective camera technique strives for that identification which cannot, through these

<sup>1</sup>*Film Art: An Introduction*, ed. David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley Publishing Co., 1979). The editors note:

In films we sometimes find the camera, through its positioning and movement, inviting us to see events through the eyes of a character. Some directors (Howard Hawks, John Ford, Kenji Mizoguchi, Jacques Tati) seldom use the subjective shot, but others (Alfred Hitchcock, Alain Resnais) use it constantly. The first scene of Samuel Fuller's *The Naked Kiss* starts with shocking subjective shots: "We open with a direct cut. In that scene the actors utilize the camera. They held the camera; it was strapped on them. For the first shot, the pimp has the camera strapped on his chest. I say to (Constance) Towers; 'Hit the camera!' She hits the camera, the lens. Then I reverse it. I put the camera on her, and she whacks the hell out of him. I thought it was effective" (Eric Sherman and Martin Rubin, *The Director's Event* [New York: Signet, 1969] 189).

Often the very first film a filmmaker conceives will be a subjective one. In his youth, Joris Ivens was fascinated by what he called 'the I film' (*The Camera and I* [New York: International Publishers, 1969] 41).

Historically, filmmakers began experimenting with the 'first-person camera' or the 'camera as character' quite early. *Grandma's Reading Glasses* (1900) features subjective point-of-view shots. Keyholes, binoculars, and other apertures were often used to motivate optical point of view. In 1917 Abel Gance used many subjective shots in *J'Accuse*. The 1920s saw many filmmakers taking an interest in subjectivity, seen in such films as Jean Epstein's *Coeur Fidele* (1923) and *La Belle Nivernaise* (1923), E. A. Dupont's *Variety* (1924), F. W. Murnau's *The Last Laugh* (1924), with its famous drunken scene, and Abel Gance's

*Napoleon* (1928). Some believe that in the 1940s the subjective shot—especially the subjective camera movement—got completely out of hand in Robert Montgomery's *Lady in the Lake* (1946). For almost the entire film the camera represents the vision of the protagonist; we see him only when he glances in mirrors. "Suspenseful! Unusual!" proclaimed the advertising. "YOU accept an invitation to a blonde's apartment! YOU get socked in the jaw by a murder suspect!"

The history of the technique has teased film theorists into speculating about whether the subjective shot evokes identification from the audience. Do we think we are Robert Montgomery? Theorists in the silent era thought that we might tend to identify with that character whose position the camera occupies. But recent film theory is reluctant to make this move. *The Lady in the Lake* fails, Albert Laffay claims, because "by pursuing an impossible perceptual assimilation, the film in fact inhibits symbolic identification" (Christian Metz, "Current Problems in Film Theory," *Screen* 14.1/2 [Spring/Summer 1973]: 47).

François Truffaut claims that we identify with a character not when we look *with* the character, but when the character looks at *us*. A subjective camera is the negation of subjective cinema. When it replaces a character, one cannot identify oneself with him. The camera becomes subjective when the actor's gaze meets that of the audience (Peter Graham, *The New Wave* [New York: Viking, 1968] 93).

All of these claims remain murky; we need to study more seriously how the subjective shot functions within the film. A start is made in Edward Branigan's "The Point-Of-View Shot," *Screen* 16.3 (Autumn 1975): 54-64, and Nick Browne, "The Spectator-in-the Text," *Film Quarterly* 19.2 (Winter 1975-76): 26-44.

methods, be obtained. The "distancing," occurring at precisely the point of supposed greatest intensity (a kiss or a punch), does indeed "inhibit symbolic identification," because it cheats us most when it promises to deliver most.

"3-D" has similar problems. As long as the "3-D" image comes within an inch or two of our collective noses, but does not presume to "touch" us, we can be fooled. The illusion has not decisively cheated us. As soon as we are asked to believe, however, that we are being doused with a firehose (as we are in a 1953 Columbia short subject, *Spooks*), we realize we are not wet, and the illusion fails. This is the central problem of "3-D": once the "3-D" illusion is intellectually surrounded (which we do instinctively as we "duck" to avoid getting wet) we realize we are not "at risk" at all. This insurmountable difficulty may have led to Hollywood's general abandonment of both "3-D" and the straight subjective camera technique.

François Truffaut's comment that "the cinema becomes subjective when the actor's gaze meets that of the audience" also seems suspect. All that a character speaking to the audience does is remind the person or persons in the audience that they are watching a film: and while it is undoubtedly an act of "eye" contact, this "contact" is irrevocably mediated by the medium which allowed the exchange between the viewer and the actor on the screen. First-person narration can serve as a distancing device all too easily: when Jean Pierre Leaud speaks directly to the camera in *La Chinoise*, particularly with Godard's nearly inaudible off-camera voice interrogating him on the track, the effect is distancing, formalizing; acknowledging (and in Godard's case, reveling in) the gap between the audience and the film actor created by the act of film-making.<sup>2</sup>

In contrast to Truffaut's claims, one posits

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<sup>2</sup>Interestingly, this device also removes Godard, the filmmaker, from risk: he has effectively abrogated the responsibility of creating an illusion, and can now, by bringing his actors into it with him, do anything he wants, which is precisely what Godard does in *Le Gai Savoir* (1969). The film is punctuated by long stretches of black leader to distance and alienate the audience; and also to focus the audience on the sound track as a primary level. Then Godard uses long sections of wild self-congratulatory applause which does away with the audience function altogether. By doing this, Godard acknowledges that far from being interested in subjective camera or audience/protagonist identification, he is involved totally in making films completely for himself, for himself alone: the audience becomes nearly a side effect which distribution, screenings, festivals and economic circumstances force upon Godard as a 35mm moviemaker.

Samuel Fuller's more sensible approach to the whole thing as shown in the opening part of the *Film Art* quotation. Instead of doing a whole film from one viewpoint, that of the subjective camera, Fuller utilized it only during one sequence: precisely that sequence which would most "cheat" an audience in the way I described *Lady in the Lake* as "cheating." But having not used the subjective technique before in the film, and by refusing to use it after the scene, Fuller intensifies the illusion. We do not feel cheated, even though we are.

The audience does not expect to be suddenly thrust into this "front-line" position. It is visually jarring to be suddenly "punched" with a subjective camera after a group of objective camera setups. The illusion only works because the use of subjective camera is intelligently restrained by Fuller.

One can also appreciate the manner in which Fuller describes his usage of the subjective camera technique. Fuller gives us the shot structure as defined in editing ("We open with a direct cut."), and tells us how he does it technically ("I put the camera on her, and she whacks the hell out of him."). The shock of sudden differentiation in viewpoint, and the limitation of it strictly to a sequence, has created a kinetic replacement of audience identification to concretize the punch. The question remains, of course, as to how long this effect resonates; both in diminishing audience identification, and in the negative effect of "replacement," once the subjective shot has been replaced with an objective setup.

But it is a mistake to construct a film entirely from one camera "viewpoint," because it becomes a stylistic gimmick. Subjective camera techniques seem to function best in physical situations. "First-person" dialogue, as seen by a subjective camera, rapidly becomes boring and ridiculous. Film is supposed to show us more than someone talking to a "first-person" camera. In film, we are used to seeing things from a privileged viewpoint. We are in the room, or in the area of action, with the characters; and yet of course we are not in the room at all. We can peer over shoulders of one character speaking to another. We might "dolly in" for an emotional closeup. We may see what no one else can see: the bomb in the little boy's package in Hitchcock's *Sabotage*; the interior of a tomb in Corman's *Pit and the Pendulum*. This is the gift of the cinema: that it puts us where we cannot be, and affords us multiple viewpoints rapidly during the course of one film. Judicious direction in the tra-

ditional sense consists primarily in selectively choosing which things the audience will see, and which things they will not.

But why would one want to construct a work entirely from the narrative viewpoint in the first place? One can see the device working very well in a novel, as a character's voice describes past or present actions. While I will try to suggest various methods by which a filmic unity of subjective vision might be achieved, at the same time, I question whether the aim is desirable (or even possible). Perhaps an "instantly recognizable subject viewpoint" in film cannot be achieved. But if one agrees that the novel and the film may have different definitions of subjectivity, and that for film, subjectivity can be a blending of different viewpoints (using visual editorial/assemblages and sound/image relationships, which engage the viewer in "subjective" contemplation of the film they are watching), then perhaps film subjectivity is possible.

With film, the viewer is already "in the room with the characters" as I have mentioned: perhaps this can be seen as the beginning of filmic subjectivity. By being in the room with the characters, but having no relation to the characters other than observing them, a passive visual subjectivity (the camera in effect saying, "I witness") may already exist. Perhaps subjectivity in film relates to a direct moral commitment to the material being presented: every shot "wedded" by design to the material it presents. Every camera movement, every framing choice, every lighting pattern, every editorial design must work together, *shot by shot*, responding to and interpreting the material through the conscious "mediation" (by the filmmakers, for the audience) of the filmic process. This is light years away from *Lady in the Lake*. *Lady in the Lake* attempts to avoid the question of audience/filmmaker moral responsibility by saying, as Robert Montgomery does, "YOU'LL be with me every step of the way." But "you" are not; the camera is with you every step of the way. Robert Montgomery is sitting off to the side, watching the camera record the scenes he has created. His camera sees all; yet it's an idiot-savant. Its impassive gaze reveals everything and nothing: in *Lady in the Lake* the supposedly subjective camera becomes clumsy and unresponsive.

But in Jean Renoir's *Woman on the Beach* (1947), to pick one of many possible examples, Renoir as director plots the course of light, camera and actor movement, sound, and incidental music with such delicacy and understanding of the medium

he is working in, that he accomplishes, to my mind, an emotionally "subjective" vision. It is a direct connection to the "vision" of the characters in the film, and the "vision" of the film itself.

Renoir's voice is not immediately recognizable. This voice does not stand up and shout, gesticulate wildly, or immediately telegraph the intent of subjectively involving the viewer. A *book* written in first person has, however, the tradition of the Diary (one of the most widely employed first person techniques used) to fall back on. *Film diaries*, as they sprang to life under the auspices of Jonas Mekas and *Film Culture* in the early 60s, employed a restrained narrative voice that seemed to be objective. But suddenly a dolly, or another sudden "reflexive" response, would reveal the work to be one of a filmmaker "reacting to" and "shaping" his filmic voice and shot construction to help the audience best *experience* the actual event. This is the director offering himself as the first person voice (and the human mediator of the *filmic voice*): the witness to the event. In Jonas Mekas' *Film Diaries* (1969), as in *Woman on the Beach*, the first person narrative voice is that of the filmmaker him/herself.

How, then, can one be in the audience, and yet directly identify with the protagonist of a film, particularly without any "framing" at all, no introductory shot to establish the identification? Roger Corman has a possible solution to this problem. He schematicized it in his *The Pit and the Pendulum* (1962): a man enters a deserted chapel, the camera in front of him, facing him directly; he approaches the camera, which backs away to the left (facing him). The camera then fluidly executes a 180° dolly, and *becomes* him, approaching the altar of the church. Corman further complicates things by having the camera stop just short of the altar, and then the man walks from *behind* the camera into the shot, his back to us, towards the altar. Corman has "split" his narrative locus, and we are now looking over the man's shoulder. This fluidity of adopting multiple viewpoints suggests again that visually subjective narrativity is not to be desired in films, particularly when such subtle variation in directorial vision can be obtained.

In Alfred Hitchcock's *Rope*, the entire 100 minute film is constructed as one shot. The narrative position in the film is never identified. Throughout the entire film the camera never seems to cut, but this strategy imposes a structure *on* the material rather than reacting *to* it.<sup>3</sup> We never abandon for an instant this one viewpoint. This becomes as tedious as Montgomery's first-person

camera—although Hitchcock's stance is probably one of detached voyeurism. Stan Brakhage, in his *Visions on Black*, creates an aberrant example of narrativity by cutting to completely black leader (resulting in no image on the screen) to create the world of a blind man who can, however, hear. Brakhage then overloads the soundtrack of this "Black Vision" with a cacophony of domestic sounds, all mingled together. But this narrative structure is almost a stunt. In all of these films, the directors strive for this identification of "camera/viewer," which functions as a language of visceral filmic identification for the audience.

But film is no longer a convincing illusion of reality. Even though the average 42nd street moviegoer doesn't know a "zoom" from a "dolly," and isn't aware when one shot replaces another with a cut (because they are following the exterior narrative line of the movie almost exclusively), they know they are watching a movie. When plot lines were first introduced to films, in *Life of an American Fire Man* (Porter, 1902), and *Great Train Robbery* (Porter, 1903), it was necessary because the "convincing illusion" had palled. No longer did ladies run from the theatre when the train pulled into the station in Lumiere's early oneshot, one minute films (which incidentally are works of clear, great beauty, and effectively sustain that pure narrative vision of subject identification, visual translation, and technical mediation for their brief length).

What is the incontrovertible realness of the filmic illusion? It is light thrown on a screen. More demonstrative viewers acknowledge this when they throw finger shadows on the screen, blocking the illusory beam and reminding others in the audience of the inherent, distant, "coldness" of the filmic process.

Yet, with the ascendancy of video, the film image has taken on relative warmth; which solidifies the humanist concerns of film, as much as it acknowledges the "stripped down" quality of documentary representation which video affords. People use film now to obtain precisely the warmth and reminiscence that video lacks, even when you "deintensify it" (a technical term for making the colors less bright). Video is clear, bright, "unscratched"—documentary. On a television screen, the video image might as well be "live"—for the viewer, second best only to "being there," as a witness.

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<sup>3</sup>Of course, the film is really a series of ten minute takes, the length of one camera well designed to flow together to create the illusion of one continuous shot.

So film has now become the benevolent repository of recorded dreams from the 1900-1970 period. Obviously, film does not present a precise duplication of objects and persons in the world as we see them: this duplication is mediated by the act of making and watching the film. "Once you see something from a certain angle which reveals the *essence* of the thing, you never can see that object the same way again—you have exposed it."<sup>4</sup> This distancing occurs in all films, not just in the films of those who interrogate their own optical illusions.

One who would question film's reality discovers that his first task is to overcome the "controlling" power of the cinematic image. Godard and Resnais have been proposed as two filmmakers who have attempted to deintensify the image by complexifying the track. Interestingly, both are literary filmmakers: Godard starting as a critic (for *Cahiers du Cinema*) who wanted to "make films of people talking," and Resnais as a screenplay writer and new left intellectual, never far from his literary roots in Robbe-Grillet.<sup>5</sup>

Film, since the advent of sound, has consisted of a cooperation between image and the sound track. But this can be pushed to extremes. Godard's factory workers in *See You at Mao* (1970) (a.k.a. *British Sounds*) work in an unceasing din of incongruous noise. It may "put us on the assembly line," but it distances us by its indiscretion. We can do a better job with our own internal sound mixers every day, filtering out extraneous noise. The workers themselves would do this, *must do this*, in order to survive in the "actual situation" supposedly being presented. Therefore, this technique may take us into Godard's world (as a filmmaker only); but it does not enter the world of the characters.

In the final "mixdown" of all the separate soundtrack on the side of the projected film, Godard makes all his separate elements one cacophonous *whole* again: artificially mangling everything into an indecipherable din. Robert Altman overloads his soundtracks in *California Split* and *Nashville* in much the same fashion, with similar effect. This multiple sound collage effect is really just another trick: like the endlessly insensate-though-objective first-person camera of *Lady in the Lake*, this technique wears thin very rapidly.

The filmic "first person narrative voice" is a

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<sup>4</sup>*Art News* Summer 1971.

<sup>5</sup>*Cahiers du Cinema in English* Oct. 1968.

"vision": it is created according to visual rules, with the "cooperation and enhancement" of the track. But the track's "enhancement" of the image is never more than that: film is primarily a visual medium, one in which the sound track works in concert with the images, but is never more than a part (although perhaps at times a principal part) of the film.

Without the image, the soundtrack would be merely a voice recording. With the image, the voice becomes the film soundtrack. It is the "track" of the sound recorded during the filming, and enhanced in mixing later. It bolsters the film's editorial construction: amending closures in weak "shot" patterns, shoring up certain visuals that don't fully "work," supporting and enhancing the image but always co-operating as a partner in the film's construction.

Film realizes its control over the audience through its immediacy, its lack of need for translation into "sign systems," by its arresting *visual* power, implicit in "the gaze that controls." The "eye-contact" fascination of film comes not only from identification with the real which the filmic image attempts to represent, but from the fact that it is being represented specifically for our visual consumption; coupled with the knowledge that one is partaking in an illusory, safe, emotionally all-consuming process.

One can listen to music, and do something else. One can walk down the street listening to the sounds, and still do something else. But one cannot look at a film or videotape and do something else, unless one even *momentarily* (as in doing household chores while watching television) averts one's gaze from the image. Momentarily freed of the structured image's influence, one can refocus on another task and accomplish it. But eventually, one's eyes will return, and *resubmit*, to an image (particularly with television) which will not let you be involved in anything else.

In a theatre, even though the auditorium is darkened (encouraging viewers to become more absorbed in the filmic presentation) a few very low lights are left on. In addition to the obvious safety factor this lighting provides, it also distances the viewer from too intense an identifi-

cation with the film, and encourages a sense of safety and community with fellow members of the audience. TV has no such mediating factor. It is only a part of one's life; but when it is on, it controls. For most viewers, watching television "ends" life temporarily, inviting mental shut-down on an instant "on/off" basis.

A great deal of the sense of *safe* "audience participation" comes directly from the common shared knowledge that when we watch a film, what we are really seeing is "the never-seen of poetic fabulation." On television, we watch people get shotgunned to death; yet we are certain of their offscreen resurrection in the real world. We can indulge in space travel, and never leave our seat. It's safe: we know it isn't real.

It's a movie! The "real" image of an object (as presented to our eyes in actual contemplation of that object) is something altogether different from our contemplation of a filmed image of that same object. This distinction between the "real" and "filmic" image is one we make constantly, instantly, automatically. Even four-year-old children are aware of this trope.

The creation of a narrative voice that truly puts us into the situation (insofar as the film medium will allow) is the shared province of images and sound, which together comprise the peculiar syntactical domain of film. When holographic 3-D films arrive, with their even greater illusion of reality (involving life-size human "simulacra" holographically projected by lasers on the stage), they will probably alter this syntactical language, which has inevitable debts to "staged drama," a form which distances as it enthralls. But an effective voice of filmic narrativity can never be accomplished without the cooperation of film's most important "voice," the visual image, in conjunction with the soundtrack, and a multiplicity of visual and aural "viewpoints" which may allow a true first-person cinematic voice.□

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## Dennis Patrick Slattery

### WATERY WORLD/WATERY WORDS: ISHMAEL'S WRITE OF PASSAGE IN *MOBY DICK*

"Then the sea  
And heaven rolled as one and from the two  
Came fresh transfigurings of freshest blue."

Wallace Stevens, "Sea Surface  
Full of Clouds" from *The Palm  
at the End of the Mind*

Epics, Eric Voegelin reminds us in his book, *The World of the Polis*, give us a memory of a civilization.<sup>1</sup> They serve to pattern our imagination through fundamental, elemental paradigms. Their reach is more inclusive than, say, that of tragedy, comedy, or lyric; their themes equally formidable if more wide-ranging. While possibly the most public of literary forms, as Voegelin suggests, epics deal with the elemental dimensions of human existence and promote an understanding by setting up an interplay between individuals and the gods, nature, and certainly the city, the polis, civitas (58). In this latter, enterprise is the preservation of civilization itself.

Many of our Western epics have, in addition, much to do with founding. In fact, epics have, as Louise Cowan has written in her work on literary typology, three movements: that of battling or struggling, founding or creating, and finally governing or preserving.<sup>2</sup>

If we think for a moment of those works in the epic tradition out of which *Moby Dick*, a work I wish to explore shortly, emerged, we can see a progression of effect that will become clear in this presentation: Homer's *Iliad*, for instance, offers in the figure of Achilles the governing of passion by self-conquest and glorious heroism; *The Odyssey* reveals the return, retrieval, and refounding of the home, hearth, and tribal city; the *Aeneid* portrays the destruction of one city, the changing cultural place of the household gods from

Troy to Italy, and the founding of both city and empire; *The Divine Comedy* glimpses the city of God through the pilgrimage of Dante through the state of souls after death; Beowulf reclaims the Mead Hall and offers respite from the pathology of the underworld monsters.

*Moby Dick*, our modern epic in its sweep, carries an allegorical awareness inherited from Dante forward, again to reclaim, reimagine, and refund invisible presences in the natural world. All of these epics, moreover, share two qualities: life as a pilgrimage or journey, either into battle or back to the hearth, or on to a new city; and each figure has a moment in which death's inevitable presence surfaces to make one imaginatively remember the future. In fact, it would seem that the presence of death, the consciousness of death is at the heart of epic awareness.

Thus, within this tradition I wish to understand at least in an initial way, the heroic nature of the splenetic, saucy, sometimes brooding loner, Ishmael, and what he has to do with founding anything, much less a city. As far as we can tell, Ishmael has little or no context; he seems to belong nowhere and so has no disagreement with travelling anywhere. Out of context, he seeks a world of water, a society of whalers who dissolve in their journeys the rigid laws of the land and substitute them with a watery commonwealth.

In *Moby Dick* we can discern within the tradition an intense move out from the city, the land, culture, then back to a community, but this time one comprised of readers of the text Ishmael creates as he reenters the city; he creates for himself and us a new context. We move from the images of the spear and shield of Achilles, the oak tree-fastened bed of Odysseus and Penelope, the sword of Beowulf, the harpoon of Queequeg, the

<sup>1</sup>*The World of the Polis*, Vol. IV of *Order and History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1972) 54.

<sup>2</sup>Lecture given to the *Summer Institute for English Teachers* under a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, *The Dallas Institute of Humanities and Culture* 15 July 1984.

pipe of Ahab which he throws overboard, to the pen of Ishmael, who in his heroic achievement creates not city but text, and thereby establishes a context to his experiences on that blank-faced body of water that rolls on and over all that takes place on its surface. It is a world, certainly, that exists without a trace.

What I wish to develop for a few minutes is the connection between the watery world of *Moby Dick*, the liquidity of the poetic text, and language itself, for I suspect that the act of writing is a founding activity. And, in this work especially, though it may be true of others as well, the text is the tracing through, or retracing of that original experience of Ishmael's whaling journey on a surface which allows no trace. And yet water is the only element of the four in which individuals may see their own faces, their own reflection. Ishmael's rite of passage becomes more like a Dantesque pilgrimage, replete with the savage, embodied text, or textual body of Queequeg as his Virgil. By means of it he is transformed; his rite of passage prepares him to write the passages of the narrative in which we communally share.

So Ishmael, in writing a poetic/historical text, not only establishes or founds a context for himself after his struggle, an activity for which he is surely to be understood as heroic, but reveals for us the relation between water and words, between liquid language and the flux of experience as it is given form.

Whaling is indeed like writing in that both require, as Ishmael says of his work, a large devotion to detail.<sup>3</sup> So this whaler's epic task is twofold: to penetrate or plum(b) the depths of the sea's surface into mystery; and, as writer, to render the body or text of *Moby Dick* himself, that white, terrifying, scarred, marked corpus who bears the imprint, traces of his history, both with other whalers and with Ahab, whose whale ivory leg, like a dried pen, leaves no mark; rather placed in and plugging a hole on deck, allows him a circular, compass-like movement which is quite different from the linear left-right activity of Ishmael's struggle to remember and record the watery world he survives. Language is his liquid element that will, unlike the watery world of whaling, leave a trace and be re-membered by the community of readers who retrace his lines. Ishmael therefore creates, even as he experiences on board the *Pequod*, not the structured, often brit-

tle civitas which on land keeps individuals apart through law and caste, but rather what Victor Turner calls *communitas*, more a world of brotherhood, equality, of self-identity and renewal where the spirit of the individual and the community is revitalized.<sup>4</sup> Water is the element in this world which nurtures such a human movement and transformation.

Water is a way of seeing. Through water, Ishmael sees through to self. By means of water he begins to see by way of analogy, for water not only renews, it reflects. The French philosopher, Gaston Bachelard writes of water in his newly translated work, *Water and Dreams*; he speaks extensively of water through what he calls the material imagination, that which sees into the depths of things and in their substance mirrors our own deep desires.<sup>5</sup> The world is animated and mirrored through the elements of the world; through them our own interior life is given both image and play. Narcissus is our best image here because through his own reflection in the calm deep pool of nature, he learns of his own beauty. He can trace himself through the water; yet, even as it is beautiful, water occasions Narcissus' fixity; his death is a consequence of too much reflecting.

Water, however, be it calm, flowing, rough, deep, violent, "doubles the world, doubles things" (Bachelard 48). It is the image of both surface and depth. Water has the capacity to give new life to all memories (Bachelard 66). Water is also part of the experience of death, for as death is a journey, a journey is a death; water is an element of death—death is in it. Water, as Romano Guardini has written, "is truly the material element that symbolizes within its substance, our own substance." The material imagination dramatizes the world in its depths, "finding there all the symbols of inner human life" (Bachelard 148): thus language's intimacy with death and with founding, tracing the inner life by way of analogy. Liquidity, Bachelard writes in his final chapter, "Water's Voice," is the very desire for language (187). Water is the mistress of liquid language, of smooth flowing language. Liquidity becomes a principle of language; language must be filled with water. "These correspondences between images and speech are the truly salutary ones" (195).

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<sup>3</sup>Herman Melville, *Moby Dick* (New York: W. W. Norton Co., 1967) 166.

<sup>4</sup>*Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974) 237.

I wish to suggest that we can discern this connection between founding the text, confronting death and capturing the liquidity of language and its relation to water in one episode in *Moby Dick*: "The First Lowering," Chapter 48.

Recall that the men of the Pequod have spotted a herd of whales; they therefore lower 4 boats. Starbuck, Stubb, Tashtego and Ahab each command one of the whale boats. Ahab's boat is pulled by a crew of "tiger yellow creatures" who seemed made of "all steel and whalebone" (190). Daggoo carries on his shoulders in another boat the mate Flask who rests like "a snowflake" on his shoulders.

In Ishmael's boat the men are ordered by Stubb to pull till their bones crack. The water, at first relatively calm, begins to churn slightly to a greenish white just ahead toward the horizon as Tashtego's eyes, "like two fixed stars" (191), spot the invisible presence of whales through the churning visible surface, "with thin scattered puffs of vapor hovering over it" (192). Visible surface mirrors the invisible depth—the meaning of that water's agitation. I want to illustrate this connection between surface and depth, between experience and expression, between water and words when we see that the result of this experience of Ishmael's is his writing of his will.

The boats move into the churning white water region of the sea's behemoths, into what Flask labels "the fictitious monster which he declared to be incessantly tantalizing his boat's bow with its tail—these allusions of his were so vivid and life-like that they would cause some of his men to . . . snatch a fearful look over their shoulder" (193). The words here are important: "allusion," "tail," (tale) and "fictitious" (193). The language of story surfaces amidst the deep pursuing hunt of the men toward the invisible, hidden realities of the water. At this point Ishmael waxes most lyrical of water, the space without trace as the boats accelerate into the foam. Their pursuit promises a passage directly into, not just through, water. Wonder and awe engender trepidation in the men as the sea begins to swell, to speak, "omnipotent," "hollow," "roaring" (194).

The terrified men enter then the circling, changing white water of the whales' invisible presence like "a dead man's ghost encountering the first unknown phantom in the other world" (194). The allegorical matrix is evident; the sea has its own movement, its own voice. It "dances," speaks indirectly in roars and howls, and changes from blue-green to white, to greenish-white.

Soon it will hiss and curl like enraged serpents (194).

Boat and crew, the "we" of Ishmael's narrative, then cross a threshold, a vaporous watery screen or curtain into the world of the whales which are now seen for the first time. The invisible becomes visible and water begins to be a whole way of seeing. Ishmael's movement is from the realistic to the imaginative, from reality to the sublime in his rite of passage wherein the experience is liminal, liquid, and transformative. Victor Turner has described liminal as a "process of mid-transition in a rite of passage; those involved are betwixt and between. . . . It is frequently likened to death; structural power is removed and nature resurges to govern. All are stripped of structure and power and in its place a sense of comradeship and communion or *communitas* reigns."<sup>6</sup> "Soon we were running through a suffering wide veil of mist; neither ship nor boat to be seen," writes Ishmael (193). This liminal passage reinstates a ritual move between "fixed points and is essentially ambiguous, unsettling, and unsettled" (*Dramas* 273). It is, Turner continues, a sacred condition which promotes *communitas*, a spontaneous concrete communion of persons not shaped by norms or institutions; it renews and revitalizes all who move through it.

I wish to suggest that through his watery experience Ishmael confronts death within the epic paradigm, passes through the underworld of water, and is then prepared to create the history he now narrates. Contrary to the rigid, hierarchical brittleness of Ahab who is a slave to his quest, Ishmael's more fluid, reflective world allows his vision of the world's wholeness as well as its ambivalent qualities to emerge. But not before he and the men of his boat are tossed into the howling waves: "The crew were half-suffocated as they were tossed helter-skelter into the white curdling cream of the squall. Squall, whale, and harpoon had all blended together, and the whale, merely grazed by the iron, escaped" (194).

What is important here for Ishmael's founding is not the whale's escape, but the response of Ishmael to its watery realm. For not just water consumes the men; the experience is far richer, blending another element into its fluid. The water is described like fire on a prairie; it crackles around the men in the sea: yet the men, "unconsumed, were burning; immortal in the jaws of

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<sup>6</sup>*Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture: Anthropological Perspectives* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978) 274.

death" (194). Water becomes its opposite element, and all the imagery is of furnaces, chimneys and live coals (194). Yet after entering the half-submerged whaling boat and waiting till dawn in the squall for help, Ishmael and the crew are forced to leap back into the water to escape the Pequod's well-intentioned but destructive path from obliterating them as it retraces its route searching for them.

Ishmael is then the last to be put on board, and of course we discover that the Pequod's search here reveals in retrospect the ship Rachel who, searching for the captain's lost son, finds in its retracings Ishmael floating atop Queequeg's coffin, and so saves him to create the text (196).

What this narrow escape from water promotes, however, is Ishmael's initiation into the community of men—of both contextuality and *communitas*. In the next chapter, "Hyena," he becomes one with the crew and understands, through his "desperado philosophy" (196), that the whole universe may be a "vast practical joke" (195). At the same time that he finds it a joke, one might begin to "consume the world in all its diversity as never before: he bolts down all events, all creeds, and beliefs and persuasions, all hard things visible and invisible . . . as an ostrich of potent digestion gobbles down bullets and gun flints" (195). He feels the presence of death but is no longer controlled by the fear of it. Such are Ishmael's reflections after landing back on deck and before writing his will, and later, the text we read in journeying with him. The element of water is no longer feared; he has penetrated below its surface. His images now are not of death, but life and community. But writing his will is a testament to his mortality, the knowledge of which frees him from the brooding isolation in himself so he might become more public, textual, to leave his mark, his trace in the world. He creates or finds not city or home but context—the book traces permanently what water disallows, the sedimented markings of experience, the flow of experience which leads to *communitas* through those liminal passages in life on the sea.

So the young whaler-writer first confers with some of the sages on board who can school him on the dangers of whaling:

"'Queequeg,' said I. . . .

"'Mr. Stubb,' said I. . . .

"'Mr. Flask,' said I. . . .

and realizing the hazards and vicissitudes of this enterprise of whaling, and even while a member

of prudent Starbuck's whaling boat, Ishmael deliberates and then goes below deck "to make a rough draft of my will" with Queequeg, his "lawyer, executor, and legatee" (196).

The will writing is an important activity at this juncture, for it is closely associated with the text. It is a document which carries on one's own will or desires after death. In the way we have spoken of text, we might speak of wills, for they are linked. First of all, a will is a rhetorical way of leaving one's trace in the world; a will traces one's life on a small scale. It weds material possessions with ultimate desires. It bequeaths ownership, bestows what one has accumulated, a kind of historical perspective through material things. A will, therefore, is a dead giveaway, for it assigns what is to be parcelled out, shared by the world and by specific individuals. A will, I would suggest, expresses *communitas* on a small scale. It is an act of memory and creates a context for one's passage from this life to the next; in so doing it becomes a liminal creation. One creates a place for himself through his will in much the same way that Ishmael creates his own context through writing the entire narrative. His death he seals in words of his will, just as his life he seals in context. Ishmael's will in relation to the total work has the same relation as does the gold doubloon fastened to the Pequod's main mast and is described as the ship's naval, for the doubloon is the miniature double of the sun itself; it is the sun writ small. Ishmael's writing the will and the text both grow from his confrontation with water and death; they are his harbingers of reflection. His contact with water revives memory and imagination. Imagination remembers its own mortality as it moves into the future. Reflection is imaginative and imagination, Bachelard reminds us, "is always a becoming" (103).

In this first plunge into the waters, Ishmael begins the process of becoming the mature manipulator of watery words, words that provoke reverie. Having finished crafting his "roughdraft," a "ceremony" he calls it, he feels that "a stone was rolled away from my heart" (197); he believes that all the days he would now live "would be as good as Lazarus lived after his resurrection . . ." (197). What Ishmael reflects on next includes the double nature of both his experience and its will-ful expression:

I survived myself; my death and burial were locked up in my chest. I looked around me tranquilly and contentedly, like a quiet ghost with a clean conscience, sitting inside the

bars of a snug family vault.

(197)

In addition to the embodied hieroglyph of Queequeg, the univocal vision of vengeful Ahab, and the opaque, white, multi-layeredness of *Moby Dick*, water is both a force and a character shaping Ishmael's destiny and growth. Water "is a complete being with body, soul, and voice" (Bachelard 16). It can cause to resonate in us the soul of things. The imagination, in its relation to water and words, is the faculty for forming images that go beyond reality (17). Water taps language, death, the flux of experience as it hides the invisible presences in human life that may at any moment breach or abrupt itself violently into the present.

Human language, with its liquid quality, its liquid flow, allows one to penetrate below the surface of mere traces on the skin of a page; there exists the deep texture of experience's multi-layered meaning which is a shared world, because its images are universal, timeless (Bachelard 15). *Communitas* grows out of language; context is created. The text becomes a portable city, a shared world, structured, yes, but without the suffocating series of systems that promote alienation.

Death's awareness, a critical moment in the actions of Achilleus, Odysseus, Aeneas, Dante, Beowulf and Ishmael, spurs the desire to leave a trace, be it heroic action or a narrative structure, so one can, in time, be remembered. Writing preserves one's memory as well as the memory of a cultural period. As Bainard Cowan has noted, part of the impulse of a work like *Moby Dick* as an

allegory is to reread and rewrite the past out of a desire to save the future.<sup>7</sup> Not to petrify but to liquefy his experiences is Ishmael the whaler-writer's grand design. He saves the appearances by going below, lowering down into what is deep, below the surface. The water is both his agent and his reflection—his last will and testament, a rough draft and so renewable, renegotiated, is his written expression of freedom: to live with the knowledge that death has not absolute dominion in life, insofar as one can leave a trace, a scratch on life's surface, before one dies.

While the water Ishmael moves through and into may be "exiled" (Melville's term), water itself is cause for language's power to stir within us the movement of invisible seas. Possibly exile and isolation are necessary so that alone one can create in words the liquid flow of universal experiences hidden below the common surface. I suspect Cowan is right in stating that "language is the medium wherein a people most fully asserts its actual unity" (*Exiled* 33). *Communitas* is con-textual for Ishmael's heroic act. The epic action is to struggle with and found the text of his own history and to bring with it as well the flow of humanity itself. The structured city of man may then be augmented by the more fluid community of the text. □

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<sup>7</sup>*Exiled Waters: Moby Dick and the Crisis of Allegory* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982) 69.

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## Herbert Eisenreich

### A DOSTOEVSKIAN EXPERIENCE

*Translated by Renate Latimer*

She came from a wealthy family, had married into an equally wealthy one, and was now living with her husband and children half an hour's drive outside the city in a two-story country house by a lake, living in a rhythm of veritable affluence that had been handed down for generations. She cultivated her mind and spirit through the daily reading of great authors, at present primarily the Russians, and she trained her body in various athletic activities which the spacious grounds behind the house and the lake in front so generously permitted. She devoted herself lovingly to the education of her children, and was her husband's most affectionate friend and most loyal advisor, keen and agile. And although coddled by nature and her milieu, she never lacked that proud modesty, heedful of moderation, which so conspicuously distinguishes the wealthy from the merely moneyed, though the latter's accounts may be greater. Thus whenever she went into the city once a week to acquire this or that for her personal need, she seldom took the car, although her very own, even with chauffeur, stood at her disposal, but rather she preferred the single-line railway between her town and the city which transported workers, clerks and older pupils as well as those who were leaving the country for the city for business reasons or for pleasure—attending the theater or a concert or merely a dance club. In the train, of course, as was her due, she chose a first-class compartment.

Thus she had also taken the train this time. In the morning she had paid a visit to her husband's city office, had delivered his instructions, had perused the latest correspondence, and had dined at Spitzer's with the two gentlemen who had been employed to look after her husband's far-reaching business dealings. She took her leave, strolled through the heart of the city, tried in vain to telephone an old friend from mutual boarding school days, a very famous (and justifiably so, according to the opinion of the experts) singer at the opera. Then she visited her tailor, instructed him to measure her for a winter coat,

handled a variety of fabrics, felt and wrinkled them, had this or that bolt lifted into the daylight which, already very subdued—as if filtered a hundred times by the indolent, satiated autumn air—fell through the panes of the show window into the dusky room lit by neon lamps. Walking on, swept along by the strollers of the late afternoon, she gazed into shop windows along the streets between the Cathedral and the Stock Exchange until it was time for the hairdresser's. And when she left the salon one hour later, after the procedure was finished, she felt the damp and cold autumn air creeping from her neck and temples under her lightened hair. A few blocks further on, in one of those large stores where working-class women buy electric trains and true-to-film Indian costumes for their brood, she purchased a game of tiddlywinks for her children, made another attempt, and yet again in vain, to telephone her friend the singer, and finally landed, as was so often the case on these quite aimless walks, at the shop of the old antique dealer, a sensitive businessman with the manners of a charming gentleman, who had furnished her boudoir and had also delivered many a precious trifle to her house. And there she discovered, with the hardly necessary gentle assistance of the antiquarian, who indeed was sufficiently acquainted with her taste, a Japanese tea set of very delicate and doubtless old workmanship which would be greatly appreciated by her husband, who had been born in Japan and for almost two decades there had cleverly managed and multiplied the wealth acquired by his family in the Far East trade. And now in Europe he was regarded as one of the most remarkable experts of that part of the world, so that it was not merely on account of his cuisine and cellars that cabinet ministers and bankers and diplomats liked to dine with him, consuls and industrialists appeared at tea, and military attachés invited him to morning flights over the mountains. His wife thus discovered this tea set which would please him enormously, especially since he had lost many personal items of remembrances from his

Japanese years during the chaos of war. Meanwhile reflecting upon all this, she hesitated on account of the not at all commonplace price. Eight hundred marks: that was a good deal of money for someone accustomed to handling money. And finally she decided against the purchase and said that she would think it over.

She stepped outside into the street where the late autumn evening damply descended among the dully-brooding houses like a clammy drizzle suspended in the air. A solid crape of mourning floated down from the low sky, gathered before the timidly lit windows and coiled itself around the street lamps. The abrupt contrast of manifold varieties of forms, the densely packed colorful diversity inside the antiquarian and the rough masses dissolving in the fog, blurred contours out here in the street—this contrast made her shudder and shiver. Involuntarily raising her shoulders to her chin, she stopped and stood still. Because she had not, after all, acquired the tea set, she felt as if she had lowered herself into a more humble milieu. And suddenly she felt miserable, exceedingly miserable, and reprimanded herself for having been petty, stingy, uncharitable; and in her thoughts she already turned back in order to return to the antiquarian. Meanwhile as if rooted she stood there. It seemed all too embarrassing to her to inform him already of her change of mind. She would prefer to write him in a few days or telephone him or, best of all, wait until her next visit to the city in a week (“Well, I have thought it over, I’ll take it . . .”). But the misery, the void, which meanwhile hollowed her body, which had overtaken her entire being like an emptiness, so that she believed everything would collapse inwardly within her, this miserable vacuum did not permit itself to be filled with arguments, with deliberations, with mentally planned reparations. And now she was more than irresolute: deeply helpless she stood there, a mummified discomfort in front of the gate of the shop, which the proprietor had closed again (taking a last measured bow, turning about-face while retaining a stiffened spine), whereby the soft clicking sound of the snapping lock had abruptly erased from her hearing the gentle, Christmasy chime which resounded as if from a music box during the closing and opening of the door. Immobile she stood there, paralyzed in her soul and incapable of turning her steps toward the train station, incapable of going home, now that her city visit had obviously ended. As if she had to be ashamed and fear that her shame could be discovered at home, her shameful behavior

could be read in her eyes like the headlines in the evening paper. However to reenter the shop once again: for that too she lacked all strength. Thus she stood without a will, totally overwhelmed—as if by immovable gravity—by the sensation that no matter what she would now undertake, would be inappropriate, embarrassing and shameful for her, unworthy of her, no matter how she might turn it.

At that instant she heard beside her a whispering voice, a mere breath, so close as if it were speaking into her ear: “Please, would you give me some money—only for a little bread?!” With relieved agility she turned her head and noticed a young woman’s face narrowly framed by a dark blue scarf, and she realized that it was raining, that it must have been raining for some minutes: several curls had protruded from under the girl’s scarf and were clinging wetly to her white forehead, and these curls glowed darkly with dampness, and little pearls of water sat on the fibers of the woolen scarf, and others sat on the girl’s brows, and still others below the eyes on her downy cheeks so that it appeared as if tears had flowed down. And she felt the dampness in her own face. She looked at the girl, still held the girl’s softly and hastily spoken sentence in her ear (as if it were rotating there) and remembered that she had not eaten anything since noon and that it was the hunger which had dug a hole in her into which she felt she was plunging—yes, the hunger and nothing more! Yet before this thought, completed to be sure, yet by no means proven in its correctness, could have developed itself into a complete proof, other thoughts arose, burying the first one. She reflected: “Now, yes now, I have the opportunity! The opportunity to recover in a roundabout way what she had just forfeited in the antiquarian’s shop; and at the same time the opportunity not to have to return home immediately, while her humiliation had not yet been completely eradicated.” And she kept thinking: “And what an experience! Not merely to have it tangible before one, but to act, to participate personally, to be involved in something that she had never experienced but had only read about until now, in a Dostoevskian experience!” And shadowlike another thought flashed past: how enthusiastic her friend the opera singer would be when she was told about it! And to the girl she said: “You know what, why don’t you come and eat with me. I’ll invite you to a nice restaurant!” And she thought: “No, not to Spitzer, that is too elegant, she could be embarrassed; presumably she is wearing nothing but a cheap

dress under what's left of this coat. Regina too is not appropriate, yes, the train station restaurant would be best. There one eats well and not too expensively and without being conspicuous in any way!"

The girl breathed: "For God's sake, no!" She stared, as if she had been most dreadfully propositioned, into the face of the strange lady whom she had dared to address—this tall, beautiful woman with the voice, the natural intonation of a sister. The woman meanwhile had already beckoned a taxi, directed the girl towards it with a mild pressure on her upper arm, guided her into it, instructed the driver with two words which the girl could not understand in the interior of the car, then sat down beside her and said: "You are not to be embarrassed at all, you are simply my guest tonight!" And when the girl seemed to try to utter an objection, less with her mouth than with her entire thinly-hunched body: "Really, you don't need to apologize, you don't need to explain anything to me, that's how life can be; but please be nice now and do me the pleasure of dining with me!" And she felt tempted to place her arm around the girl's bony, angular shoulders; but then she thought that such a gesture, even if it should succeed in all its unprejudiced cordiality, could intimidate the girl even more rather than free her from her intimidation. And she desisted. She continued to think that it would be a priceless pity if, on account of impatient, even if best-intentioned, carelessness, she would prematurely frighten away this rare, precious catch, which fortunate chance drove straight into her arms. At once, however, she sensed such a train of thought as a roaming in forbidden realms and said, in order to bring herself back to the right path: "Let's just have a leisurely meal together, the two of us?"

The girl realized that the driver was taking the direction of the train station toward which she had been hastening from home for some time, hesitating, deeply ashamed, before every woman she felt bold enough to address (and then failed to do so after all) and she thought that the closer they came to the train station the more favorable her chances would be. And as she deliberated, as if rummaging with feverish fingers in her brain, when and above all how she should make her situation clear to the woman, the driver already turned, as he had been instructed, toward the train station square, made a sweeping curve, approached and pulled up under the protective roof above the sidewalk in front of the ticket hall. Behind the threads of rain on the car windows the

girl stared outside like a prisoner behind bars. "Drive up to the restaurant!" There the driver stopped the car, jumped out, flung open the car door, accepted the fare, and let his purse containing change quickly vanish in the pocket of his wind jacket after the woman's gesture indicated that the sum was correct. The girl thought that the moment had now come to explain herself. But meanwhile she already felt a gentle touch, irresistible, on her arm: her hostess had taken her arm and was already leading her up the stairs to the restaurant, inside and across the room to one of the few free tables in front of the large windows which offered a view upon the platforms and train tracks below, where several trains stood ready to depart. "But now we want to enjoy a leisurely evening, don't we?" The girl, who hitherto had not said a word, still did not say anything, took off neither her scarf nor her coat, stared down upon the platforms beneath whose flat, gently sloping roofs with rain gutters she could see several suitcases, and in the most restricted space, the quick legs but, due to the visual angle, not the faces of waiting travelers. "Why don't you take off your coat, Miss—!" The girl thought: "Oh no, no, no!" At the same time she reached under her chin where her scarf had been knotted, loosened and lifted it from her hair, and hung it over the back of the chair. And thought: "Oh, if only she weren't so damnably kind—how am I supposed to be able to tell her?!" She felt incapable of disappointing her benefactor, of revealing everything to her like the contents of a bag full of stolen goods. She now took off her rain-damp coat, particularly since the strange lady was assisting her, and let herself resignedly be pressed into the positioned chair. "We had best drink a brandy first, that will warm us up." And when the girl was still silent: "Surely you do like a brandy?"

"No," the girl began hesitatingly, with lowered eyes, softly and full of nausea at the thought of drinking. However when she realized that brandy would give her the courage, which she now needed to undo the error she committed on account of the strange lady's kindness, the courage which she now needed as never before in her life: "All right, please, if you suppose so, ma'am?"

"You see!" the lady said, satisfied with her first successful inroad into the silent, virtually walled-up being facing her. And she ordered the brandies from the waiter who was just bringing two menus to their table. "French brandy, please!" And she turned again to the girl: "But

please don't call me ma'am again; simply call me by my name!" And she told her her name. And thought: "What a pretty girl! Not at all a bad face, a dull face! God only knows how she has sunk so low?! Perhaps someone is ill at home or she herself may be ill! Likeable, but exceedingly intimidated! Probably begging for the first time—and I, I can perhaps change it so that this first time may also be the last time. I'd only have to know what is really the matter with her! But she'll tell me her story, no doubt she'll definitely do that!"

The waiter brought the brandies. "The ladies have decided?"

"In two minutes!" The waiter retreated. She raised her glass, smiled encouragingly at the girl. The girl groped for the glass, raised it to her mouth, took a sip, sipped again and then with a violently-angular gesture drained the glass. Her deep breathing delineated the constriction of her throat, she brought her head forward again, suddenly suspended the motion with a glance at the clock on the wall, actually only the white wall with twelve black lines and forty-eight black dots in between and two black hands encircling them, and she thought: "There are less than ten minutes remaining, yet still enough time to run through the entire train, to look into every compartment!" And she thought: "If I don't say it now it will be too late!" And she said: "I would like—I would like to tell you something—," and overwhelmed for the second time by her own boldness, she lost her painstakingly controlled language which turned into such a confused, tormented stuttering resembling weeping that the lady interrupted her gently and said, "Let's just eat first very quietly; after a good meal it's much easier to talk—yes, it's much easier. Why don't you make a selection! Select anything you would like!" She pushed the opened menu in front of her lowered face. "Would you like a veal cutlet with a salad?" The girl nodded barely perceptibly with the inert, uncomprehending submission of one whose death sentence has just been pronounced. "Or do you prefer stuffed peppers with rice? . . . And this too would be delicious: ragout with fried potatoes!" And since the girl continued to nod automatically, she waved to the waiter and ordered two ragouts with fried potatoes and a small decanter of wine, and for the girl another brandy before the meal. She would have liked to tell the girl something cheerful but the words that came to her mind felt insipid as soon as she formulated them mentally. Thus she too was silent. Outside in front of the window the locomotives were puffing indo-

lently into the foggy evening, and individual lights, green, red, blue and white lights, were swimming in the damp darkness. The waiter brought the brandy, but the girl did not touch it. At the surrounding tables more and more people took a seat, mostly travelers who had chosen a night train and were now eating their evening meal before departure. But there were also people here from the city who had come to the restaurant merely for the sake of eating. Trains were called out, the reluctantly articulated clearing of the throat of a railway official on duty, workers' trains into the immediate vicinity, and then the through-train "with special railway carriage to Le Havre." The girl heard the announcement crackling and rustling, stared at the white wall with the black lines and dots and hands as if her gaze could bring the time to a standstill, realized that this was her last chance, and was silent—as if an enormous guilt were sewing up her mouth. Still unaware, yet surmising with a certainty transcending all awareness, that not the request itself addressed barely half an hour before to the strange woman had devoured all her energies, but rather that small untruthfulness of this request had totally and completely drained the vessel of her will, which barely half an hour ago had seemed inexhaustible to her. The waiter brought the dinners and poured the wine into the glasses. "And now," said her hostess, "don't think of anything but your meal!" Awkwardly, as if with stiffly frozen fingers from which all blood has been drained, the girl took her knife and fork into her hands, started to cut and then let her barely raised arms sink again feebly. And she was thinking, while the other half of her thoughts was striving toward only one so near yet oh so unattainable goal, that she sat here imprisoned, caught in a trap, whose casing was constructed of her untruthful request, and whose little door, closed shut behind her, consisted of the immoderate fulfillment of that request! "One must not press her, one must let her very slowly become herself again," the woman thought meanwhile, and began to eat as inconspicuously as possible. Suddenly, however, she let her knife and fork sink as she saw the girl's gaze, a petrified convulsed face, aimed beyond her in death-like rigidity. She turned around, as if perceiving behind her back a suddenly loud danger, but only saw the white wall with its black clock there. Down below, from the direction of the tracks, a whistle cut through the stillness that hovered whisperingly over the entire train station. Then a locomotive started to pant, puffed violently and

short of breath, and gradually found its rhythm that paralleled the droning grind of the wheels. The girl remained immobile, bursting with tension. No, her hostess thought, she is so very intimidated that it's best to leave her alone! She searched for a name-card in her purse, added three folded bills, slid the little package under the edge of the girl's plate, and said, gathering all the warmth and cordiality at her disposal into her voice: "I am just realizing that it's already very late for me." And withdrawing her hand, as if after a discovered theft: "Honestly I don't want to offend you! I only would like to help you, insofar as I can. Please write to me, I have influential friends, I am quite certain that we will find something for you!" And rising: "Do me the favor and pay for everything and don't say another word about the rest, all right?" It was not until now that the girl noticed the name-card and the three ten mark bills, touched them with trembling fingers, raised her head and then suddenly it burst forth from the enraged face, a darting flame of disappointment and despair: "Now, now, now!" She swept the money and the name-card from the table, jumped up, tore her coat from the hook and rushed outside, past the unobtrusively astonished waiter and the nearby tables where the people were craning and twisting their necks and staring after the girl and then looked back to the so abruptly abandoned woman who was quickly paying the waiter. And someone at the neighboring table said, and said it so loudly that she had to hear it: "Of course, she made demands on the girl!" She gathered her belongings together and with lowered head she walked away, still considering whether she should not have taken the scarf, which the girl had left lying on the chair, as a concrete remembrance of this unmastered adventure. And just as she abruptly rejected this fleeting thought, the waiter surfaced beside her and handed her the scarf. Simply to avoid any further complications she accepted it wordlessly. And she hurried toward her platform where, she knew, the next commuter train had to be departing very soon. And after she had extinguished the light in the compartment, she sank back into the cushions. The girl, meanwhile, rushed across the train station square, retracing the way she had driven in the taxi, in her numb mind nothing but thoughts of him, whom she had come to see just one more time, one last time, and who had now departed without her having been able to see him and tell him that it was not her fault alone, by God in heaven, not her fault alone! This last letter too her father had inter-

cepted because he could not stand him, this "foreign fop," this "visage from overseas," or simply because he did not want to give up the daughter who brought home the money for drink. And today when by mere chance her father's intoxication had more quickly than usual turned into a rattling sleep, and a letter informing her of his final departure fell into her trembling hands after all, it was too late or still not quite too late if only she had had the money, the twenty-five pfennigs for the streetcar and the ten pfennigs for the platform ticket. But these thirty-five pfennigs she had not had, and even if she had succeeded in shaking her father awake he would sooner have beaten her to death with his emptied bottles than given her the money, no matter for what purpose, and there was no one in the vicinity from whom she could have borrowed the money. Thus she had hurried away on foot, had then addressed the beautiful stranger and thereby all had been lost. She had not been able to free herself from the dilemma, that consisted on the one hand of her untruthful request and on the other hand of the immoderate fulfillment of this request, had not been able to free herself in order to admit the truth, this simple, little, oh how comprehensible truth: that she still had to see him, him, him, to see him but no longer to hold him, but simply to explain to him how all had come about between them, to tell him all this before he rode away, so far away that she could not even imagine it, and never to return—yes, to tell him how all came about between them and indeed no longer to hold him, not to persuade him to turn back, but merely to explain everything to him, and with this knowledge to bury the discord and grief and resentment which henceforth would separate them more deeply than the deepest ocean between them—if only she would succeed in still seeing him, in telling him all, in offering him a good word and receiving in turn a good word from him: so that, if all should come to an end here, it would not end other than the way it should have lasted! She had addressed the woman, the beautiful stranger, with the request for money for a little bread, because it had seemed to her that bread was the only thing on earth of comprehensible value to men and its lack was felt so tangibly that men were ready and capable to become enraged on account of it, and therefore perhaps also to help. And now all had turned out to be much better and therefore much worse! She was simply caught and had not been able to disentangle herself from this abused helpfulness to which she had ap-

pealed out of helplessness with an elusive word such as "bread." And she was caught, trapped between her own tiny lie and the excessive kindness of that beautiful, tall, wealthy stranger—who was now sitting in the rumbling train and thinking. Thinking that it must have been the hunger which had gradually hollowed her out, had made her miserable and had made her susceptible to adventures which her nature could not master. And that things had only been able to come this far because in the antique dealer's shop she did not immediately do what she would now have to make up for tomorrow on the telephone. ("Yes, well, I have thought about it and have slept on the matter; I'll take it . . .") In spite of everything, she did not feel happy at the thought of the tea set, and the more tenaciously she clung to this thought the more painfully betrayed she felt by the actual booty of her roaming in uncertain territory. Wasted time, wasted money, wasted effort, senselessly and uselessly squandered kindness, and finally the humiliation! Never, as far back as she recalled, had she failed so completely in anything without being able to find an explanation for the failure or a blame in herself. Her heart and her head were overwhelmed by the question as to what had actually happened and why she had been unable to master this adventure, since truly she had not spared time, money or effort and had done her very best possible. Thus she strayed from irritation into annoyance, from doubt into indifference, from shame into the desire to forget. She saw herself helplessly at the mercy of the new experience of blameless failure, she did not know how to deal with it, she wanted to rid herself of it. As well as rid herself of the girl's scarf. So as if nothing, nothing at all had happened, and therefore nothing, not even the scarf should remind her of anything! She searched for the scarf in her purse in order to place it in the baggage rack opposite her. And as her fingertips touched the coarse woolen fabric

in whose shabby texture a trace of dampness still remained, she felt once again as she touched this small pitiful piece of reality that had stayed with her the entire indestructible reality of the evening's encounter, this encounter with the thin, pale girl in the drizzle in front of the antiquarian's gate. She felt with the indubitable certainty of all her senses and transcending thoughts that she had met not merely any poor and wretched creature from that half of the world unfamiliar to her, but rather the incomprehensible fate of a human being which makes that being—more than any poverty or any misery—pitiabile, since not even goodness, even if all the means of the material world were at its disposal, is always and necessarily capable of helping, of healing, of saving. And she also felt that experiences such as the one into which she had been swept do not simply let themselves be cast aside in forgetfulness like a strange scarf in the baggage rack. And finally she felt that the more intimately her fingers became acquainted with the object of her touch, the purer the sorrow streamed from this touch, as a kind of solution to all that had happened in reality, the sorrow of all true experience which she had believed one only makes with the fingertips of the soul: the sorrow into which she now sank, descending to the primary cause of life, precisely where this sorrow, as it bores its shaft into the depth, suddenly changes upon impact into the incomprehensible fortitude thanks to which man returns, ascends and lives. She had wanted to help, and it was she who had been greatly helped! And as the train came to a stop in her hometown, she wept without restraint into the coarse woolen scarf of the girl, wept and knew that at home her tears would be noticed, but continued to weep softly and finally silently on the way home, at home, in bed and into sleep, into a new day, into a new life where she found herself again with empty hands, yet all the richer. □

Sophia de Mello Breyner Andresen

ASSASSINATION OF SIMONETTA VESPUCCI

*Translated by Lisa Sapinkopf*

**M**<sup>en</sup> In the rooms' sharp profiles  
In mortal angles of shadow and light.

See how the swords come forth  
Without anyone lifting them—suddenly.

See how the gestures are sculpted  
In exact geometries of destiny.

See how the men become animals  
And the animals, angels  
And only one of them rises and becomes a lily.

See the long hovering of the eyes  
Filled with liquid, filled with grief,  
Of a woman strangled in her hair.

And the whole room lies abandoned  
Full of horror, full of disorder.  
And the doors are still open,  
Open onto the paths  
On which the men flee,  
In the sharp silence of the spaces,  
In mortal angles of shadow and light.

Bert Cardullo

## THE ART OF *SHOESHINE*

It is tempting to read de Sica's *Shoeshine* (*Sciuscià*, 1946) as an indictment of post-World War II Italian society. Pierre Leprohon writes that "the theme of *Sciuscià* is the infinitely tragic clash between childhood innocence and adult injustice."<sup>1</sup> Roy Armes states that

The blame in the film rests squarely on the shoulders of the adults whose actions are indeed often mean and spiteful. Giuseppe's brother callously involves [the boys] in crime, while the police use underhand methods to make Pasquale confess [the brother's name] by pretending to beat Giuseppe (we see what is really happening in the next room: a policeman is beating a sack while a boy shrieks convincingly). The lawyers are cheaply opportunistic, suggesting that Giuseppe put all the blame on his friend, and the prison officials act foolishly and split up the pair (so that Giuseppe is left a prey to bad influences) and then punish Pasquale for fighting a bully.<sup>2</sup>

Peter Bondanella echoes Leprohon and Armes when he says that in *Shoeshine* "de Sica dramatizes the tragedy of childish innocence corrupted by the adult world. . . . [Pasquale and Giuseppe's] friendship is gradually destroyed by the social injustice usually associated with the adult world and authority figures."<sup>3</sup> Both Bondanella and Leprohon describe a "tragic" conflict between childhood innocence and adult injustice, but by pitting victims against villains in this way, they are really suggesting that the film is a melodrama.

*Shoeshine*, however, is much more than the story of two boys whose friendship is destroyed at the hands of a villainous and insensate social

system. Society may be ultimately responsible for the death of Giuseppe and the destruction of his and Pasquale's friendship, but de Sica does not portray it as villainous, as consciously or indifferently evil and exploitative. As Monique Fong has written,

*Shoe-Shine* is neither an accusation nor a propaganda work. . . . Great skill is shown in putting the single moral-bearing sentence of the story—"If these children have become what they are, it is because we have failed to keep them what they are supposed to be"—into the mouth of the corrupt lawyer, a man to whom lying is a profession and whom we saw, just a moment earlier, falsely accusing Pasquale in order to save his own client.<sup>4</sup>

Italian society is as much a victim as Giuseppe and Pasquale in *Shoeshine*, and this is perhaps what James Agee had in mind when he wrote that *Shoeshine* "is . . . the rarest thing in contemporary art—a true tragedy. This tragedy is cross-lighted by pathos, by the youthfulness and innocence of the heroes, . . . but it is stern, unmistakable tragedy as well."<sup>5</sup> The real tragic conflict is not between the two boys and society: it is to be found in a society divided against itself; the tragedy of post-World War II Italian society is reflected in the pathetic story of Giuseppe and Pasquale. We are not meant to focus on the misfortune of the boys apart from the world in which they live; the point of the film is that their misfortune derives directly from this world. De Sica is interested as much in having us examine and question (not blame) the society that destroyed the boys' friendship as in having us pity Giuseppe and Pasquale. He is thus a typical neo-realist filmmaker, according to Roy Armes:

Deep concern with humanity is common to . . . all [neorealist filmmakers] but there is no

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<sup>1</sup>Pierre Leprohon, *The Italian Cinema*, trans. Roger Greaves and Oliver Stallybrass (New York: Praeger, 1972) 101.

<sup>2</sup>Roy Armes, *Patterns of Realism: A Study of Italian Neo-Realist Cinema* (New York: A. S. Barnes, 1971) 148.

<sup>3</sup>Peter Bondanella, *Italian Cinema: From Neorealism to the Present* (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1983) 53.

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<sup>4</sup>Monique Fong, "Shoe-Shine: A Student Film Analysis," *Hollywood Quarterly* 4.1 (Fall 1949): 17-18.

<sup>5</sup>James Agee, *Agee on Film: Reviews and Comments* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958) 279.

attempt to probe beneath the surface into the mind of the individual, so that concepts like *Angst* or absurdity have no place in neo-realist art, and alienation is defined purely in social terms. In place of the traditional cinematic concern with the complexities of the individual psyche comes a desire to probe the basically human, to undertake an investigation into man within his social and economic context.

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No critics to my knowledge have investigated the tragic role that society plays in *Shoeshine*; I would like to do so in the following pages.

Italy was of course in a state of political and economic turmoil after World War II. Many of its inhabitants, especially those in large cities like Rome, where *Shoeshine* takes place, were finding it difficult to survive, since there was a shortage of food and clothing. A black market arose, trading in goods stolen or bought from the American occupation forces. Giuseppe and Pasquale's problems begin when they agree to sell stolen American army blankets to a fortuneteller, as part of a plan by Giuseppe's brother and his gang to rob the fortuneteller's apartment. The boys know nothing of the planned robbery. They use the 3,000 lire that they are paid for the blankets to buy a horse; soon afterwards they are arrested.

Roy Armes says that "Giuseppe's brother callously involves [the boys] in crime" (148). This statement fails to take into account the environment that produces the crime. Giuseppe's brother may be a thief, but he is one in a society where there is little or no work: he must survive, so he steals. He involves his brother in his crime and pays him well. Giuseppe's brother is callous only when seen from the point of view of someone who has never been in his situation; *he* thinks that he is doing his younger brother a favor. Petty crime is a way of life for them both, and the older brother's justification for robbing a fortuneteller is probably that he is robbing the equivalent of a thief: a woman who steals people's money legally by telling their fortunes. Giuseppe's brother is not a villain. Giuseppe turns on Pasquale when his friend names the brother as one of the thieves to prison officials; his loyalty to his brother—to the person who tried to do him a favor, not to a villain who callously involved him in a crime—leads eventually to his death. Ironically, in attempting to help Giuseppe to survive, the brother has helped to get him killed, and has gone to jail himself. Although Giuseppe's brother is not a

major character in *Shoeshine*, he is part of the society whose tragedy de Sica is depicting.

Although it is true, as Roy Armes writes, that "the police use underhand methods to make Pasquale confess by pretending to beat Giuseppe," it is equally true that they use such methods because they want to capture the gang that robbed the fortuneteller's apartment (148). Like Giuseppe's brother, the police are not villains. They want to stop the black-marketeering that is threatening an already unstable economy, and they use whatever means they can to do so. The police do not, in Armes's words, "act foolishly and split up [Giuseppe and Pasquale]" (148); the pair is split up by chance in the assigning of groups of boys to cells. The prison in which the police house the boys is not by design "cruel, crowded, wretched, and dirty," as Monique Fong believes (15). It is crowded because many of the boys of Rome have turned to petty crime in order to survive; wretched and dirty because it is so crowded and because adequate funds do not exist to provide for the boys; and cruel because the prison staff is small and overworked, and therefore prone to solve problems by force instead of by disputation. The prison was not even built as one: it was formerly a convent and has been taken over, presumably because of a shortage of space in other prisons.

The deception that the police work on Pasquale is not without its consequences: he and Giuseppe themselves learn deception. In revenge for Pasquale's betrayal of his brother, Giuseppe, along with several other boys, plants a file in his cell; it is found, and Pasquale is severely whipped by the guards. Later in court, Giuseppe is forced by his lawyer to put all the blame for the fortuneteller incident on the older, supposedly craftier Pasquale. (Armes calls the lawyer "cheaply opportunistic" [148]; he is not: he is unscrupulous in the defense of his client, like many lawyers.) Pasquale, in revenge for Giuseppe's rejection of him and escape from jail with his new friend Arcangeli, tells the police where to find the two. Giuseppe plans to sell the horse that he and Pasquale had bought and to live off the money with Arcangeli. The police find them at the stable, Arcangeli flees, and Giuseppe is killed in a fall from a bridge. He slips trying to avoid the angry Pasquale, who is poised to strike him.

Tragically, the prison officials, in "protecting" society from Giuseppe and Pasquale, have brutalized the boys, have robbed them of the very emotion and the very virtue necessary for the survival of humane society: love and trust. So-



ciety, in the name of law and order, has destroyed what it should promote: bonding, male and female. Giuseppe is torn not only from Pasquale when he goes to jail, but also from the mysterious little girl Nana, who had been following him through the streets of Rome and is inconsolable in his absence. Once the boys are placed in separate cells, Pasquale can give his love and trust only to the tubercular Raffaele, who himself is ostracized by the other prisoners and who is trampled to death during a fire; and Giuseppe can give his love and trust only to the scoundrel Arcangeli, who leaves him on the bridge at the end the moment he sees Pasquale.

*Shoeshine* does not simply portray brutality against children, for which society will have to pay no particular price and for which it is simply "evil." The film portrays society's brutality against *itself*, in the person of its future: its children. What makes *Shoeshine* so poignant is that we see more than the love between Giuseppe and Pasquale destroyed: we see a love destroyed that could only have grown and spread to their other relationships as they grew older; a love that meant to solidify itself through the purchase of the horse and take flight, to announce itself triumphantly throughout Rome and its environs.

The very title of this film is a clue to its intentions. *Shoeshine* is the pathetic story of Giuseppe and Pasquale, but, as I have been maintaining, that is not all. The tragedy of post-World War II Italy is *reflected* in their pathetic story. Even as the American GIs in the film see the image of their own security and prosperity in their shined shoes, so too does Italian society find the image of its own disarray and poverty in the story of these beautifully paired boys. *Shoeshine* is an illumination of reality, a "shining" of reality's "shoes," if you will, of the basic problems facing

a defeated nation in the wake of war: for the ruled, how to survive amidst rampant poverty at the same time one does not break the law; for the rulers, how to enforce the law without sacrificing one's own humanity or that of the lawbreakers.

Early in the film we see the shoeshine boys at work, kneeling at the feet of the GIs, who barely take notice of them except to pay. At the end we look over the shoulder of the prison guard at the screaming Pasquale in the river bed: he is on his knees, next to the dead Giuseppe. De Sica holds this shot for a long time; it is the final one. Pasquale and Giuseppe are still the shoeshine boys, and down at them, as if they were shining his shoes, looks the prison guard, a representative of society. He is confronted with the offspring of war-torn Italy, of his own work: a once beautifully matched pair, now driven apart; the kind of pair without which Italy will not be able to move forward.

Monique Fong remarks on the cinematography of *Shoeshine*:

It would seem that [the cinematography] might best have been painstakingly realistic, with sharp outline and great depth of field. But on the contrary, the use of a small-angle lens gives soft effects that help to retain the poetic character of the picture and, by contrast, enhance the realistic performances of the actors.

(25)

Just as the title itself, *Sciuscìa*, corrupts or "blurs" the Italian word for shoeshine, the "soft effects" of the cinematography blur reality slightly, especially in the last scene on the bridge, where mist also obscures the image (Fong 15). Fong thinks that this technique, in addition to giving



the film a general poetic character, “surrounds the adventure with a halo, supplying a new element to serve the basic idea of the picture—the presentation of a realistic story seen through the eyes of children” (25). I would alter this idea and take it one step further to say that the “soft effects” suggest that the story is seen not only through the eyes of children, but also through those of the American occupation troops, the Italian government, the prison officials, and de Sica himself—eyes that, like those of children, do not comprehend fully what they see, do not have sufficient knowledge.<sup>6</sup>

The American GI who looks into his shined boots sees the image of his own victory and prosperity, but his image is tainted by the Italy that surrounds him—one that he has helped to destroy and whose rebuilding it is now his respon-

<sup>6</sup>When writing about neorealism, critics most often follow André Bazin’s lead and emphasize its use of nonprofessional actors, the documentary quality of its photography, its social content, or its political commitment. Bazin went so far as to call neorealism a cinema of “fact” and “reconstituted reportage” that rejected both traditional dramatic and cinematic conventions (André Bazin, *What Is Cinema?*, trans. Hugh Gray [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971] II: 60,77,78, et passim [the first seven chapters—over half the book—treat neorealism]). However, as Peter Bondanella points out,

Certainly the cinema neorealists turned to the pressing problems of the time—the war, the Resistance and the Partisan struggle, unemployment, poverty, social injustice, and the like—but there was never a programmatic approach to these questions or any preconceived method of rendering them on celluloid. . . . In short, neorealism was not a “movement” in the strictest sense of the term. The controlling fiction of neorealist films . . . was that they dealt with actual problems, that they employed contemporary stories, and that they focused on believable characters taken most frequently from Italian daily life. But the greatest neorealist directors never forgot that the world they projected upon the silver screen was one produced by cinematic conventions rather than an ontological experience. . . . Thus, any discussion of Italian



sibility to oversee. The prison guard at the end of the film looks down on Pasquale and Giuseppe and may feel sorry for them, but how aware is he of society’s, of his own, responsibility for their misfortune? De Sica directed the film, but he does not propose any solutions to the social problem he presents. There are no clear villains, no easy answers, so de Sica softens the “blow” of what we see at the same time that he discourages us from seeking answers to all our questions on the screen. We are in a position to contemplate this social tragedy far better than any character in the film; the audience *infers* the tragedy, while the group protagonist, society, plays it out. We are thus able to consider solutions to the problems that de Sica poses, or to consider the idea of abolishing war altogether. We are the ultimate recipients of de Sica’s *Shoeshine*.□

neorealism must be broad enough to encompass a wide diversity of cinematic styles, themes, and attitudes. . . . Directors we label today as neorealists were . . . all united only by the common aspiration to view Italy without preconceptions and to develop a more honest, ethical, but no less poetic language.

(34-35)

De Sica himself stated that his work reflected “reality transposed into the realm of poetry” (*Miracle in Milan* [Baltimore: Penguin, 1969] 4). And the last scene on the bridge in *Shoeshine* is an excellent example of this poetry: it was shot inside a studio, and relies for its meaning and effect in large part on the manner in which it is filmed (a manner more easily controlled indoors than on location). Bondanella notes that the cinematography of the last scene continues the sense of confinement witnessed in “a number of shots through cell windows [that] place [Pasquale and Giuseppe] in a tight, claustrophobic atmosphere and restrict their movement” (54). The boys are trapped in the foreground in the final scene on the bridge, since de Sica’s small-angle lens does not photograph the image in deep focus in addition to not capturing it in sharp outline.

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TIMELY PLEASURES: SANE AND IN-SANE

I

Pleasure has become an arch cultural motive in Western societies. It lures power, tempts institutions, seduces puritan and epicure alike. Its discourse seems paramount. Should we not then inquire, in this reflexive age, what enables pleasure or denies it, and what form it currently assumes? My own preliminary remarks will do no more than broach the topic.

Inescapably, Lionel Trilling's essay, "The Fate of Pleasure," casts on that topic an intellectual shadow. I need not recapitulate here its arguments, subtle, rich, full of muted urgencies and odd remissions. I need only recover its central apprehension:

The destruction of what is considered to be specious good is surely one of the chief literary enterprises of our age. . . . The most immediate specious good that a modern writer will seek to destroy is, of course, the habits, manners, and "values," of the bourgeois world, and not merely because these associate themselves with much that is bad, such as vulgarity, or the exploitation of the disadvantaged, but for other reasons as well, because they clog and hamper the movement of the individual spirit towards freedom, because they prevent the attainment of "more life."<sup>1</sup>

In a mood of civil monition, Trilling deplored that "unillusioned militancy of spirit" which deals violently with common life, and, in devaluing pleasure, threatens a morbid mutation in culture; "the 'high' extruded segment" of that culture, he judged, assays "an experiment in negative transcendence of the human," which breaks the bond between art and politics, spirit and society (79-81).

Trilling's signal apprehension still stands—stands, that is, subject to critical qualifications, two decades later, that time and our own distractions demand. How could it otherwise stand? For pleasure, like a dome of many-colored glass,

<sup>1</sup>Lionel Trilling, *Beyond Culture: Essays on Literature and Learning* (New York: Viking Press, 1965) 76f.

stains the grey radiance of history. It refracts all the hues of our personal as of our communal lives. The most intimate, even perverse, element in our character, it also binds us each to each, and all to the universe. Though it obeys no single, indefectible rule, it knows where Life, Love, and Death conduct their most enduring transactions. Thus pleasure seems at once the most constant and labile force in the human universe, perhaps one of its constitutive principles, perhaps a source of its nimiety.

II

It is no surprise, then, that pleasure has been known by many names, understood in many perspectives. I shall begin by naming four of its elementary perspectives before coming to my main business.

As a biological fact, pleasure does the slow work of evolution, preserving the organism, guiding it to its end. As pain signals danger, so pleasure promises well-being, though death and disease sometimes deceive it. Pleasure starts with our appetencies, with the extravagance of our erotic lives, which no estrus regulates. But it goes deeper, farther. Encoded in the brain's finest mesh, it inhabits language, play, all our creative and cognitive structures. Indeed, pleasure may prove an "epigenetic rule," as sociobiologists say, proctoring the human race in the widest test of life.<sup>2</sup>

In the ontological perspective, though, pleasure yields to that larger imperative, Being. "Man," says Nietzsche,—and I suspect he also meant woman— "does not seek pleasure and does not avoid pain . . . —what man wants, what every smallest part of a living organism wants, is an increase in power."<sup>3</sup> For this implacable "anti-

<sup>2</sup>Charles J. Lumsden and Edward O. Wilson, *Promethean Fire: Reflections on the Origins of Mind* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983) 71, 82f.

<sup>3</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Random House, 1967) 373.

Darwin," life rages not to preserve itself but to grasp *More!* The will to power is the primal form of affect that subsumes all others, including sexual pleasure. (Nietzsche would have applauded with the old Egyptian gods, in Mailer's *Ancient Evenings*, when Set grows hugely tumescent during his combat with Horus, testifying that power has become erect desire.) The "happy man" lives in perpetual strife, taking pleasure in the dissatisfaction of his will.

Human beings, however, are not only organisms of power; they also carry the burden of consciousness. The latest, perhaps last, brash hope of evolution, they intervene with mind in the very process which brought them to mind. That mind, alas, is not of a piece, as Freud best knew. *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* instructs us in the cunning of desire, the enigma of masochism, the deviousness of dream. Then, almost blandly, the book concludes: "The pleasure principle seems actually to serve the death instincts."<sup>4</sup> Here it is, beyond all seeming, in its darkness and starkness, this death instinct, primal homeostasis, that will stalk our ideas of bliss and prey on pleasure where it hides.

But now, to the three perspectives I have named—biological, ontological, psychoanalytic—I must add a fourth, socio-historical, which also mediates our conceptions of happiness. Trilling adverts to Werner Sombart's *Luxury and Capitalism*, which explores the role of woman, money, leisure, in the development of courtly pleasance since the Renaissance (Trilling 62). Yet princely luxuries scarcely offer a unique instance of the association of pleasure with power; for they persist in the far more diffuse forms of our conspicuous consumptions. No doubt, a "surplus value" continues to reside in these consumptions, a value that independent thinkers may clarify for us better than late Marxist ideologues, orphans of an exhausted revelation.

### III

I have alluded to these four "elementary perspectives" only to prepare us for Wordsworth's clarion call to pleasure:

Nor let this necessity of producing immediate pleasure be considered as a degradation of the Poet's art. It is far otherwise. It

<sup>4</sup>Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 1950) 87.

is an acknowledgement of the beauty of the universe, an acknowledgement the more sincere, because not formal, but indirect; it is a task light and easy to him who looks at the world in the spirit of love: further, it is a homage paid to the native and naked dignity of man, to the grand elementary principle of pleasure, by which he knows, and feels, and lives, and moves.<sup>5</sup>

This high and visionary claim, this comprehensive homage, confirms in us the widest interest in pleasure, physical and metaphysical, social and solitary.

But the claim also presses upon us a fifth perspective, more proximate to our poetic—indeed, to our civilized—existence: I mean the aesthetic perspective, theoretic and pedagogical. This perspective reveals a tradition of noble prevarications, extending from Horace to the present. "*Aut prodesse aut delectare*," Horace said. "Whatever you invent for the sake of pleasing, let it not be too distant from the truth. . . ."<sup>6</sup> This tension—or uneasiness—of pleasure and truth, delight and instruction, poetry and power, has informed criticism from the start:

Scaliger: "The end [of poetry] is the giving of instruction in pleasurable form."

Sidney: "Poesie therefore is an arte of imitation . . . with this end, to teach and delight. . . ."

Boileau: "Whatever you write of pleasant or sublime  
Always let sense accompany your rhyme."

Pope: "Avoid extremes, and shun the fault of such  
Who still are pleas'd too little or too much."

Johnson: "The end of writing is to instruct; the end of poetry is to instruct by pleasing."

(Smith and Parks 153, 196, 272, 395, 449)

<sup>5</sup>William Wordsworth, "Observations Prefixed to 'Lyrical Ballads,'" *The Great Critics*, eds. James Harry Smith and Edd Winfield Parks, 3rd rev. ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1951) 508.

<sup>6</sup>Horace, "Epistle to the Pisos: or The Art of Poetry," in Smith and Parks 124.

Throughout this tradition of sane equivocation, of critical equipoise, lurks, however, another motive of art—in Castelvetro, for instance, in Young or Reynolds. Here is Reynolds, surprising his own neo-Classical decorum, in the thirteenth "Discourse," delivered to the Royal Academy on 11 December 1786:

The great end of all those arts is, to make an impression on the imagination and the feeling. . . . the true test of all the arts is not solely whether the production is a true copy of nature, but whether it answers the end of art, which is to produce a pleasing effect on the mind.<sup>7</sup>

(Smith and Parks 492)

By insisting here that art should address "the desires of the mind," gratifying it by "realising and embodying what never existed but in the imagination," Reynolds prefigures some extremes of Romanticism that would have repelled him (Smith and Parks 494). Still, in that moment of his *Discourses*, Reynolds assents to a certain motive of art: "To produce excitement in co-existence with an over-balance of pleasure," as Wordsworth put it, or to propose for "its immediate object pleasure, not truth," and "delight from the whole, as is compatible with a distinct gratification from each component part," as Coleridge famously said (Smith and Parks 512, 530). That motive finally disencumbers the imagination, and ends in vertigo, ecstasy, death. And it pervades a counter-tradition of "in-sane" pleasures, presaging, in our time, Barthe's notion of *jouissance*.

All literary theory may be a footnote to Plato, and it is also to Plato that this "in-sane" tradition reverts. Beyond pleasure or instruction, the Platonic poet, we know, is divinely possessed. Thus in the "Ion": ". . . the Muse first of all inspires men [poets] herself; and from these inspired persons a chain of other persons is [magnetically] suspended, who take the inspiration" (Smith and Parks 5). A chain of possession, society in hierarchic chains. Plato returns to his theme in the "Phaedrus": without madness, the poet's skills, his "works of sanity," come to naught. But there is a higher madness still, "the best of all forms of divine possession," which only the lover of Beauty comes to know.<sup>8</sup> Love, Beauty, and Mad-

ness seem here in one poetics compact, a metaphysical poetics—to every Horace suspect.

This "in-sane" poetics next finds expression in Longinus, the counter-Horace and his near contemporary. "On the Sublime" rests on pleasure, on more than pleasure: it argues for transport. Genuine passion, in "its right place . . . bursts out in a wild gust of mad enthusiasm and as it were fills the speaker's words with frenzy"; the Sublime "scatters everything before it like a thunderbolt . . ." (Smith and Parks 72, 66). Indeed, Nature herself, "when she ushers us into life . . . implants in our souls the unconquerable love of whatever is elevated and more divine than we" (101). Thus, in the Sublime, pleasure veers toward awe.

From awe it is but a step to terror, not Aristotle's, but Kant's. A number of writers had written on the sublime before Kant: notably Baillie, Dennis, Shaftesbury, Addison, Burke. But it remained for "the beautiful magister" of Königsberg to give that concept amplitude, first in his *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* of 1764, then, twenty years later, in the imperious *Critique of Judgment*. In the early work, Kant distinguishes between the (feminine) attributes of beauty—delicacy, comfort, charm, gaiety, finitude, love—and those (masculine) of the sublime—grandeur, danger, harshness, melancholy, infinitude, truth. The "terrifying sublime"—there is also a "noble" and "splendid" sublime—has even a more forbidding mien. "Deep loneliness is sublime," says Kant, "but in a way that stirs terror. Hence great far-reaching solitudes, like the colossal Komul Desert of Tartary, have always given us occasion for peopling them with fearsome spirits, goblins, and ghouls."<sup>9</sup> Hence, too, the affinity of this dark sublime with the unnatural, the grotesque, the visionary (*Observations* 55). By the time Kant came to his third, great critique, this suprasensual element becomes essential to the sublime, which, as he now says, commits "an outrage on the imagination," and so "merits the name of a negative pleasure."<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup>*The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, eds. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961) 492, 496.

<sup>9</sup>Immanuel Kant, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*, trans. John T. Goldthwait (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1960) 48.

<sup>10</sup>Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgment*, trans. James Creed Meredith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952) 91.

<sup>7</sup>It would seem as if some of our bluff, latter-day critical realists might find in the discourse of an eighteenth-century academician some apt complication of their views.

#### IV

We risk to lose ourselves in arbors of weird delights. The point is this: there has *always* been a sinister counter-tradition of pleasure, touched by madness, pain, terror, touched even by "dusky death." It is an agonized, agonistic, spiritual tradition, which the epithet "insane" or "morbid" fails to render. And it comes to rotten ripeness in certain works of the last hundred years. We know it best in that tradition of Gallic extremity, of radical erotic chic, which runs from Sade, through Rimbaud and Lautréamont, to Artaud, Bataille, Céline, Leiris, Genet, Klossowski. We know it, too, in more influential masters since Proust and Kafka. But there it was, before them, in Plato, in Shelley:

It is difficult to define pleasure in its highest sense; the definition involving a number of apparent paradoxes. . . . Sorrow, terror, anguish, despair itself, are often the chosen expressions of an approximation to the highest good. Our sympathy in tragic fiction depends on this principle. . . .<sup>11</sup>

We may conclude that pleasure—whether in an excess of Platonic madness, Longinean sublimity, Kantian terror, Romantic agony, or Modernist alienation—can also claim us to dread. But what now is its fate in Postmodern culture? Does an extruded segment of that culture still seek negative transcendence, as Trilling thought, dealing violently with the common, the specious, good? Whence now the "unillusioned militancy of spirit" which infuses in society terror, death? The questions are not likely to find decisive answers even if we must assume the burden of our self-interrogations—as did Kant, exactly two centuries ago, in "*Was heisst Aufklärung?*"

Certain characteristics of our epoch have already begun to emerge from invisible time. In a mass, or consumer, or postindustrial, society, we can no longer speak confidently of a high extruded segment. High and pop culture, past and future, fact and fable, continually mingle in the immanent media of our day. Genres blur; signs shift; centers and margins collapse or disperse. "Paratactical" (Auerbach) structures prevail, inducing indeterminacies everywhere. A tendency to ironic pastiche, to "carnivalization,"

(Bakhtin) undermines Authority—even as the need for it, or at least for Consensus, grows. All this prompts thinkers to proffer strange, anarchic, images of the age: "rhizome" (Deleuze), "parasite" (Serres), "black hole in space" (Baudrillard), "minoritarian language game" (Lyotard).

Nor is it certain that Postmodern literature still insists on "the energy of its desperateness," as Trilling put it, still howls unconditionally for "more life." This may be true of an implacable genius like Samuel Beckett, whom some critics now perceive as "Last of the Moderns." In large measure, though, Postmodern literature mediates dread with play, parody, dreck, with the textuality of all things, even death's. From Nabokov and Borges to Barthelme, Calvino, or Solters, a ludic strain of literature insists on its deconstructive wit, its "playgicism" (Federman), its artifices, travesties, and arbitrariness. In so doing, it may have brought itself to an end deader than it had imagined.

Still, despite its equivocations and diffusions—what I have called its "indeterminances"—Postmodern culture continues to harbor the two motives of pleasure: sane and insane, beautiful and sublime, gracious and convulsive, Epicurean and Platonic, Apollonian and Dionysian—so runs our bicameral brain. How do these *interactive* motives reveal themselves in the present climate of our culture?

Consider an example of sane, indeed succulent, pleasure: Brillat-Savarin's *Physiologie du goût*, prefaced by Roland Barthes. Here is a "*géné-sique*," combining all five senses with erotic and convivial pleasures, a synaesthesia of our physiological and social existence, and of our intellectual existence too, which the author engages in an act of erudite and poetic clarity. This meditation on taste teases us into a literary mood, as Barthes knows. Thus his "*lecture*" connects the temporality of taste with narrative, the orality of gastronomy with language, and the satisfactions of a fastidious appetite with those of art. We are in the realm of "*désir*," not "*besoin*." And in that enchanted realm, the imagination reigns supreme: "*L'appetit tient du rêve, car il est à la fois mémoire et hallucination . . . il s'apparent au fantasme.*"<sup>12</sup> Barthes, of course, cannot resist to tip toward bliss, *jouissance*; he speaks of the incommensurability of all true delight. Still, in his accent on the precision of taste, on the ethic of gus-

<sup>11</sup>Percy Bysshe Shelley, "A Defence of Poetry," in Smith and Parks 576.

<sup>12</sup>Brillat-Savarin, *Physiologie du goût, avec une Lecture de Roland Barthes* (Paris: Hermann, 1975) 25f.

tatory discernment, he recovers pleasure to cultural experience. This is a communal experience of luxury as well as desire, of class no less than taste. Indeed, as Barthes perceives: "*Le goût lui-même (c'est-à-dire la culture) est socialisé . . .*" (30).

I cite this eccentric—I nearly said esculent—text because I believe that it offers a certain flavor of our time. For I take both Barthes and Brillat-Savarin as exponents of a sane and sensuous civility that accrues more to our civilization than to its discontents. That civilization remains, of course, as much in nuclear peril as in moral doubt. The apodictic Left has affluent contumely for it; so does the prophetic Right. And even originals, like Jean Baudrillard, perceive in the West "a collective vertigo of neutralization, a forward escape into the obscenity of pure and empty form, unintelligible form, wherein the visible is both lessened and degraded."<sup>13</sup> Hence, for Baudrillard, our pervasive pornography stems not from lust or delight but from a "paralyzed frenzy of the image." Yet I, for one, would suggest that, despite their crass or cunning failings—including the wilful exportation of those very failings—, Western democracies may some day be recognized among the most decent societies the world has known.

The conventional, and invariably lugubrious, critiques of our consumer society have become largely impertinent. The real issue may be neither "exploitation," as the Left habitually intones, nor "decadence," which the Right ritually decries. The issue may be one of *representation*: counterfeit images that our sloth or fear conspires with our institutions to make. The issue may be one of *cultural cowardice*, mendacity if you wish, but also massive narcosis, where both power and pleasure contribute to their own hebetude. "This stupefaction," says Baudrillard again, "is what is obscene, it is the glazed extreme of the body . . . an empty scene. . . . Nothing happens and yet we are saturated with it" (43). And the issue may be one of *national mediation*: the inability of developed as of developing nation states to negotiate their centers and margins, sociolects and idiolects, wholes and fragments—the One and the Many as pre-Socratics used to say—on an earth now wracked by the coeval forces of planetization and retribalization, totalitarianism and terrorism.

<sup>13</sup>Jean Baudrillard, "What Are You Doing After the Orgy?," *Artforum* Oct. 1983: 43.

Totalitarianism and terrorism: mirror images of our radical absence, inexorable enemies of pleasure in its multitude. Totalitarianism seeks to possess men's minds but succeeds in controlling only their behavior, that is, their bodies conceived as machines. It does so absolutely; hence the flagitious practice of torture, pandemic now in half the continents of the world.<sup>14</sup> In totalitarian states, Michel Foucault might have said, the old "*symbolique du sang*," bloody coercion, still prevails; in Western democracies, a more insidious "*analytique de sexualité*," or better, "*analytique d'identité*," has taken its place, prescribing for each individual, beyond a social role, a particular form of subjectivity, of inner subjection.<sup>15</sup> In either case, the principle of unpleasure reverts to the modern state, perhaps inherently totalitarian in its tendencies, certainly destructive in its "outraged righteousness," as Paul Johnson argues in *Modern Times*, even when it seeks to be benevolent (48).

As to terrorism, that other, rancorous principle of unpleasure in the Postmodern world, it thrives mainly in open societies, which it tries balefully to subvert. Desperately elite, it pits its fractious vision against society as a whole, sometimes against all Life. Adroitly, insanely, it exploits the symbols of its moment, subsisting between the immanence of our media, the indeterminacy of our authorities. Its avowed aim, of course, is change—though only the terrorist's own self-transformation may suffice. And so it strikes at the glaze of representations in post-industrial societies, at their guilty pleasures. Yet in the end, terrorism itself appears the most glazed, the most fantasmic, of contemporary arts; and the terrorist himself, as often herself, seems a vicious conjurer, solitary entertainer, a figure of violent thought inhabiting a world of semblances.

It may be, as Oscar Wilde said in his probing essay, "The Soul of Man under Socialism," that

<sup>14</sup>Contemplating the carnage and barbarism of the Great War, Winston Churchill bitterly remarked: "When all was over, Torture and Cannibalism were the only two expedients that the civilized, scientific, Christian states had been able to deny themselves: and they were of doubtful utility." (Quoted by Paul Johnson, *Modern Times: The World from the Twenties to the Eighties* [New York: Harper & Row, 1983] 14.) But torture has become now more "useful."

<sup>15</sup>See Michel Foucault, *La Volonté de savoir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976) 188-195; and "The Subject and Power," *Critical Inquiry* 8.4 (Summer 1982): 781-785.

"All modes of government are failures"; and that "Socialism itself will be of value simply because it will lead to Individualism."<sup>16</sup> But we need to discriminate between political failures, and discriminate also between the acts which aspire to redeem them. The sensuous civility of Barthes/Savarin may seem corrupt to some fierce, disaffected youth or intransigent revolutionary. But is the answer to that "corruption" the bomb thrown, on a Sunday, among families dining at a restaurant in the Bois du Boulogne? Our politics, totalitarian or terrorist, has become a politics of mountainous power or abysmal spite. And it is this politics, far more than high culture, that now opposes what each faction there considers the specious good, our thralldom to pleasure.

Trilling reproached his fellow intellectuals—notably William Phillips—for failing to perceive that the devaluation of pleasure helped to sunder literature from any "rational and positive" politics: "The situation that Mr. Phillips describes will scarcely be a matter of indifference to those of us who, while responding to the force of the perverse and morbid idealism of modern literature, are habituated to think of literature and politics as naturally having affinity with each other" (83). Trilling, of course, wrote his essay before experiencing the full brunt of the Sixties, their visionary and "irrational"—as opposed to "rational"?—politics. And he wrote, too, before witnessing the grim spectacle of terrorism. May he have been persuaded to see that a large, ideological part of our politics now abets the death instinct?

Everything, we are told often enough, everything is ideology. That is tautology. Should we not also pause to distinguish between ideologies, their values, goals, exactions, their hidden torque on our being? For some ideologies breed totalitarians, some terrorists; while others would make bores, bigots, captives, or cowards of us all. Certainly, ideologies inspire action, empower change. They also comfort, reassure, cradling us in reality. But though human kind may not "bear too much reality," as Eliot wrote, the masters and mistresses of life have tended to be reckless of their grievances, of themselves. And like great poets in their "negative capability," they have taught us "to care and not to care," to hold our courage high and keep our moral imagination on the stretch. Their patience becomes our task—for who amongst us has not grown weary of wear-

ing his damage or her plaint on the sleeve?

## VI

Ideology, however, is not the sole culprit, the only bullying exigency of our age. What, we may well ask, is the place of pleasure in our work, in our knowledge, in all that we profess to write or teach? What, particularly, in all those literary theories, recently welcomed by our Statue of Intellectual Liberty to these shores? Such theories often speak of desire, the erotics of the text, only to inspire a variety of painful critical prose: American Gothic, Immigrant Gongorist, Left Bank *Scriptible*. Sidney, Dryden, Johnson, Shelley, Hazlitt, Arnold, Emerson, Pater, Eliot, wrote criticism to give lasting pleasures that few critics now are inclined, in their styles, to afford. This is not to deprecate the Newest Criticism, its vast energy, excitement, scope. But who, at some professional meeting, has not strayed upon Lucky declaiming from the podium: "Quaquaquaquaqu outside time without extension. . . ." Perhaps that is why Umberto Eco, consummate theoretician, has turned from *A Theory of Semiotics* to *The Name of the Rose*, explaining its extraordinary success in terms of its available pleasures, without apology for their "repressive desublimation" (Marcuse).

When poststructuralist critics now address the issue of pleasure, they do so in darker terms of desire: as an experience of rupture, abjection, dissolution, a scission of feeling, transumption of affect, diremption of love. Thus they seem to align themselves, excepting a few, with the tradition of "in-sane" pleasures, which has prevailed since the Romantics, deepened since Freud. Keats, though unfashionable, can still speak, in "The Ode on Melancholy," to these critics:

She [Melancholy] dwells with Beauty—  
Beauty that must die;  
And Joy, whose hand is ever at his lips  
Bidding adieu; and aching Pleasure nigh,  
Turning to Poison while the bee-mouth  
sips. . . .

But their emphasis remains, as Leo Bersani put it, on "a celebratory sense of the failure of idealistic vision," and calls for an "exuberant indefiniteness about our own identity," which can "both preserve the heterogeneity of our desires and rescue us from the totalitarian insistence

<sup>16</sup>*The Artist as Critic: Critical Writings of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Richard Ellmann (New York: Random House, 1969) 266, 257.

natural to all desire."<sup>17</sup>

In concluding, however, I need to approach a more speculative horizon of pleasure, perhaps neither "sane" nor "in-sane." I recall Kant who also insisted that the sublime "pleases immediately by reason of its opposition to the interest of sense" (*Critique of Judgment* 118).<sup>18</sup> The sublime appeals to a "higher finality" of mind, eluding representation. It is, one might claim, a species of gnostic delight. It implies a movement, as Trilling said of Wordsworth and Keats, "a movement from the sensual to the transcendent, from pleasure to knowledge, and knowledge of an ultimate kind" (65). This knowledge our postmodernity affirms even as it puts in dogmatic doubt.

The doubt, I think, proceeds mainly from our untempered aversion to "metaphysics," to everything that might place us under the obloquy of "presence." This aversion makes us partial in our pleasures—and also mindless, I fear. Aristotle wrote on metaphysics, wrote on politics, ethics, physics, logic, rhetoric, and poetics too. And though Aristotle has now ceded some ground to Derrida—Second City critics may vehemently deny it—surely Aristotle's comprehensive civil-

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<sup>17</sup>Leo Bersani, *A Future for Astyanax* (Boston: Little Brown, 1976) x, 314.

<sup>18</sup>See also p. 92.

ity of mind can still serve us as example. We do not truly know enough to deny all beliefs as "nostalgias for presence." As William James tersely remarked: "The freedom to believe can only cover living options which the intellect of the individual cannot by itself resolve; and living options never seem absurdities to him who has them to consider."<sup>19</sup>

I end this essay on a more personal note. There are many pleasures and displeasures, sane and perverse, and none knows how to give them legitimacy beyond human need. Some say therein lies the loneliness of every heart. But I think three hearts beat in us all: one private, one politic, one visionary or poetical. Together, they pump blood into the near, the middle, and the far distances of our lives, farther than any receding star. And when one of these hearts falters or fails, we shrivel a little in our humanity. And shrivel in our pleasures too. □

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<sup>19</sup>William James, *The Will to Believe* (New York: Dover Publications, 1956) 29.

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Kay Ryan

TO SPEAK OF NEED

If I could take into my lungs  
once the light gas the dead breathe  
If I could pass all husbandry  
of hope and wrong headed notions  
of charity and see  
without instruction from my sight  
and taste without the link  
to nourishment, and follow light  
beyond the clock and rise up  
white as first blade out of seed,  
I could come back and speak of need.  
I could beg you sing for the night  
is long and generous. I could beg you  
stay for the dead are with us.

## Glen Pourciau

### BACK

That evening I saw him standing around outside before he got the nerve to come up to the door and knock. The sound of his fist made me jump a little even though I expected it and even though he didn't knock hard at all, maybe because he was afraid of coming inside here with me again or maybe because he was afraid of finding out I was gone. Something held me back from moving too quickly to the door, but after a second I went ahead and answered.

And there he was in front of me, smiling, but afraid to be here. He waited for me to smile back at him, and I could see him looking over my face, glancing at my teeth, at the lines on my cheeks and under my eyes, like he was making a list in his mind of the damages.

I hadn't known he was coming or I could have looked better. He didn't seem to have done much to get himself ready, but he did keep smiling, trying to get me to smile at him. I didn't smile but I let him in anyway.

I watched him looking over the room, but he seemed like he didn't want to look at it too much because I would think he was being pushy, already thinking he was moving back in. He turned halfway around and nodded and kept smiling, saying with that nod and smile that it still looked pretty much the same, that it pleased him, I guess. And then he fixed his eyes on me and his smile faded out. I saw that his breathing was different and I knew that he would come toward me.

I did let him hold me, but I got stiff in his hands. My eyes closed and my head dropped because I was afraid to see his face coming for mine. I was remembering when he left me. We went to the library downtown on the bus and he told me he was going upstairs to read while I looked at the paper. He never came back. I looked everywhere, on every floor, and then came home to find him and his things gone.

He leaned away and looked at me, waiting for me to say something, I guess, or to see my face melting and me crying and welcoming him back. I kept my head down. My stomach was churning and all of a sudden I felt very hungry.

He put his hand on my face and rubbed me to keep me from hurting, but I shrank from him. He didn't let go though. He held me tight.

He headed for the bathroom then, pointing at it and looking at me in a way to show he needed to go right then. It seemed quiet and alone after he walked away. I could feel my aching for him and my weakness. I told myself, well he's here anyway and no one else is or has been since he left almost a year ago.

I heard his footsteps coming out of the bathroom, and I ran up to him; I couldn't stop myself. I held him and he held me.

We went and sat down on the sofa. I wanted to ask him questions right away. I wanted to know if he had plans for himself and if he had maybe decided that he loved me. But I was afraid he would look distant and turn away, like he used to when I asked him those kinds of questions. But

maybe he has changed, I thought, and then laughed at myself for thinking it.

We weren't saying anything to each other and all I heard was his stomach gurgling. I noticed that he looked weak. He got up and went to the kitchen, grinning at me. He found a can of tuna fish, his favorite, and began turning the can opener around the top of it. He started eating it out of the can with a fork. He got some crackers out of the refrigerator and a glass of milk.

I smiled real big at him and he smiled too, because this eating he was doing meant to us that he was really back home. There he was eating his tuna fish.

I said, "I'm glad you're back," meaning it.

He nodded, saying, "Glad to be back. Sure am glad to be back here with you. The only person I've lived with." And he nodded again, meaning it.

I heard him crunching into a cracker and swallowing his milk. There he is back, I thought. His lips were shining from the oil in the tuna, and while I was looking at him he burped a little. He smiled, wiping his mouth with his hand, and turned the can over the sink, pouring the oil out while he held the tuna down in the can. Him doing that made things seem even more back to normal.

"You're nice to welcome me like this," he said, holding the can up between us.

I saw a drop slip off its bottom and fall to the floor. He saw it too and told me he was sorry.

"What you been doing?" I asked him.

He shrugged, said, "I don't know," looking serious all of a sudden, putting his head down some, still eating his tuna fish. "I've got some stuff out on the porch. Can I bring it in?"

"Okay," I said.

He set the tuna down and went to the door, leaning out, reaching for an old suitcase. He pulled it inside and set it down, grinning, leaving it there by the door, I guess because he was embarrassed to carry it right on in the bedroom.

"It's okay," I said. "You can take it in there."

He stopped grinning as he carried his suitcase into my bedroom. I went and ate the rest of the tuna and some crackers. While I ate I heard him start to unpack and all at once I got afraid of the sound of the drawers going in and out and the sound of the hangers rubbing together and the floor creaking under his feet. It didn't take him but a minute to finish.

"You didn't think I was dead, did you?"

"No," I said, still afraid.

"That's good," he said.

He must have seen something in my face.

"Your feelings hurt about something?"

I looked at him.

"Have I done one damn thing?" he asked me, like I had accused him.

I shook my head that he hadn't, and said no.

"Maybe it's a mistake," he went on. "Maybe I should pack up. It's not that drop of tuna fish oil, is it? I'll come wipe it up."

He wiped it up and threw the paper towel into the trash. Then he nod-

ded at the sofa and we went to it.

He sat beside me, holding my face, looking into it, and kissed me real hard. I smiled at him, wondering what he wanted to convince me of with that kiss. He touched my hand and I touched him. He hugged me under his arm, rubbing my shoulder, looking relieved but tired. He propped his feet up, yawning.

He said, "Oh I'm tired," then blinked his eyes a few times.

Before long he closed his eyes and went to sleep. He slept until his arm went to sleep around me. Waking up, he rubbed his arm, opened and closed his hand, and sat back, sighing.

I wondered if he was afraid to invite himself into bed or if he just wanted to sit up for a little. It had got dark outside so I told him we might as well go on to bed. He nodded and we looked at each other.

When we were there we kissed and held one another, and it was like his hands were inside of me and something soft was uncoiling in them, something that hadn't been touched for a long time. He was lying on his back and I was held under his arm with my head on his chest, my hand on his stomach.

We were lying there quiet, both of us awake, and I decided I wanted to know something right then. I thought whether or not I should ask him, but before I answered myself I went ahead.

"Do you love me? Is that why you came back?"

I felt excited as soon as I asked it and was trembling, waiting for what he would say. I heard him gulping. It sounded real loud with my head on his chest, and his heart was beating fast. And when he didn't answer, my trembling started to die.

I just lay there in the dark and the quiet with him, listening to his heart, listening to him gulp, knowing why he left, and feeling some kind of deep desperation.

And then, though the answer was still the same, we held each other tighter than before and kissed again, meaning it, just like he'd said yes to the question.□

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Nick Bozanic

HOME COMING

I come home across fields, across rivers,  
across the shadows of clouds.

I come home wearing my brothers' sorrows like a cloak,  
my clenched fists clutching nothing.

I come home to my wife sleeping,  
to my children drowning in darkness.

I come home to my mother who weeps,  
to my father who cannot close his eyes.

I come home to the garden of thistles,  
to the orchard of bones.

I come home shouting *traitor, traitor*  
into the faces of those who greet me.

I come home again and again,  
until I am no longer a stranger  
and the dogs who have been beaten by hunger  
kiss my hands as we lie down together.

Gary Davis

## REJECTED OFFSPRING: THE SCREENPLAY AS A LITERARY GENRE

Recently, a professor at a Southwestern university was denied credit of publication by his department administration for a screenplay he wrote, then later turned into a film, working as co-producer and editor. This same department, it should be noted, offers masters degrees to creative writing majors who come up with novels titled, alarmingly, *Climb to Terror* and *Sands of Time*. Obviously, the distinction being drawn here has less to do with the quality of the work than it does with a matter of form or genre, a sort of literary snobbishness reminiscent of the critical reception of the early English novel.

Though some critics and many English departments are beginning to study film from a literary perspective, no one seems quite sure what to do with the screenplay. Generally, the screenplay is seen as the mere outline, the warm-up, for the real work—the film. The literary distinction that has been placed on plays—we do, after all, read plays as literature in literature classes—has never been likewise bestowed upon the screenplay. And although the dramatist has always taken pride of place in the theater, the screenwriter, even when developing an original work, is rarely recognized as a principal creative force. Clearly, the literary community, like the business world of Hollywood, views the screenplay only as a means to an end rather than an entity in itself.

Yet a screenplay is a separate entity; it is not film, dialogue, an outline, or a cinematic tool. It is a literary structure written first to be read and then produced. And though pride of place is an arguable concept in the creation of a film, the pride of place in the creation of a screenplay is clear and definite; the creator is its writer or writers. And while it is, perhaps, understandable that the business mind of Hollywood overlooks the literary contributions of the screenplay writer, that the literary world should abandon and neglect one of its own is near sinful.

Though a literature course is likely to admit that Faulkner or Fitzgerald wrote screenplays, the admission is somewhat sheepish, and rarely will

an original screenplay be included in the study of their work. Yet the great majority of literary work being produced today is written in the form of a screenplay and presented as film. And it is too easy to view this fact as a matter of commercial rather than an aesthetic concern. In its continued refusal to consider and use the screenplay as a literary genre, in its inability to train its young to read the screenplay as such, the literary community is overlooking an essential part of its own development and ignoring the justifiable excitement of studying, exploring, and developing a new genre.

Most arguments presented against viewing the screenplay as a literary genre seem to be illogical syllogisms. The same critics who argue that film isn't literature argue that the screenplay isn't literature, and attempt to prove the "unliterariness" of the screenplay on the basis that it does not do what film does. The screenplay is not film, the argument seems to go, and film is not literature, therefore, the screenplay cannot be literature. Obviously, the opposite conclusion would be just as illogical, but would at least *seem* to make more sense. Roger Manvell, for example, is one of those critics who insists that the distinction between film and theater lies in the fact that the play is also a branch of literature. Yet consider his reasons for refusing the screenplay that same distinction:

Film scripts, especially today, are frequently published, but it is evident from the very appearance on the printed page that very few can rank as literature; the description of the action is evidently a second hand affair, losing visual impact through the referential nature of words. It is like a description of a painting instead of the painting itself. Dialogue in a film, much as conversation in real life, forms part of human behavior, the spoken part, involving action and reaction. In a film the *total* behavior of a human being . . . makes up the nature of the action. This can only be described on the printed page. Film

scripts, therefore . . . are rarely works of literary art, even when decently written.<sup>1</sup>

Obviously Manvell is criticizing the screenplay on the simple basis that it is not film. What Manvell seems to be missing is the fact that written literature does not attempt to present "the painting itself" or the "total of human behavior." This is a question of understanding the languages of the various mediums. Film, working through a complex of languages, presents the immediate physical reality of total images. Written literature, working through a linguistic, verbal language, presents concepts, ideas, and images through the abstract. Film is the literature of a constantly unfolding physical present; written literature speaks solely in the language of representation. That the screenplay loses its "visual impact through the referential nature of words" is only meaningful when the screenplay is opposed to film, and has little bearing on the literary nature of the screenplay as the same statement can be made of any form of written literature when compared to film.

The visual impact of written language comes from its ability not to present but to suggest the whole of a thing. To use E.M. Forster's somewhat tired analogy, while visual art such as painting presents its spectator with at least half of the outside of the cow in the pasture, thus suggesting a whole cow, it is the nature of written literature to suggest the qualities of the whole cow through an accurate word selection, such as "mooring beast," "the gentle animal, sleepily munching grass, gravity tugging at its milk filled udder," or as Hemingway might put it, "the cow chewing on the grass in the pasture."

Thus, when Wallace Stevens writes "The Man With the Blue Guitar," he is not trying to replace or compete with Picasso's painting. Using written literature, he is suggesting certain aspects of the image through word selection. The same holds true for Herman J. Mankiewicz, who, when writing the opening scene for *Citizen Kane*, writes, "The camera moves slowly toward this window, which is almost a postage stamp in the frame . . . . A gateway of gigantic proportions and holds on top of it a huge initial 'K' showing darker and darker against the sky. Through this and beyond we see the fairy-tale mountaintop of Xanadu, the great castle a silhouette at its summit, the little window a distant accent in the darkness."<sup>2</sup> Man-

kiewicz, like Stevens, is not trying to compete with the visual images of film. He is using written literature's ability to suggest in order to give his reader a perception of certain qualities of the image.

The fact that the window is "almost a postage stamp" suggests that there is something official, business-like, efficient in this lonely and isolated "distant accent in the darkness." This implies an entirely different sort of isolation than if the window were "almost an insect" or "almost a coat button." It is hard to imagine someone calling this sort of writing unliterary because it loses "visual impact" or because it doesn't present the "total behavior." Literary word selection charges this sort of writing with both visual and conceptual impact through the ability to suggest the qualities of the whole.

It might serve to point out here that a screenplay is not written solely to be viewed or perceived as a film. It is written to be read, and read, hopefully, by someone who is going to turn the images suggested by the writer into the presentational images of film. It is upon the imagistic suggestions of the screenplay, through the writer's selection of words, that the film will develop its tone and timbre. The feel of a setting, the contrasting nature of a sequence of shots, decisions on the essence of characters and modes of characterization, are, essentially, derived from the script. The text remains the actor's and director's focal point of inspiration. And since the screenplay is to be read by people making such important decisions for the outcome of the film, it must use and display the best literary quality possible if the writer's intentions are to be realized or even recognized.

Erwin Panofsky, in defending his notion that "movie scripts are unlikely to make good reading," makes the comment that "the screenplay, in contrast to the theater play, has no aesthetic existence independent of its performance, and that its characters have no aesthetic existence outside the actors."<sup>3</sup> Notice the italics. Evidently Panofsky felt this idea was relatively fundamental to the nature of screenplays.

It may be possible, as Susan Sontag suggests, that many of Panofsky's ideas are directly re-

<sup>1</sup>Roger Manvell, *Theater and Film* (New Jersey: Associated Univ. Presses, 1979) 25.

<sup>2</sup>Herman J. Mankiewicz and Orson Welles, "Citizen Kane," *The Citizen Kane Book*, col. Pauline Kael (New York: Bantam Books, 1974) 132.

<sup>3</sup>Erwin Panofsky, "Style and Medium in the Motion Pictures," *Perspectives on the Study of Film*, ed. John Stuart Katz (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1971) 69.

lated to the quality of the films being produced at the time of his notable writing, a time when films were written for certain stars, thus blending character traits that the actor was known for with character traits of the fictional characters. At any rate, this is a comment much harder to support today than in the time it was written. It is unlikely that anyone would suggest that Ratso Rizzo of *Midnight Cowboy*, Benjamin of *The Graduate*, and Lenny Bruce of *Lenny* are all characters completely dependent for their existence on Dustin Hoffman. If the characters, as written, had no intrinsic, *aesthetic* existence, Hoffman would have no basis for the creation of his rendition, no reasoning behind the distinctions between the characters.

Yet Panofsky's comment above is one of the few with which Susan Sontag does not take exception in her essay, "Theatre and Film," although she does make some attempt to qualify it. "Panofsky's observation," she says, refers to the fact that "each film is an object, a totality that is set. While in the theatre only the written play is 'fixed,' an object (literature) and therefore existing apart from any staging of it. But, these qualities of theatre and film are not, as Panofsky apparently thought, unalterable." Sontag further qualifies Panofsky's statement with the notion that "art in all its forms, whether objects or performances, is first a mental act, a fact of consciousness . . . . Each subject of an aesthetic experience shapes it to its own measure."<sup>4</sup> The implication here is that the act of perception makes the distinction between object art and performed art negligible. That is, it is the experience of perceiving or participating in an art form that reaches an audience member and not the art form itself. Sontag, of course, is concentrating on disputing Panofsky's distinctions between theater and film, and her concerns are a bit too ethereal to be of any immediate use in the space available here.

What is important to note, however, is her view of Panofsky's ideas as being based on the distinction between object and performance, a difference of the "fixed" object and the temporal experience. For film, it could be said, is both a fixed object that can be carried and transported in much the same way as a book, and a temporal experience the perception of which is linked to the viewing of a performance moving through time. Yet what both Sontag and Panofsky seem to be neglecting is the fact that not one but two

fixed objects are created in the production of a film, one of which is the screenplay.

The fact that in theater only the written word remains fixed cannot be the sole basis for considering the stage play a branch of literature. The written play itself must have some literary qualities of its own to be deserving of that title. Similarly, the screenplay cannot be denied that title simply on the basis that something aside from itself remains fixed.

In his book *Screenplay: The Foundations of Screenwriting*, Syd Field, a writer-producer for David L. Wolper Productions, says that "a screenplay is a story told with pictures," and that, "all screenplays contain a basic linear structure."<sup>5</sup> Obviously, this definition is somewhat oversimplified. We might, for example, want to qualify his statement by saying "a screenplay is a story told with word-pictures," the connotation of the "word" being implied in the former but more accurate in the latter.

Yet even working with this simple definition as a basis, the relationship between literature and the screenplay becomes clear. By what possible standards could a story told with word-pictures in a linear structure not be considered a literary form? This is not to suggest that all works following this form are literature, just as all books claiming to be novels or all sentences marked by line breaks are not literature. Yet these are literary forms capable of containing literature.

Consider the method by which meaning is formed in written literature. Meaning is formed through the relationship of one unit of expression to another. The larger the genre the larger the units of meaning. In poetry, for example, meaning is created in the relationship of one word or one syllable to the next, spiraling out to the relationship between images. In the short story meaning is formed in the relationship of one image to the next and spiraling out to the relationship between details or single scenes. In a novel meaning is formed in the relationship between one scene and the next, spiraling out to the relationship between whole events. This spiral of units of meaning is applicable to written literature's grammatical structure as well, starting with the relationship between the printed characters and on up into paragraphs, pages, chapters, and whole sections of books.

Meaning in written literature, then, is derived from the lineal relationship between individual

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<sup>4</sup>Susan Sontag, "Theatre and Film," *Perspectives on the Study of Film* 82.

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<sup>5</sup>Syd Field, *Screenplay: The Foundations of Screenwriting* (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1979) 7.

units of expression. Is this not true for the screenplay as for any other literary art form? The constructs of units of meaning in the screenplay are relatively analogous to those in the short story, although most critics see fit to compare the screenplay to the novel. Yet meaning in a screenplay is formed through the relationship of one image (word-picture) to the next, spiraling out to the relationship between single scenes. Susan Sontag points toward this fact when she suggests that the screenplay, or even film for that matter, derives its meaning not from the presentation of an image, like a painting, but from the relationship of an image to the other images presented in a sequence. This is not simply the nature of narrative, but the nature of literary form.

Empirical proof of the fact that the screenplay is a literary genre can be found in the application of any set of literary aesthetics to the screenplay. The extent to which an aesthetic principle can prove itself valid by applying itself to other literary forms can be equaled by its application to the screenplay, with the one exception of the use of self, as the camera-eye is always the narrator of a screenplay. Woody Allen, however, has been repeatedly demonstrating that the camera-eye narrative can still be exceptionally subjective. At any rate, Poe's principle of unity of effect, Pound's notion of simultaneous expression, Bly's theory of leaping poetry, for example, can all find aesthetic validity in, retrospectively, the tone of *Citizen Kane*, the angles and quick cuts of *Faces*, and the imagery of *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Any principle governing the nature of literary form is applicable to the screenplay because the screenplay is as much a literary form as poetry, the short story, or the novel.

With this idea in mind, consider the development of modern literature in such a manner as to include the screenplay. In "Spatial Form in Modern Literature," Joseph Frank writes, "Modern Anglo-American poetry received its initial impetus from the Imagist movement of the years directly preceding and following the First World War. Imagism was important not so much for any poetry written by Imagist poets—no one knew quite what an Imagist poem was—but rather because it opened the way for later developments by its break with sentimental Victorian verbiage."<sup>6</sup> Frank then goes on to present Pound's definition of image. "An image," Pound wrote, "is that which presents an intellectual and emo-

tional complex in an instant of time." Clearly, the two literary genres most capable of doing this, and, in fact, the two which use this notion as their fundamental units of expression, are the film and the screenplay.

The phrase truly worth noting in Frank's statement is, "later developments by its break with sentimental Victorian verbiage." The later developments, according to Frank, have been a constant movement toward spatial form in written literature. This movement is seen here as coupled with a break in Victorian verbiage.

Along with its desire to express itself in an "instant of time," literature broke away from the wordiness and subjectivism which had been bogging it down. Reductivist writing became popular, developing into noun or verb writing as modifiers of all sorts came to be seen as extraneous. Succinctness became a high literary value, and literature began to express itself in the physical images of the external world, rather than the muck and mire of the poet's personal perceptions. Couple with this now the conceits which grew out of Imagism, the movement beyond the metaphor and into poetry of the thing itself. Poems such as "Peter Quince at the Clavier" and "The Red Wheelbarrow" pay homage to the workings of the physical image. The desire to show rather than tell a story became such a popular notion that today it is one of the opening clichés of any introduction to creative writing class, and the editorial intrusion, so popular in earlier centuries, has come to be seen as one of the few remaining sins possible to commit in print.

All of these notions are fundamental concerns of contemporary literary aesthetics. They have become the principles governing contemporary writing. And each of these concerns is fully realized, perhaps more fully than anywhere else, in the form of the screenplay. The screenplay offers modern literature and the contemporary writer a form which intrinsically combines a concern with succinct unity and the space-logic demanded by modern aesthetics, a form which not only allows for but necessitates the showing, rather than the telling of a story. The screenplay, though a tool of modern, industrial society, demands an awareness of and participation in literary craft, for the screenplay allows for no other mode of expression than the image, a mode of expression of paramount importance for writers of any age—and most particularly our own.

Erwin Panofsky pointed out that film and, therefore, the screenplay were called into being

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<sup>6</sup>Joseph Frank, "Spatial Form in Modern Literature," *The Widening Gyre* (New Jersey: Rutgers Univ. Press. 1963) 9.

not by artists or any artistic movement, but by scientists and technicians interested in the study of physical movement. Yet, considering the nature of the screenplay and the movements of modern literature, if science hadn't invented the need for the screenplay, literature, in all likelihood, would have had to develop a form very much like it in order to fulfill its own growing demands. Science has provided literature with a

new genre, a new child, that has too long suffered from neglect and abuse. As literature is reaching Middle-Age, it's time for reconciliation, comfort, and the sort of immortality provided by family. □

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*Gary Davis teaches writing at Ohio University and has published fiction in The Amphora Review, Mayaimi, and River's Edge.*

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## FEATURED ARTISTS

**Sophia de Mello Breyner Andresen**, one of Portugal's most distinguished living poets, has written ten volumes of poetry as well as several books for children; she is the winner of the Grande Premio de Literatura Portuguesa.

**Nick Bozanic** is teaching writing at the Interlochen Center for the Arts.

**José Maria Cundin**, the distinguished Basque artist, was member #435 of the Casino Algorteo. The full membership comprised 175,000 years of certitude of wisdom or error. Sr. Cundin was seven years arrears in dues (roughly \$35 U.S.) when he left Spain; the organization did not object to his departure. He lives in moral limbo in New Orleans.

**Richard Easton's** work has appeared in *The Critic*, the *Christian Science Monitor*, and the *New Orleans Review*; he teaches at Washington and Jefferson College.

**Herbert Eisenreich**, the contemporary Austrian writer, has received numerous literary awards and honors.

**Renate Latimer** teaches German at Auburn University, received her Ph.D. in Comparative Literature from the University of Michigan, and has translated among other works Adalbert Stifter's novel *Der Nachsommer*.

**Mark Nepo** has published poems recently in *Harper's*, *Antaeus*, *Sewanee Review*, *Southern Review*, and elsewhere.

**Jan Newman's** story appearing in this issue won first prize at this year's Deep South Writers Conference.

**Glen Pourciau** has stories in recent issues of *Carolina Quarterly*, *New Letters*, *Epoch*, and *New Mexico Humanities Review*.

**Kay Ryan** has poems current or forthcoming in *Poetry*, *Kenyon Review*, *Antigonish Review*, and elsewhere.

**Lisa Sapinkopf**, who teaches Portuguese at the University of Washington, won the Columbia Translation Center Award in 1983.

**Steinunn Sigurdardóttir**, the distinguished Icelandic writer, lives in Reykjavik.

**F. J. Sypher** lives in New York.

**Tom Whalen**, director of the NOCCA writing program, has translations of Robert Walser in *Selected Stories* (Farrar, Straus, Giroux; Vintage) and *Robert Walser Rediscovered* (University Press of New England); his *The Eustachia Stories: An Astroromance* will appear in late 1985 with Velocities Press.

