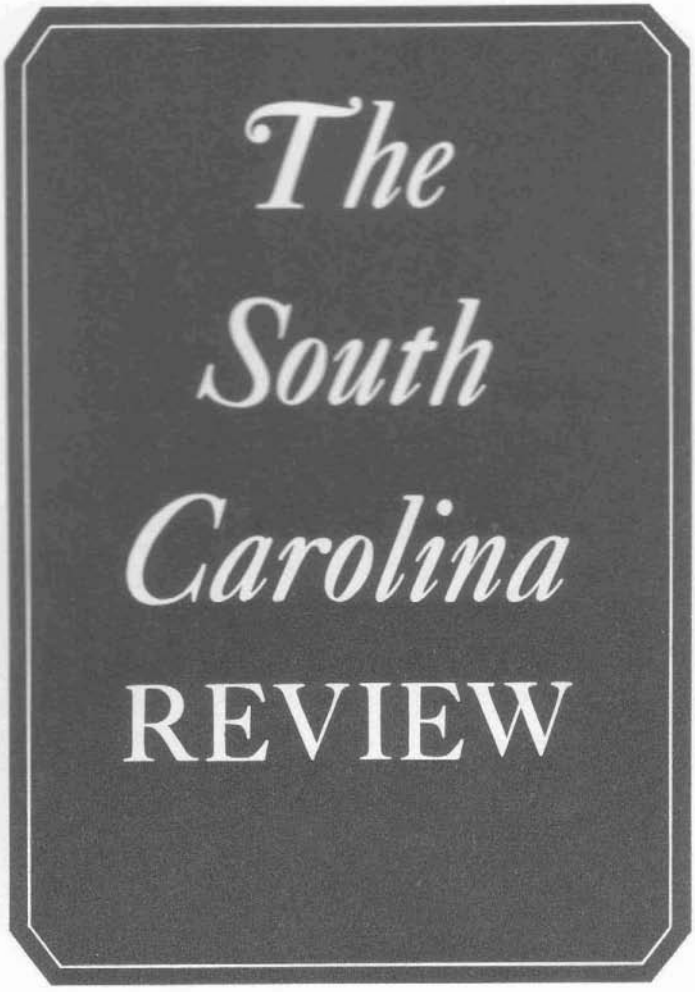

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The essay that follows was the last paper written by the founding editor of *The South Carolina Review*. It was prepared for delivery at the Modern Language Association Convention on December 28, 1975, in San Francisco. It was well received at that meeting and later deemed worthy of publication by another authority on the poetry of A. R. Ammons. We decided to print it without revision as a contribution to our continuing series on postmodernist poets and in the memory of Al Reid, who died in March, 1976.

R. J. C.

* * * *

THE POETRY OF A. R. AMMONS

ALFRED S. REID

We can scarcely read a literary review or critical essay these days without finding the word *post-modern*. One critic has even described certain writers as *post-contemporary*. These usages of *post-*, paralleled by equally frequent occurrences of *neo-* in combination with *romanticism, realism, or experimentalism*, might be a mere passing semantic fad, but more likely they suggest a pervasive sense of cultural transition. As one reviewer has put it, the transition has progressed to the point that our literature is "no longer 'post-modernist' but 'pre-something.'" Perhaps other critics are saying the same thing when they recognize no literary orthodoxy. Nevertheless, some critics still insist that modernism is not over. Despite the deaths of all the great moderns and our lengthening distance from the peak of modernism, these critics say that modernist poetry continues in different ways. One critic speaks of early moderns and late moderns. Others use the term for its mystique. Still others use the label *modern* only as a term of convenience or habit, more in its popular sense of *now* than in its critical sense of a body of writing that flourished in the teens and twenties of this century and had certain definite characteristics, such as repudiation of rhetoric, a reliance on formalist techniques of myth, symbol, and subjective states, an ironical, analytic detachment, and a numbing sense of alienation and nihilism.

If we define modernism by two of these most essential features—first, its impersonality, its formal separation of art and reality, its attraction to personae and fictions to live by, as in Pound, Yeats, Eliot, and Stevens—and, second, by its hollow despair, its inability to accept absolutes, we cannot help being struck by the newer tendencies of certain representative contemporary poets to take the opposite attitude of demythologizing the poem, of personalizing it, of blurring the line between art and reality, and of making more than tentative attempts to re-attach man to his world within a context of faith. I refer mainly

to the recent work of Robert Lowell and A. R. Ammons but also to such poets as Allen Ginsberg and Imamu Amiri Baraka (formerly LeRoi Jones). The latter two are special cases, and Lowell is already well recognized as probably our major contemporary or post-modernist poet. He abandoned the mythic approach for the semi-autobiographical, and in 1973 in *The Dolphin*, he surprised us all with his optimism, his "heaviness lifted."

To develop this controversial point of an emerging post-modernist sensibility, I shall therefore concentrate on A. R. Ammons, who is less well known than the others in spite of his recent winning of the National Book Award in 1972 for his *Collected Poems* and the Bollingen Prize in 1974 for his latest book *Sphere*. I realize the risks of oversimplification in arguing that a post-modernist sensibility can be demonstrated at this point and that it can be reduced to two features. I make the assertion less as dogma than as a hypothesis, something to be explored. But the truth is that some kind of break has definitely been taking place since the 1950s and that essentially it includes a blurring of the line between poetic art and reality and an urge to religious synthesis. Let us look at these phenomena in the poetry of A. R. Ammons.

Ammons began his poetic career in 1955 as a descendant of the wasteland poets in a little book called *Ommateum*. It is clearly modernist in technique and tone. The dominant image is that of a mythic wanderer, a sort of priestly poet or kingly exiled figure, often nameless, often named Ezra or Gilgamesh, one who seeks wisdom for himself and restoration for his people. He shuffles over the dry desert land, over "the bleached and broken fields," over the ravaged cities, hoping to hear the eternal word in the wind, but "there were no echoes from the waves." "The sap is gone out of the trees." There is only a "great vacuity." Death, disease, war, and destruction stalk the land and leave it in ashes. Wells are polluted and yield only muddy water, beer cans, and innertubes; there is scant shade under the willow trees. The wanderer is as often dead as alive and yet finds some minimum insight in this dying state. Coming to a primitive shore, he is killed by an aborigine's arrow shot in his throat. Although taken off by the wind, he returns to find his own dry bones, draws pictures with one of his ribs in the sand, and sings Devonshire airs. He dies in a more "mirthful place" and hears the buzzards engaged over him in talk that sounds "excellent to my eternal ears" while they wait for a "savoring age to come."

The book shows the obvious influence of Eliot's *The Waste Land* but contains a few more hints of redemption, as in the desire to experience an eternal unity beyond the flux, the image of working in the barn by a sheaf of light torn from a sunbeam, a love affair with a lion at a waterhole, and especially the various miracles of moonlight, grass,

and autumn harvest. In "When I Set Fire to the Reed Patch," Ammons experiences not only pleasure and beauty but "mulch for next year's shoots/ the greenest hope/ autumn ever/ left this patch of reeds."

Eight years later, in 1963, in his second book, *Expressions of Sea Level*, Ammons abandoned the formalist imagery of the mythic wasteland and the hollow despair. He describes the familiar landscape of farms and inlets of his youth in Whiteville, North Carolina. Instead of the dramatic masque of the wandering Ezra-Gilgamesh figure, he adopts the more general speech of meditation. Instead of a forlorn search for faith, apocalyptic and surrealistic, he focuses on a belief in an orderly world in which finite and natural boundaries reflect an immense universal order. We live amid these forms, these "expressions of sea level," he writes, on the periphery of being, far from the center, yet not so far that we do not recognize the unity of creation in its multitudinous identities and motions, its mysterious comings and goings, its harmonious and wonderful operations. The book celebrates this sense of union and order in the universe: "an order of instinct prevails/ through all accidents of circumstances," he writes in "Identity." Along the edge, the crust, one can find "disorder ripe,/ entropy rich, high levels of random,/ numerous occasions of accident." But these multitudinous forms or modes are possible because the "underlying" essence is "all and/ beyond destruction/ because created fully in no/ particular form." We cannot know the essence, only "its forms, the motions. . ./ its/ permanence," but we know the essence is there because its manifestations work so well and appear so universally. Therefore the poet in "Raft" drifts out through the inlet to the sea, letting "the currents be/ whatever they would be,/ allowing possibility/ to chance/ where choice/ could not impose itself." In "Hymn" he says he will find this eternal essence both by leaving the earth and by staying:

> and if I find you I must go out deep into your far resolutions
> and if I find you I must stay here with the separate leaves.

The book represents a striking departure from the modernist sensibility in which the poem is artifice and man is cut off from his world. Ammons is both a neo-romantic and a pragmatist, fusing certain modern scientific principles of indeterminacy and closed structures with an older Platonic metaphysics of matter and form and of the one and the many.

In his subsequent books of short lyrics—*Corson's Inlet*, *Northfield Poems*, *Uplands*, and *Briefings* in the 1960s and early 1970s—Ammons, for the most part, expands and illustrates his theories of peripheries and identities of nature. The bulk of his output consists of short nature poems about the familiar objects in his experience—inlets, dunes, rivers, animals, butterfly weeds, morning glories, pea vines, a favorite mule,

and trees in the snow. He invites his friends to visit him and see the glories of nature, to be blessed as he by the destruction of self in the epiphanies of natural experience, be "released from forms" into the "eddies of meaning" and into the transcendental mysteries of the "overall" presence. He has his dark moments, his struggles and losses; he knows violence and change; but he consistently holds to a world of open possibilities and the pervasive order of objects perceivable by the human mind and traceable to a vitality at the core. Ammons comes close to a Whitmanesque absorption into the One but strives to maintain a wholesome pragmatic balance between the oneness and the manyness of reality. Facts are facts, regardless of the freedom of philosophy, and he insists that we take the world as we sense it. With a similar stubbornness, he insists that we take the spiritual essence as we intuit it. In many of his poems, he professes to talk to mountains, rivers, and trees but wisely recognizes that his capacity for synthesis and flexibility of perspective makes man superior to, if slightly confused by, these other stable identities that he can take apart and re-order ("Zone"). As he says in "Poetics" (from *Briefings*), he looks for ways that things will turn out spiraling from a center.

In the midst of these personal nature lyrics spoken in his own voice, Ammons departed still further from the modernist sensibility of mythical analysis by writing a spontaneous autobiographical book-length poem, *Tape for the Turn of the Year*. With this work he explicitly joined the post-modernist movement begun ten years earlier by Ginsberg and Lowell. The Beats had aggressively challenged the modernist theory of the objective correlative of subliminal experience. They had advocated direct autobiographical treatment of reality and favored spontaneity over art. They argued too that the intellectual imposition of form on expression distorted reality. In *Life Studies* of 1960 Lowell had likewise departed from his earlier modernist works by demythologizing poetry in the confessional mode. Ammons' *Tape* similarly blurs the line between reality and art. Inserting an adding-machine tape into his typewriter, he proceeded to write a journal of his feelings, reminiscences, thoughts, and activities—a "long thin poem," he called it—between early December, 1963, and early January, 1964. "Anti-art and nonclassical," the book ridicules both the modernist and classical theories of poetry as artificial and obscure. Ammons accepts the "frazzling reality" of his daily life as more genuine, a "way of going along with the world as it is: "I care about the statement/ of fact:/ the true picture/ has a beauty higher/ than Beauty." He put the idea better ten years later in *Sphere* when he scoffed at the tightly made modernist poem: "I don't know about you, but I'm sick of good poems, all those little rondures/ splendidly brought off, painted gourds on a shelf." In *Sphere* and in *Tape* he

wanted to write something more personal, something massive, more synthesizing, something that touches "the universal anywhere you touch it everywhere." Yet he was not fully satisfied with the artlessness of *Tape* and concluded at that time that one cannot get too free: reality has to accept some form because form, as he is fond of saying, is part of reality; the identities of matter have their confinements though seemingly looser than the strict oneness of the center. *Tape* therefore is only a temporary launching, an experiment to see how far spontaneity will go without much imposed order, and it will not go very far. He returned to his short lyrics of natural insights until he finally devised a series of more controlled verse-essays or lectures to provide the "play-shapes" that satisfied him.

The first of these verse-essays, "Essay on Poetics," defines poetry as a synthesizing principle. A poem, he says, draws out the multiple stimuli of reality, those essential designs and configurations that curve to the wholeness of meaning. Language is a level of abstraction that only appears to suppress reality while actually holding it in a stasis: "poems are arresting in two ways: they attract attention with/ glistery astonishment and they hold it: stasis: they gather and/ stay: the progression is from sound and motion to silence and rest." The poem must not violate the bits and pieces of reality but must tidy them up. There is a living organism in life's structures, and the poet's task is to locate that law at the centers of the various blobs and clusters so as to find their meanings and preserve the living core. Ammons' tone is slightly whimsical, and the view of poetry is not new: as others have noted, it is Whitmanesque. What is mainly interesting is the almost banal perspective of a lecturer trying out illustrations, deliberately avoiding the "locked clarity" of finished poem for a "linear"—perhaps he means rhetorical—mode that keeps open all options and possibilities of thought. To Ammons, poetry is "fun," a "superior amusement." He deplores the "Scoffers," the "party-poopers who are/ afraid they ought to believe in history or logical positivism and/ don't have any real desire to do so: they are scarcely worth a/ haircut: organisms, I can tell you, build up under the trust of joy and nothing else can lift them out of the miry circumstances: . . . poems are pure joy, however divisionally they sway with grief: the way to joy is integration's delivery of the complete lode. . . ." As did *Tape for the Turn of the Year,* this long poem repudiates the Pound-Eliot-Yeats-Stevens tradition of recondite myth and the cynical historical complicators of the very simple romantic truth of a harmonious creative center.

In a second lecture-poem called "Extremes and Moderations" Ammons delights in this great principle of harmonious balance that moderates nature's extremes of winds, floods, lightning, and body sick-

ness, but he expresses fear that human beings have technologically tampered with nature so as to upset the balances. Such things as factories, automobiles, and chemical insecticides have jeopardized the balancing principle: "blue green globe, we have tipped your balance/ though we have scalded and oiled the seas and/ scabbed the land and smoked the mirror of heaven, we must try/ to stay and keep those who are alive alive." Like Blake and Hopkins and others before him, he believes that nature's balances are superior to our own and that we are headed for destruction unless we can align our psychic forces with nature's. Extreme calls to extreme, and moderation is losing its effect and quality. Yet all is not dreary; he has faith that we shall recognize our folly and save our world.

The third of these lectures, "Hibernaculum," attempts more ambitiously than the earlier verse-essays to define the poet's own emerging mental and physical identity. It catalogues the welter and tangle of his sensations that are bursting into a recognizable personality. He sees himself coexisting with nature without conscious will. Compared, however, to Whitman's brilliant poems on the subject of the self's becoming —"Song of Myself" and "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry"—Ammons' poem is unsuccessful. It does exactly what he says he hopes he will not do: "I must not when I get up on/ the soapbox wash out." The bobs and bits never synthesize, and the tone is proudly clever rather than penetrating. A few isolated passages are splendid, but earlier shorter poems about nature—"Identity," "Risks and Possibilities," "Expressions of Sea Level," "Gravelly Run," "Corson's Inlet"—say much better what he seems to be trying to say here about his own identity as a consciously complex person in the process of organizing his various multiplicities.

Ammons' *Sphere* reaffirms the ideas of the one-many and center-periphery that have guided his thought for more than fifteen years. It brilliantly succeeds in showing the underlying unity of diversity that leads up to the Most High. It is the finest of his autobiographical verse-essays, a meditative philosophical lecture on the unifying forces in nature. It is also a work in the grand American tradition of Emerson-Thoreau-Whitman-Frost, the blend of the practical and the idealistic, the semi-cantankerous and garrulous amateur thinker eliciting universal meanings from commonplace details. It is a joyous book, a celebration of living, a humble awareness of the mysteries of cycles and changes.

Beginning with a statement of his usual theme of the mystery of an integrated universe, Ammons proceeds to illustrate its working in lively examples: sexual imagery, geometric imagery, the seasonal changes, nature's ways of renewals and balancings, the eternal springing of water in a well, numerous kinds of objects like chairs or fictions that imitate the ideas of these things, daily routines that identify him, history ever

on the move toward newer meanings, biological formations, and so on—a constant flux of organization and divine recreation in which "fragments/ cease to be fragmentary and work together in a high flotation." It is one long ecstatic book-length sentence of 1,860 lines arranged into 155 numbered sections of four three-line stanzas. Like Whitman, Ammons addresses "vague hosannas: evaporation without arithmetic of loss." He feels so blessed that he invites others to join him: "send folks over: I have/ plenty to pass around . . ./ I go/ on the confidence that in this whole magnificence nothing is/ important, why should this be, yet everything is, even this/ as it testifies to the changing and staying." Abandon your scrambling for social status, he chides modern man: "let go and let your humanity rise to its natural/ height, said the star, and you will in that smallness be as/ great as I." The attitude extends to patriotism as well. He ecstatically praises his country and its citizens and attacks the radical, nay-saying, unpatriotic tradition:

> I can't understand my readers: they complain of my abstractions as if the United States of America were a form of vanity: they ask why I'm so big on the
>
> one-many problem, they never saw one: my readers: what do they expect from a man born and raised in a country whose motto is *E pluribus unum:* I'm just, like Whitman, trying to keep things
>
> half straight about my country. . . .

And what he keeps straight is the unity, the federation, the comradeship, the continuing possibilities:

> I figure I'm the exact poet of the concrete *par excellence,* as Whitman might say: they ask me, my readers, when I'm going to go politicized or radicalized or public when I've sat here for years singing
>
> unattended the off-songs of the territories and the midland coordinates of Cleveland or Cincinnati: when I've prized multeity and difference down to the mold under the leaf on the one hand and swept up into the perfect composures of nothingness on the other. . . .

But he has no intention of radicalizing or politicizing, only of asserting hope and reassurance, of singing "that tireless river system of streaming/ unity: my country: my country; can't cease from its/ sizzling rufflings to move into my 'motions' and 'stayings' ":

> when I identify my self, my work, and my country, you may think I've finally got the grandeurs. . . .

His hope is to achieve "a broad sanction that gives range/ to life," to achieve a "context in which the rose can keep its edges out of/ frost" and in which the "knots of misery, depression, and disease can/ unwind into abundant resurgence."

Often facetious and witty, often a bit tedious and overblown, *Sphere* is never merely clever or dull for long. It securely grounds its observations, unlike the other essay poems, on a progression of events, natural and human, that take place during one season: the melting snow of spring, the blast-off of Apollo 16, "April 23rd and still not a daffodil," returning from a trip to Baltimore on April 29 to find daffodils in bloom, the first mowing of the lawn, a cook-out at a friend's house on May 6, planting a garden, trimming a quince, being chased by a hornet while picking veronica from the lawn. In this respect the poem resembles *Walden* as well as *Leaves of Grass*, a kind of writing in which the assertions lead to concretes and the concretes rise again to universals.

Only in the most careless meaning of the term *modern* is Ammons a modernist poet in *Sphere*. He has rejected nearly everything that the modernists stood for. Like the other post-moderns he has extolled personality, blurred the line between art and reality, demythologized the poem. He is no confessionalist of a broken life, no advocate of poems-as-bullets, no extremist as A. Alvarez has called Plath, who tragically fulfilled the meaning of her poems in her suicidal death. He has rediscovered his own kind of personal expression, the lecture, the verse-essay, the Emersonian sermon. More than any of the others of his time he has attempted to re-integrate man into a whole person in a whole nation in a whole world, a part of a synthesis of man, nature, and God. He is the new poet of hope and faith, national and cosmic, who prophesies a "climb/ up the low belly of this sow century, through the seventies,/ eighties, right on upward to the attachments, the anterior/ or posterior fixation, anything better than the swung pregnancies of these evil years."

A movement as pervasive and successful as modernism will not succumb easily to change. It will continue to shape the work of contemporary poets for years to come. Yet Ammons is only one of several poets in the past fifteen years who has challenged the formalist theories and practice of modernism, not only by outright argument but by the more glacial emergence of a new sensibility. In the process he has lost some of the dramatic intensity that we associate with modernist poetry, but he has made up for the loss in urbane phrasing and the energy of a new affirmation.

MR. CHERRY

Two parts lye, and one part quicklime,
he beat his wife daily with words that bounced
and splattered like a rubber hose.
She faced him gushing through the nose.

He had a look of hot distaste,
of grim blood-pressure under black
eyebrows and black hair, a thick neck,
a fighter's look of quirky impulse,

razor quick. He played golf. One day he hooked
through eighteen holes and broke
every club across his knee, one by one.
He'd rather play baseball with his son,

he said. In the Thirties a man he'd fired
tried to fire him with a Colt forty-five.
Mr. Cherry saw him coming and grabbed a chair.
"Batter up!" He pitched, it combed his hair.

He had a cataract. They said, "Cut it out!"
His wife who had the same, survived it.
But patience was never Mr. Cherry's forte.
He had a stroke. He sneezed and really blew it.

They carried him out. The little knife
that killed him, no bigger than a flake of rice,
went crawling into its case
of scalpels, thin as hungry lice.

P. B. Newman

TWO POEMS BY SHARON OLDS

ENCOUNTER
(for Betty)

I am combing my hair in front of the mirror
when you come to me, your face full of pain,
your hair tangled.
I sit you down in front of the mirror
and comb you out, looking in your eyes
dark as soil well under the surface.

You do not wince when the comb catches.
You sit quite still. We can hear the swell
rise ten feet up the gouged rocks
and slide down. You are dead tired
but you sit straight, eyes ahead,
black as graves in the mirror.
You are not angry I am sleeping with your son,
you are not angry we gave our daughter your name,
you are not angry we are visiting here
on the stone island where you died. You sit
still and deep. The waves lift and
cover the rocks.
After a while it looks like only
one woman in front of the mirror
combing her hair, but I don't know
which one of us it is, your presence
rising up me rapidly and
pressing like earth from all sides.

VISITING-IN-LAWS IN THE EXTREME NORTH

In the middle of the thick neck of that channel
the swell lifted us six feet,
our dory like a saddle. We watched those broad
iron manes flow toward town.
The men let the line down and let it down
two minutes to hit bottom.
The shale, sharp as arrowheads,
pierced up on both sides. They fished
and I figured which cliff I would push the kids to
in their life-jackets, when the boat fell off that
grey glass skyscraper of water.
That night, she told me the life-jackets only
prolong the death. No one can live
ten minutes in that water. It would be better for the children
to die by drowning, it would be much quicker,
and then no one would have to find the bodies
and get all upset. And then she said
someone had been cutting bread right on her
Formica counter.

THE MYTHIC COHERENCE OF *MOLLOY*

ERIC S. RABKIN

The writings of Samuel Beckett feel in the reading to be profoundly unified wholes; yet in the analysis, many critics resort to comparisons to chaos. Frederick J. Hoffman[1] can stand for those who see Beckett's novels as centerless:

> It is idle to ask what Beckett's novels and plays are "about." In any traditional or conventional sense, they are "about nothing": they do not possess "human reference."

These novels without "human reference" are nonetheless powerful emotional experiences. The source of Beckett's effect can be revealed by analysis of *Molloy*.[2]

Molloy is typical of the novels of Samuel Beckett: the infirm, despicable narrator talks and talks, talks about talking, gets nowhere, and winds up with a single futile hope that a sufficiency of talking will eventuate in an isolated but truthful silence. The book reflects on itself as Moran, the name of the narrative voice in part two, metamorphoses into the reportorial situation earlier occupied by the narrating voice named Molloy at the beginning of part one. Within each of the two parts, there is the inevitable return of narrator to narrative situation: Molloy's beginning by the roadside in part one recurs after an eighty-three page paragraph and a passage through quest and forest; the agent Moran in part two leaves home in search of Molloy only to return home from his quest as Molloy himself. And, as well as the typical Beckett out-group narrator and the typical self-reflexive structure, we find also in *Molloy* the persistent use of Beckett's polished, playful, often oxymoronic language that carries striking truth within and behind its apparent absurdity. "When my comfort was at stake," Molloy says, "there was no trouble I would not go to" (83).

In attempting to articulate the roots of the felt coherence of *Molloy*, readers need not deny the emotional foundations of their aesthetics. The impulse toward that oxymoronic, critical twist comes not from any necessity of a general human mode of apprehending phenomena, but from a reader's concentration on what is *written*. We should not forget that Beckett means *language* when he refers to "the convention that demands you either lie or hold your peace" (88). The piece that Beckett holds back in *Molloy* is the myth of Oedipus—not the truncated Freudian story of sexuality, however, but the rich classical myth with

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[1] Frederick J. Hoffman, *Samuel Beckett: The Language of Self* (Southern Illinois University Press, Carbondale), 1962, p. xii.

[2] Samuel Beckett, *Molloy* (1951: English trans., 1955), in *Three Novels* (Grove Press, New York, 1955). All textual references are to this edition.

its universal applicability.[3] This fuller meaning emerges if we complement the familiar tools of psycho-symbolic analysis with the methods of structural anthropology.

Though the myth of Oedipus exists in several variants, we can, along with Lévi-Strauss,[4] settle on a typical telling. In order to see just how much of the spare machinery of *Molloy* has its counterpart in the story of Oedipus, it is worth our time to recall that myth.[5] Laius, king of Thebes, had been warned by Apollo that if he begot a son, that son would kill him. Nonetheless, he fathered a son by his wife Jocasta. Laius had the child exposed to the elements and staked to the ground through the feet. Found by a shepherd of Polybus, king of Corinth, the child was adopted by the childless monarch and named Oedipus—meaning "swell foot." When, as a young man, Oedipus was accused of not being a true child of Polybus, he asked the Delphic oracle about his parentage. He was told that he would kill his father and marry his mother. To avoid this he abandoned Corinth. In his wanderings, he struck a fatal blow to a man who blocked his way. Arriving in Thebes, he stopped the monstrous, depredating Sphinx by correctly answering its famous riddle: what animal goes on four legs in the morning, two legs at noon, and three legs in the evening? Man.[6] For saving the city, Oedipus was made king and married the widowed Jocasta. Here the variants are comparatively diverse. In some, initially the secret of Oedipus' relationship to Jocasta comes out and she then hangs herself. In others, Oedipus as king, defender of justice, first sends to discover Laius' killer and discovers it was himself who killed his father on the road to Delphi, only then to discover the hanging corpse of his wife and mother. Then, he either blinds himself (using the pins of Jocasta's gown in one version) or Laius' servants blind him. In some versions he dies either miserably or in battle, in others the story breaks off.

One would hardly suggest that *Molloy* is an Oedipal allegory, but it is, I think, a work consistently and constantly enriched by the parallel

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[3] In *Samuel Beckett Now*, Melvin J. Friedman, ed. (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1970), an international collection of recent essays, we twice see Oedipus emerge, but we also see him lightly dismissed. This, despite Bruce Morrisette's report, recounted in "Interpreting *Molloy*" by John Fletcher (also in *Samuel Beckett Now*) that Beckett was himself the first to notice the Oedipal level of Robbe-Grillet's *The Erasers* (p. 168). (See the Freudian uses of Oedipus in Ben F. Stolzfus, *Alain Robbe-Grillet and the New French Novel* [Southern Illinois University Press, Carbondale, 1964], Ch. 4, "*The Gum Erasers:* Oedipus the Detective.")

[4] Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology* (Doubleday Anchor, New York, 1963), Ch. XI, "The Structural Study of Myth."

[5] See "Oedipus" article in the *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 2nd ed., Oxford University Press, New York, 1970.

[6] In Alain Robbe-Grillet, *The Erasers*, Richard Howard, trans., Grove Press, New York, 1964, the riddle is alternately "What animal is parricide in the morning, incestuous at noon, and blind at night?" and "Deaf at noon and blind at night? . . . And limps in the morning" p. 226.

world of the Oedipus myth. Molloy, speaking overtly of his decrepit senses but covertly of the perceived interchangeability of the character A with the character C, says that

> often where only one escarpment is discerned, and one crest, in reality there are two, two escarpments, two crests, riven by a valley. (10)

The perceived escarpment in Beckett's novel is Molloy/Moran and the second escarpment in reality is Oedipus. The ultimate reality includes them both, albeit they are riven by a valley of silence.

Like Oedipus, Molloy's most salient feature is his lameness (12), and that lameness attacks Moran progressively as he achieves Molloy's state. When Molloy opens his eyes in the morning (the time of birth in the Sphinx's riddle), he sees "the shepherd . . . under whose eyes I opened my eyes" (28). As Moran, he tells his inquisitor to "Get out of my way" (151). When the man refuses, Moran claims, Moran loses consciousness briefly, regaining it to find the man on the ground before him, his head smashed. Similarly, in the Molloy stage of his existence, Beckett's narrator, not knowing the true name of his own town—for names are not things—asks directions of a man whom, when he is seen to be ignorant of directions, Molloy kills (84). Molloy, of course, is nearly blind, and Moran becomes so. Molloy's quest is for his mother who, he admits, may be his wife; while Moran's quest is for Molloy, who turns out to be himself. Molloy and Moran represent two stages of the same Oedipal myth, a myth revived and called to mind not only by shepherds, lameness, and killings by the way but also by Molloy's own assertion about the woman whom he seeks: "I took her for my mother and she took me for my father" (17).

Molloy, our narrator, has as much stake in his art as Beckett. Indeed, Moran refers to people in his other reports and includes such Beckett creations as Watt and Murphy (168). Lest one think that Oedipal parallel is too roundabout, one should remember the narrator/creator's words:

> I did my best to go in a circle, hoping in this way to go in a straight line. For I stopped being half-witted and became sly, whenever I took the trouble. (85)

This sly indirection is bent toward telling a story of universal human significance, the same significance that prompted Freud to see it as central:

> . . . there was always present in my mind [the] hope that I was going forward in a straight line, in spite of everything, day and night, towards my mother. (90)

Or, in the Moran half of the book, towards himself. The difference, within the context of the myth, is inconsequential: we are seeing apparently different characters—and hearing apparently different names—because we are seeing the same character at different stages of development, like Heraclitus' river. It is a matter of perspectives, not names or words, for Molloy, as he himself points out, is a "chameleon in spite of himself . . . viewed from a certain angle" (26). *Molloy* is not so much an allegory as a modern examination of an ancient artifact. As the text unfolds, we see the statue of Oedipus from one vantage after another, and with our developing knowledge of the ancient thing, we come to have a new sense of its possible meanings.

Like a Platonist, then, Molloy can say of himself as he writes the truth and/or insights and/or ramblings which constitute his report, or autobiography, or fiction that "Perhaps I'm inventing . . . perhaps I'm remembering" (8). Though the modern critic of Beckett may be embarrassed to see consistent mythic reference in a text of the glum harbinger of silent despair, Molloy is not:

> I speak in the present tense, it is so easy to speak in the present tense, when speaking of the past. It is the mythological present, don't mind it. (26)

Molloy must write, despite the falseness of language, because "What I need now is stories" (13). And he gives us silent clues in the text that aim us at the Oedipus statue: "Tears and laughter," writes the modern Irishman Beckett, "they are so much Gaelic to me" (37). The Greek is not foreign here, but quite foreign are the national roots of this Irishman who writes in French. We see, in the main, two overt views of the narrating character, the mythic view of part one in which he does not change and the historic view of part two in which we see how Molloy the mythic figure develops from Moran the economic man. Between the two is a chasm as deep as the difference between the two types of time sense that underlie the views, but the book aims to let us know by implication the silent truth that encompasses both. This is done in part by breaking down again and again the differentness between the views. "The fact was there were three, no, four Molloys" (115). "I confuse east and west, the poles too," Molloy says, reflecting his own inability to know his home town for want of a name and Oedipus' foolish approach to his birth-town of Thebes thinking it was not his home town of Corinth, "I invert them readily. I was out of sorts. They are deep, my sorts, a deep ditch," like the valley riven between the two escarpments, "and I am not often out of them." Infrequent indeed is our view of the permanent as something that can change, something new. Our views become ossified in our language. "That's why I mention it" (19), Molloy concludes.

The Oedipal context of *Molloy* is hardly gratuitous. Its Freudian implications for any analysis of the narrating voice are all too clear. What is less clear, but, I believe, more to the point, is that Beckett adds new meaning to the Oedipus story, and uses this new meaning to enrich and explain his own story. Indeed, speaking of two different stories is perhaps too violent a separation in discussing a text that strives to break down barriers and convey a message of silent understanding. Words, one realizes, do, by the "convention" of language, "lie." "To restore silence is the role of objects" (13), but objects are not verbal phenomena. Molloy forewarns us of this when he says that "I should add, before I get down to the facts, you'd swear they were facts" (19). Yet we persist in reading fictions as if they were facts. Language, impossible though it may seem, functions.

> They paid no attention to me and I repaid the compliment. Then how could I know they were paying no attention to me, and how could I repay the compliment, since they were paying no attention to me? I don't know. I knew it and I did it, that's all I know. (23)

Even if language can't say what actually is, this passage asserts, it somehow does. And we, fools that we are, believe the language in which we are told this. Molloy speaks truly for us when he says that "in me there have always been two fools, among others" (48). One of our fools might even prevent us from seeing, then, the satire of the nominalist faith that words are things which Beckett creates for us in the absurd

> system, of singular beauty and simplicity, which consists in saying Bally (since we are talking of Bally) when you mean Bally and Ballyba when you mean Bally plus its domains and Ballybaba when you mean the domains exclusive of Bally itself. (134)

This system works, of course, if one can *know* that a town is Bally or Turdy, birth-town or home-town. But the story of Oedipus reminds us that we cannot know this. The oracle tells the truth only because we misunderstand it, and we misunderstand it only because it uses language. This is a fact of human cognition which affects us all, whether we carry our penis envy to a psychiatrist's couch or not. What Beckett does in *Molloy* is restore universal importance to Oedipus in a post-Freudian world.

Knowing this, in passage after passage, we see much more than mere playfulness and the work of an accomplished stylist. Here the

breakdown of grammar reflects the inability to find even the right lie when one already questions nominalism:

> I beg your pardon, Sir, this *is* X, is it not? X being the name of my town . . . I had been living so far from words so long, you understand, that it was enough for me to see my town, since we're talking of my town, to be unable, you understand. (31)

The unconquerable problem that this passage confronts is captured in the relational word *my*. It is easy enough to elicit the name of a town, and easy enough to impute relationship, but how can the "seeing" of a town verify or disconfirm the assertion that both label and imputation apply equally to the same palpable town? This, of course, was the kernel of Oedipus' problem, though neither the Greek tragedians nor Freud nor Lévi-Strauss saw it: a palpable woman is easy to identify—so tall, so wide, so heavy—but how to know that she is so-and-so's mother? Yet it is this linguistic imputation, this fiction which we'd swear was a fact, that matters most of all. The disjunction between words and things which was fatal to Oedipus gives rise in Beckett to comedy not merely playful. Speaking of his foggy recollection of one rear entry, Molloy wonders, "is it true love, in the rectum? That's what bothers me sometimes. Have I never known true love, after all?" (56). The style may divert our attention to a consideration of its humor, but its humor comes from the simple fact we always forget: words aren't things. "I have dressed the tooth, [the dentist] said, your son cannot possibly feel any more pain" (103).

The epistemological dilemma of Oedipus, and the parallel problem of Molloy who seeks his mother, is a universal problem. Oedipus in Beckett becomes more universal than in Freud and his blindness, like Molloy's blindness, stands for the imprecision of all our senses:

> . . . of my two eyes only one functioning more or less correctly, I misjudged the distance separating me from the other world, and often I stretched out my hand for what was far beyond my reach, and often I knocked against obstacles scarcely visible on the horizon. But I was like that even when I had my two eyes. (50)

Indeed, so are we all. Yet we suppress our knowledge of our own fallibility and instead act always in the hope that we do understand how things are. We read as if words were things. The lies in *Molloy*, the apparent chaos, remind us again and again that we are not so good at understanding as we like to think we are, the world we wish to grow up into is not so easy to learn, the oracle is always right. Moran's hopes that

> Molloy, whose country this was, would come to me, who had not been able to go to him, and grow to be a friend, and like a father to me (161-62)

are "childish hopes." Molloy will not take care of Moran; he may even kill him. Yet he does "come to" Moran in that Moran becomes Molloy. Words lie, and the oracle is right after all. We are trapped by words.

> I wondered, suddenly rebellious, what compelled me to accept this commission. But I had already accepted it. I had given my word. Too late. Honour. It did not take me long to gild my impotence. (105)

To invent a myth is to remember a human truth; to lie in words or deny with words is to tell a hidden truth; to accept a role is to be that role; every escape is an approach. These are the universal truths that Beckett lays bare in the story of Oedipus and the story of Molloy, and these are the meanings of the paradigm passage for the entire novel:

> She never called me son, fortunately, I couldn't have borne it, but Dan, I don't know why, my name is not Dan. Dan was my father's name perhaps, yes, perhaps she took me for my father. I took her for my mother and she took me for my father. Dan, you remember the day I saved the swallow. Dan, you remember the day you buried the ring. I remembered, I remembered, I mean I knew more or less what she was talking about, and if I hadn't always taken part personally in the scenes she evoked, it was just as if I had. I called her Mag, when I had to call her something. And I called her Mag because for me, without my knowing why, the letter g abolished the syllable Ma, and as it were spat on it, better than any other letter would have done. And at the same time I satisfied a deep and doubtless unacknowledged need, the need to have a Ma, that is a mother, and to proclaim it, audibly. For before you say mag you say ma, inevitably. And da, in my part of the world, means father. (17)

Here the text becomes nearly explicit: the problem of this novel is the problem we all share with language, and language is unavoidable, necessary, inevitable. We each have a sense of self, an ego. Yet we each learn and grow. I am, I assert today, a man with a lame leg; how then can I tell a story about myself (call me Moran) in which the character is not lame? How indeed? And yet it is so. "That's all I know."

> *Question.* How did I feel?
> *Answer.* Much as usual.

Question. And yet I had changed and was still changing?
Answer. Yes.
Question. How was this to be explained?
Answer. (154)

There is no explanation. Explanations are in words. But in the fiction of *Molloy* we come to feel that this question both has no right to trouble us because it is merely a reflex of the conventions of language and has every right to plague us because we're too cock-sure that we know who we are, who are our mothers, the names of our towns. Language is something that tricks us and that serves us, an imperfect solution.

Molloy has a rage for order. With his sixteen sucking stones he contemplates the different systems of pockets whereby he might distribute them so as to guarantee sucking them in order (69-74). This musing constitutes a burlesque and exemplifies the verbal skill at clowning that so often captures the attention of Beckett critics. The attempt, however, is much more than burlesque: it comments on the need to label and compartmentalize, the need to language things. The passage engages our own process of reading fiction, the process of reading *Molloy*, in which we constantly cast about for bearings, landmarks for which we know both relation and name. Molloy solves his problem by distributing his stones five in one pocket, five in a second pocket, six in a third, and none in the fourth. His idea is to suck stones from one pocket, replacing them in the receptacle pocket and, once emptying the supply pocket, shifting all stones in groups until he has a new supply in the old place and an emptiness in the original receptacle pocket.

> . . . however imperfect my own solution was, I was pleased at having found it all alone, yes, quite pleased. And if it was perhaps less sound than I had thought in the first flush of discovery, its inelegance never diminished. (74)

This little verbal joke caps the burlesque joke of Molloy's discovery. But Oedipus' response to the oracle's pronouncement is a similar "imperfect solution" of which he was similarly proud. Not only, though, is Molloy's solution in the search for order an emblem for the imperfection of verbal labelling as a general practice, it embodies also a silent "inelegance": from a physical/mathematical point of view, Molloy's four-pocket solution is a needlessly complex topological equivalent for a two-pocket solution which uses one pocket for supply and one as receptacle. Such a source of inelegance in consideration of things—communicated wordlessly in Beckett's written text—integrates every angle on the author's view of language and still produces swift and stylish prose. And, to make it better yet—and also endear to us that

ghastly Molloy—we find after all the effort that the solution—which is in words—is only temporary:

> And the solution to which I rallied in the end was to throw away all the stones but one, which I kept now in one pocket, now in another, and which of course I soon lost, or threw away, or gave away, or swallowed. (74)

Notice here how little the words matter, so long as the meaning is clear.

The second part of *Molloy* begins, "It is midnight. The rain is beating on the windows" (92). The end, with Moran now recognized as Molloy, seems to give this the lie: "Then I went back into the house and wrote, It is midnight. The rain is beating on the windows. It was not midnight. It was not raining" (176). But there is no lie at all. The very words which assert the lie are themselves as susceptible to construction as lies as are the first words. A is not-A, so long as A is mere imputation. The book is fiction, we are reminded, and like so much modern fiction, it is fiction about fiction. Moran calls Molloy "just the opposite of myself, in fact" (113), but facts don't exist, only our angles, perspectives, ways of looking at things. And our ways of looking are universally "imperfect," a notion which teaches us humility and tolerance, I think, and justifies those critics who see in Beckett's very act of writing an affirmation:

> In the game that the mind plays with itself, language, of course, is the original flaw.[7]

But Hassan is as wrong in calling this a game as he would be wrong in calling the riddle of the Sphinx a game or the Delphic pronouncement a ploy: such games are at the heart of human relations, and the poor, isolated Molloy makes us value these relations more than ever.

Critics such as Hoffman see the supposedly "existential" philosophy of *Waiting for Godot* as a call from Beckett to accept the impossibility of there being order in the world.[8] They see no order in the play's repetition, albeit with change; they see no order in the characters' clinging to each other, even if as master and slave. But there is order there:

> . . . we have all encountered something like it before, in our off moments, our nightmares, our fears.[9]

Beckett writes myth, and in his silences he speaks to us all.

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[7] Ihab Hassan, *The Literature of Silence: Henry Miller and Samuel Beckett* (Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1967), p. 132.

[8] Hoffman, op. cit., p. 161.

[9] Calvin Bedient, "Beckett and the Drama of Gravity," *Sewanee Review*, Winter, 1970, p. 152.

THE SEPARATION

ANNETTE T. ROTTENBERG

A few days after my twelfth birthday my father and mother separated. The separation came as a shock to all of us, except my father, of course. I didn't hear about it from them. I was standing on the terrace of our villa in Cologny looking across Lake Geneva to the park where there was a hotel—so I had just been told—in which Byron, Shelley, Queen Victoria and others had stayed. It was late afternoon, August, I was using a pair of field glasses which I had received as a birthday gift. It seemed strange enough that I had never seen the hotel, but even stranger that I had recently encountered Byron in so many places; first, reading "The Prisoner of Chillon" and exploring the castle (where I confused Byron with the prisoner); then, learning that our house was not far from the Villa Diodati where Byron had lived one summer, visiting his friends the Shelleys and writing part of *Childe Harold;* finally, to my delight, overhearing someone say that my father resembled Byron. I took this to mean physically, but later when I saw a picture of Byron, I knew that I had misunderstood the remark. (And here I confess that, although Byron has nothing to do with this story, it has always been impossible for me to tell it without associating him with the separation.) My father, who was an architect, had designed our house, in its airy site and its light-filled serenity like an exquisite small temple high above the lake, surrounded by roses and pear trees, facing the gentle slopes of the Jura; the fact that it was near the Villa Diodati seemed to me now both mysterious and satisfying. My parents were Peruvians who had met in Geneva. Sometimes they spoke of Lima in such a way as to suggest that the mists, the waters, the mountains of that other city were comparable to those of Geneva, but I didn't believe there could be another place like this one.

As I peered across the lake, seeing nothing but vague shapes, suddenly I heard above me from the open window of my parents' bedroom, the sound of their voices, my mother's raised in anger, my father's less strident but tense and urgent. I had never heard them quarrel before, never, and the sound of it was terrifying. I couldn't distinguish the words, but whatever it was that had hurt or divided them, I didn't want to know about it, and I ran into the house, pulling the French doors shut behind me so that the sound couldn't follow me.

At the bottom of the stairs I saw my sister Sylvia with a white closed face, holding onto the bannister. So she had heard it, too. She turned as I came in and before I had moved from the door, she said in a harsh whisper, "Pap's leaving. He's got—" Without finishing the sentence, she looked at me darkly as if her meaning must be clear.

"Leaving," I repeated. I had only a vague motion of what this meant, but surely something terrible had happened. My sister's strained voice, her secretive face frightened me as much as the voices I had heard a few moments before. Sylvia was almost fifteen and knew much more than I did about everything, but especially about the bewildering relationships between adults.

"Yes, leaving," she said and stopped. Then, after a short silence, she broke out angrily, "What are you staring at? You know what leaving means, don't you, stupid? He's got another woman."

For some reason it took me a minute to absorb the last part—I had trouble with the meaning of the verb—then I began to cry, although I knew that that would make Sylvia even angrier. When she saw my tears, she gave me a withering look and vanished into the dining room. I stood in the hall, letting the tears fall and licking the salt from my lips, not knowing where to go. Then I heard a door opening and closing upstairs, and my father came down, almost running. When he saw me, he stopped—reluctantly, I thought—and said, "Why are you crying, Ana?"

I examined him hungrily, but there was nothing in his face or manner to disturb me. He looked the same as always, pale and smooth—pale, smooth face, smooth brown hair, his body relaxed and graceful, like that of a dancer or a bullfighter (though, in fact, he hated all forms of exercise). Only his suit was different, a beige silk which I hadn't seen before. And yet, despite his beauty and his marvelous assurance, he seemed vulnerable, at least to me, like somone who might die early of an old-fashioned disease, one that lingered but would not disfigure. I loved to stroke the back of his neck, which was as fine as a girl's. Sometimes I imagined him as a boy of my own age, growing older as I did, but at the same time never changing.

"I'm not crying," I answered.

"Of course, you're crying." He took out his car keys and moved a few steps toward the door, then stopped again. "Has Sylvia said something to hurt your feelings?"

"She called me stupid," I said. I lowered my head and began to sob noisily.

He shook his head and frowned. "That's enough, Ana. You're too big for that." He came forward and kissed me on the top of my head. "Now stop crying and go upstairs and talk to your mother. She's not feeling well."

I tried to cling to him, but he pushed me gently away.

"What's the matter with her?" I asked.

For a moment he stared abstractedly at the carpet. He seemed at a loss for words. When he spoke, he glanced at me briefly, then looked away.

"Listen, Ana, I'm going away for a few days. Till Sunday. I'll be here for Sunday dinner. Now go upstairs and say something cheerful to your mother."

I watched him as he went out, waiting until I heard the sound of the Maserati going down the driveway. Then I turned and climbed the stairs, walking as slowly as possible. I didn't want to disobey my father, but I didn't want to see my mother either. What could I say to her? I stood and listened outside the bedroom before I knocked. I couldn't hear anything, even when I put my ear against the door—no crying, no movement. I knocked timidly and waited. After a moment I heard my mother walk toward me, but the door remained closed.

"Who is it?" she asked.

"It's me, Ana. May I come in?"

"Go away," she said in a muffled voice. "Go away."

I could feel the sobs rising again. "Please, Mama, I want to tell you something."

My mother struck the door softly.

"Ana, don't make me angry. Leave me alone. Get away from the door."

Her voice sounded tired and tremulous as if she too had been crying. I turned away and went downstairs and out onto the terrace where I saw Sylvia sitting on the low stone wall, picking at the mortar with a garden tool. I waited for her to speak to me, afraid that whatever I might say would irritate her. But when she looked up and saw me, her face seemed sober, not angry.

"Come here," she said, glancing up at the bedroom window, and when I came closer, she asked me in a whisper, "What did Papa say to you?"

"He said he was going away for a few days. Where is he going?"

"He's not coming back," she said, bitterly. "That's his way of saying he's moving out. He's rented a house in Petit Sacconex, and he's going to live there with that woman."

I sat down on the wall next to her and watched her face. She looked sullen and unhappy, already grown-up; I realized then that this inexplicable crisis, instead of bringing us together, might widen the differences between us, perhaps forever.

"But he said he was coming back for Sunday dinner," I said, forgetting to whisper. Sylvia gave me a warning glance.

"Oh, yes, very good," she said. Her lips parted in an imitation of a smile. "Sunday dinner. That'll be nice."

A thin haze had begun to drift across the lake. A few lights, like insect fire, appeared on the other side, and suddenly I imagined that I could see the lights of the very house where my father would be living. Could he have arrived there already? I felt a thrill of jealousy.

"Sylvia, do you know who the woman is?" Even as I asked, I hoped that she would say no, that the woman would remain disembodied, a phantom who would never acquire any more reality than a bad dream.

Sylvia continued to pick savagely at the wall, tossing out small chunks of rock and cement.

"Oh, I saw her once. I don't know who she is. They were coming out of *Roberto's* after lunch, but Papa didn't see me."

I tried unsuccessfully to imagine my father with another woman on his arm.

"What did she look like? Was she pretty?"

Sylvia bent over the wall; her hair swung forward and covered her face.

"She's an Indian," she said. "She was wearing a sari." A sizable stone dropped to the floor of the terrace. My sister picked it up and put it back carelessly. "I didn't look at her," she added.

There was a long silence while I tried to think of something to say. I wanted to summon up a more appropriate feeling, but I felt only a vague anxiety, nothing like the fear I had felt a few moments ago. The information that Sylvia had given me floated like a cloud somewhere above me, like gossip about people I hardly knew. One of the girls at school was an Indian. I had seen her mother several times, a small, wizened, heavily made-up woman with a shrill scolding voice. I felt reassured when I thought of her. Never would my father have chosen such a woman. If he had, then there had been a terrible mistake which would soon be rectified.

The maid Angelica came to the door to call us to supper.

"I'm not hungry," said Sylvia.

Angelica made a noise of exasperation. "What's come over this family?" she said in Spanish. "First your mother, now you. Well, come, anyway. I'm putting it on the table. Tito is waiting."

"Let him wait," said Sylvia under her breath—Tito was our nine-year-old brother—but she got up, dusting off her hands, and followed Angelica into the house. I sat on the wall for a while longer, watching the lights across the lake grow more numerous; then I went in, too, not because I was hungry but because I didn't want to be alone.

But at the table we sat like strangers in a hotel dining room. Neither Sylvia nor I had anything to say, and Tito, who always ate rapidly with full attention to his food, jumped up as soon as he had finished and disappeared. Angelica took a tray up to my mother's room. An hour or so later I saw her come down with it. Oddly enough, my mother, unlike Sylvia or me, had eaten everything.

My father had left the house on a Thursday afternoon. The next few days were a mixture of normalcy and nightmare. None of us talked about what had happened. On Friday and Saturday Sylvia and I attended school, took our tennis lessons, went to the dressmaker, and on Saturday afternoon I saw my mother for the first time in two days, talking to Angelica in the kitchen. She was still in her housecoat, without make-up, her hair uncombed. She looked like an ambulatory patient in a hospital. But apart from her tiredness, she didn't seem much changed, not as I had been imagining her behind the closed door. I was somewhat relieved, although that absent-minded weariness, which I had never seen in her before, put me off, and I didn't try to talk to her. Nor did she try to talk to me. What worried me a little was that she hadn't gone to work. She was one of the editors of a woman's magazine.

When Sunday came I was exhausted. For two nights running I had had dreams of phone calls from my father saying he was on the way but having trouble with his car which prevented him from getting to the house and of myself standing on the terrace in a fever of anxiety watching the cars on the road and waiting until it grew dark and I couldn't see them any more. Once I woke up crying.

My mother didn't come down to breakfast. I began to worry that when my father arrived she would drive him away with her anger or her silence. I wanted to talk to Sylvia about it, to get her help in mollifying my mother, but Sylvia had gone into her room and locked the door and wouldn't answer when I called her.

At half-past one—my father was expected at two, Angelica said, and I should have been reassured by the fact that she seemed to be preparing a feast of unusual size and complexity—I was lying on my bed trying to read when someone knocked. Anxiously I opened the door, and there was my mother, already dressed for dinner. I stared at her as if she were a stranger, the transformation from the haggard and disheveled woman of yesterday was so extraordinary. My mother was slender and delicately built with enormous eyes and dark hair cut short like a boy's; she had dressed in a way to emphasize that appealing blend of innocence and seductiveness which even as a child I knew the power of, though, of course, I couldn't have defined it. She had made up her eyes and mouth more heavily than usual and put on a wide-sleeved cerise silk blouse, buttoned low, and white linen pants. I thought she looked like a movie star, and I told her how beautiful she was.

She bent forward and touched my cheek with her lips, then said briskly, "Get dressed now, Ana. Put on your embroidered dress. And don't be long. Get Sylvia to help you with your hair." She was nervously fingering a silver bracelet while her eyes moved back and forth over my face as if she were trying to remember a great many things at once.

"We're going to eat on the terrace. Papa is always on time, so don't be late." She turned and ran downstairs.

Even Sylvia had made some slight concession to the occasion; I noticed that she was wearing lipstick. And she was excited, too; not exactly happy, but nervously excited, like my mother and me.

A few minutes before two, we went out to the terrace where Angelica had set the table with our flowered Peruvian dishes and pots of pink and white cyclamen. It was a brilliant day, a day of Mediterranean splendor, of white sunlight and southern breezes, the lake spangled with reflected light and hundreds of sails. The striped red and white canopy over the table, billowing in the wind, made a loud smacking noise. If I looked at the water, I could imagine myself and my father on board a sailing ship, bound, like Byron, for the Grecian isles.

And at two o'clock the Maserati came up the drive, and my father emerged, smiling and stretching out his hands to us. There was no sign of hesitation or embarrassment. When he reached my mother, he held her at arms' length to admire her, then kissed her on the cheek. How could he prefer any other woman to her, I wondered, and in a sudden rush of bitterness, I hated him for making her suffer. But my mother didn't seem to be suffering; on the contrary. How could that be? While they drank their apéritifs, I watched them as if they were spies, trying to find some way to reconcile Thursday and today. There had been an astonishing leap, a quantum jump, from unhappiness, even misery, to radiant joy; during those three days something had been mysteriously at work; a secret had passed from one hand to another which changed everything, but at the crucial moment I had missed it. If I had not been so happy myself, I would have felt angry, cheated. In my stupidity I had not known what to look for.

Later we sat under the striped canopy, eating chilled consommé with caviar, poached salmon, salmis of duckling, cold lemon soufflé, drinking the Chateauneuf-du-Pape that my father had brought. Even Tito drank as much as he wanted. As the afternoon lengthened, the sunlight slanted in under the canopy and shimmered below our faces; the wine-filled crystal threw off shafts of ruby light, and my father, who was facing the sun, put on his dark glasses and took out a cigar. Now it is easier for me to remember that day as a work of art than as an event in my life—a Bonnard, perhaps, the whole scene arrested forever, every color, every shadow intact whenever I summon it to mind. No wonder that my father seemed so happy. For him the perfection of life lay in those moments of its proximity to art, especially Impressionist art, in its smiling changeless serenity, all the elements arranged to capture and immortalize the sense of delight. He had no "germanic" notions, as he called them, about the virtues of suffering and sacrifice. When I asked him to repeat our favorite anecdotes—a series of stories about his high-school

chemistry teacher, who called himself the greatest chemist in the Andes —he launched into them with pleasure and even added a few touches which may or may not have been authentic. Then it was time for poetry. My father read it aloud with an old-fashioned dramatic eloquence which might have appeared ridiculous in anyone else, but, after all, he himself was not entirely a man of his time. Although he was modish and worked hard, loved fast cars and movies and modern art, there was also something belonging to an earlier age in the elegance of his manners, in the romantic idealism which sat easily beside fastidious notions of his own place among the elite. His attraction for women and his love of the classics and of poetry, in those days made me think of him as the reincarnation of Byron that I seemed to be looking for, but after I knew more about Byron, I realized that my father lacked Byron's cynicism. He had an unbreakable confidence in the goodness of people and, like a well-loved child, lived comfortably in the belief that no harm could come to him.

Carrera Andrade, the Ecuadorian poet, was one of his favorites, and after finishing his coffee, my father went into the house and came out with a volume of his poetry. Although neither Sylvia nor I, and certainly not Tito, knew literary Spanish well enough to understand those dense metaphors, except for occasional phrases, we always listened intently to the music of my father's somewhat high-pitched voice and the cadence of the lines.

Yo amaba la hidrografia de la lluvia,
Las amarillas pulgas del manzano
Y los sapos que hacian sonar dos o tres veces
Su gordo cascabel de palo.

Sin cesar maniobra la gran vela del aire.
Era la cordillera un litoral del cielo.
La tempestad venia, y al batir del tambor
Cargaban sus mojados regimientos;

I remember that by a curious transference I thought of the long afternoon on the terrace as the inspiration for Carrera Andrade's poem, especially as the sunlight faded and rain clouds appeared over the Jura. So we sat there until Angelica came to clear the table and my father went away.

After that our lives revolved around his visits. The Sunday dinners became less elaborate but more ceremonial, like holidays which commemorated some joyful and significant event. The rhythm of the weeks altered abruptly for all of us, but we accepted the changes as if they were part of a natural alteration in the night sky, say, or the seasons. Even Sylvia, now beginning to have a life outside the family, seemed reconciled although her attitude was far more complicated than mine.

Of course, the changes were greatest for my mother. Before the separation my mother, who loved skiing, used to go with friends on weekends to Megeve or Villars while my father stayed home or visited other friends. But after he left, my mother gave up her skiing and refused to accept almost all other invitations. Her days were filled with work, lessons in painting and music, and shopping. She was preoccupied with her appearance. Every week she brought back something from her favorite boutiques: dresses, perfume, jewelry, which she wore on Sunday afternoons for my father's admiration. Now and then he called my mother during the week. They would talk for a long time; my mother smiled and laughed often during those conversations. She acted like a young girl being courted by a favorite suitor. Once or twice my father stayed very late, after Sylvia and I had gone to bed. I don't remember that my father ever missed a visit in more than two years; even when we took a house in Talloires for a month during the second summer, he drove down faithfully every week.

From time to time my mother invited people in. Then the visits became celebrations; full of loud, vigorous conversation, dramatic recitations, music, even dancing on the terrace. I was always jealous of guests and preferred the times when we were alone. On cold or rainy days we ate in the dining room, a white room furnished very simply and decorated with a few of my mother's paintings. There were French doors curtained in white silk which faced south, and years later when I read the lines,

> The light of early evening, Lisadell,
> Great windows opening to the south,

I thought at once of the diffused light and the gleam of rain or snow outside the dining room in Cologny. But the best afternoons were those when we sat on the terrace above the lake like excursionists in the gondola of a great balloon, feeling the air rush through the sails of the canopy, looking down on the lake and the city which receded endlessly toward the mountains.

One day a few months after my father had left the house, I overheard a telephone conversation between my mother and one of her friends. The bedroom door was open, and as I passed, I heard my mother saying, "What's the difference, Louise? Believe me, nothing has changed." Her voice was light and untroubled. I stopped in the hall out of sight and listened. There was a silence, then, "You don't understand. I don't think about that. What's the difference?" she asked again, and after a short pause, "What if he were a secret agent? Or a traveling salesman?" I could tell that the idea amused her. Then she changed the subject.

I went back to my room and sat down to think about what she had said. A traveling salesman, a secret agent. So she believed that my

father still belonged exclusively to us. For a moment I wondered if Sylvia's detective work in uncovering the other woman's name, age, marital status, and other facts had been a joke. Once Sylvia and I had even driven past a small chalet near the United Nations building where the other woman worked, *their* house, Sylvia had told me. I had never doubted that all these things were true; why should Sylvia have invented them? And yet I partly understood what my mother meant. What did his absence matter, the little house, even the other woman, if everything was just as it had always been?

At first Sylvia and I used to entertain fantasies about our father's life with the other woman. The fantasies took different forms; sometimes they were sublimely happy together, like lovers in a dream by Chagall; sometimes living in a state of perpetual warfare. I suppose we preferred the unhappy scenarios, though they made little sense. But after a while even those lost their interest. On his Sunday visits my father never spoke of his other life, never even mentioned Krishna's name to us, and it became harder and harder to imagine anything either real or probable.

Now it seems incredible, but one thing I didn't question was a kind of agreement between Sylvia and me not to speak about the separation to our parents—with one exception, which turned out to be a mistake. It's true that in the beginning we cast about, desperately, for something to say to either of them—a question, a reproach, a plea, a magic formula which would open the door behind which they seemed to have barricaded themselves. I used to lie awake at night composing long speeches which would move my parents so deeply that they would fall into each other's arms, weeping. But in the light of day the words always died in my throat. Sometimes I even wondered, so vivid were those interior monologues, if I hadn't already uttered them and received the assurances I wanted. When Tito asked why our father wasn't home during the week, Sylvia and I offered him an implausible story about the necessities of a house he was designing which required him to stay on the site. The explanation didn't satisfy him (and surely he spoke to my mother without telling us), but in September he went away to school in Lausanne and came home only on weekends so that my father's absence no longer seemed unnatural. And after a few days had passed, a few weeks, speaking about it became not only more difficult but finally pointless. There were hours, I remember, when my mother was suddenly struck by a numbing listlessness, like the malaise of those first few days, and I longed to comfort her, but at those times, even less than at others, did it seem possible to break in with words. And in the end we lived blissfully in silence, secrecy, and evasion, in a cocoon of mystery. Perhaps it was the mystery that we loved.

But shortly after that telephone conversation I followed my mother to her room one afternoon when she came back from the magazine and

sat on the chaise longue while she changed her clothes. There was something I had wanted to ask her for a long time, and she seemed so happy, so much the tender, gay creature she had always been, that I thought there could be no harm in mentioning it to her.

"Mama, do you think Papa ever talks to Krishna about us?"

My mother, in the process of pulling on her slacks, stopped and let her hands fall; the unzipped slacks rested on her hips. Her face, which always colored whenever she was angry or hurt, turned bright pink. She looked at me with repugnance, as if I had just committed some shameful act in front of her.

"Where do you get those crazy ideas?" she asked harshly. The lines of her face deepened, her nose seemed to lengthen. "You're a fool, Ana. Don't talk about things you don't understand." She zipped up her slacks and looked at herself in the mirror, running her fingers through her hair and moving her head from side to side in the mirror. Her expression changed. A smile came and went on her brightly-colored face.

"Have you ever seen her?" she asked. Not knowing how she would take an account of Sylvia's discoveries, I didn't answer. Besides, the question astonished me; I didn't understand it. Was it a request for information, a challenge, a sneer? I couldn't read her tone. It didn't occur to me to wonder how it was that, in such a small city as Geneva was then, my mother and my father's mistress had apparently avoided meeting each other. Or how it was that other people hadn't told my mother all the things she wanted—or didn't want—to know. As soon as I could, I got up and went out. I knew then how right we had been, Sylvia and I, not to violate the harmony of the arrangement with words.

I think I imagined that those Sundays would go on forever. Once in a while if I suddenly had a vision of the future in which the villa didn't appear—because I would be away at school or married or travelling around the world—I banished it. While everything else might change, I believed passionately, or tried to, that those days when my father came to visit us at the house in Cologny would go on as they always had. Of course, it must sometimes have occurred to me or to Sylvia that my father might give up his other life and come back to stay. But that possibility, too, appeared more and more remote as the months went by. So that the end, or the beginning of the end, seemed to come unexpectedly.

One rainy Sunday in October, more than two years after my father had moved out, we were sitting at the table after dinner, listening to my mother, who, like my father, had a gift for anecdote. She was telling a story about her guitar teacher, an elderly Spaniard with an interest in yoga; all of us laughed at her description except my father, who seemed to be thinking of something else.

He waited until the laughter subsided.

"Anita, let's be serious." He was looking at my mother soberly but with affectionate indulgence as if he were speaking to Tito or me. "Listen." His eyes went round the table and came back to my mother. He said, gently, "Anita, I must have a divorce." He paused for a second, then went on, "Shall we talk about it now?"

My mother's face darkened, and she glanced at the three of us. Sylvia lowered her eyes. I felt a sudden sharp painful throb in my stomach, a rush of blood to my head.

"Pablo, not here," my mother said. "Not in front of the children."

Although his manner didn't change, he seemed taken aback at her answer. He said in the same gentle coaxing voice, "They're not infants, Anita. They know what's happening whether we talk about it or not." He looked around the table at each of us in turn. "Krishna is going to have a baby," he went on gravely. "We ought to be married as soon as possible."

There was a moment of terrible silence, then my mother said in a low strained voice, "I don't want to hear any more." I saw that she was struggling to keep her feelings under control, to remain dignified, no matter what my father said. He rose and came toward her, but she stood up and moved away.

"Don't touch me," she said, loudly this time. At the sound of her voice, Tito stiffened in fear. His eyes remained fixed on her face, like those of a dog waiting for a signal from his master. She added, more violently, "Don't say any more!" But to me there was something unnatural, even theatrical, in the way she said it. Or perhaps it was only that I had never seen her play such a part before. She seemed suddenly like an older, coarser version of herself.

"Anita, you don't understand." My father stopped and looked at her helplessly. "What can I do?" He seemed bewildered at her obstinacy; at the same time he was searching her face as if for a sign that would clearly reveal to him what he had done to evoke such a response. He moistened his lips nervously while my mother stared back at him, her eyes wide and brilliant with excitement.

"Anita, listen, you don't understand," he said again. "Krishna and I—"

My mother didn't let him finish. She took a step backward and said hoarsely. "Be quiet! Don't speak to me! I don't want to hear any more!"

My father held up his hands in a characteristic gesture which he used whenever he was asking for forgiveness, even in fun.

"Anita, don't say such things." They were still looking at each other with desperate intensity, in a kind of staring match. They seemed to have forgotten that there was anyone else in the room. "God knows I don't want to hurt you, darling. I love you." His voice had risen. I recognized the passionate tone of his poetry readings. He came closer to

my mother; this time she didn't move. There were tears in her eyes and she had begun to sniffle like a small child. My father took her in his arms. She didn't resist but put her head on his shoulder and began to cry in earnest.

"Don't cry, darling," he whispered. "We'll still have the same good times. You've been happy, haven't you?" He lowered his head to touch hers. "Nothing will change. Why should it?"

Neither Sylvia nor I said anything. Sylvia continued to stare at her hands, but my own eyes were riveted on my parents as they clung to each other. I remembered that first Sunday dinner on the terrace more than two years ago: a meeting (a reconciliation?) that I did not understand, joy and summer light which did not penetrate the mystery. And now, in sick suspense, I watched them again without knowing whether they were friends or enemies.

His head still resting against my mother's, my father went on in a low voice, "If it weren't for the baby, Anita, I would never ask for a divorce."

At this my mother raised her head to look at him. She was no longer crying, and her expression had changed. She seemed watchful but entirely composed, even relaxed. She reminded me of a bird watcher who has just heard some unusual call which he cannot identify. My father didn't see her face. He smiled and stroked her hair.

"What can I do?" he said. "Krishna has been the soul of patience. You can't imagine what she's been through for me. Her husband and her children have gone back to India." He took a deep breath, like a sigh. "I'm all she has now, Anita. I have to think of her happiness."

My father's eyes were half closed as my mother twisted herself out of his arms and confronted him. Her face was flushed with weeping but enigmatic. She studied him for a moment without emotion. I was afraid that she was preparing some striking and irrevocable insult. But she said nothing, simply turned and walked out of the room. Tito sprang up and followed her. I sat waiting, stunned; I couldn't believe that she wasn't coming back to finish the scene. If she had spoken, what would she have said? That was what I wanted to know.

My father looked after them unhappily, then took out his handkerchief and carefully wiped his face. The odor of his cologne hung over the table. Suddenly he seemed aware of my sister and me and turned to us.

"Sylvia, Ana," he said, "talk to your mother. Tell her I don't want our good times to end. God forbid." He paused while he replaced his handkerchief. Sylvia's eyes remained downcast. She was rigid, I guessed with rage.

"I want things to be as they've always been," he went on earnestly. "I don't want anything to change. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"Papa, will it be the same? Really?" I asked, reaching out my hand to him.

"The same, the same, believe me." He seized my hand and held it for a second, then glanced at his watch and straightened up.

"It's late. I can't stay." He looked at Sylvia again, trying to catch her eyes, but she would not lift her head. "I'm sorry our Sunday was spoiled." As if he had thought of a more appropriate farewell, he added, "But next week I'll have a surprise for you. Something special. Tell your mother."

Then he went away. As soon as he had left the room, Sylvia looked up and sent after him a long glance of purest hatred. "The greatest lover in the Andes," she said, mimicking someone I didn't recognize, "also the Alps." I was listening intently to the sound of my father's footsteps, the closing of the door, the starting of the engine. But when the sound of the car had faded, I turned to her angrily. "You heard what Papa said. What difference does it make?"

But Sylvia wouldn't answer me, and we sat there in silence until Angelica came to clear the table. Then I followed Angelica into the kitchen, hoping to talk to her, to have her explain to me what had happened to change things when, after all, my father hadn't lived with us for more than two years. But Angelica wouldn't talk either, and next day we had a terrible fright; my mother took an overdose of sleeping pills, and the doctor came only just in time.

SHADOWDANCE

Fingers sift the darkness, feel for the wall,
Slide along plaster to the doorsill
And the hall. Your cry drew me here,
This posture of blindness, testing each turn
I know by heart, following the sound
Through the passage to your room, in silence
Alive, yet ringing, a deep night signal
Within and after the hollow of a dream.

The worst is over when I reach you.
How warm it is at the cup of your back;
How soft the velvet nap of your teddy.
I run my hand across your forehead,
Tucking the hairs behind your ears, whispering
Words familiar, words you like to hear,
Unspelling figures dancing from the forest
Of your head into the clothing lying
On the floor.

You said the lampshade was a pumpkin,
Tablelegs were broomsticks that the witches ride,
Socks the lonely footprints of a ghost.
"Who's behind that funny face?
Nobody knows but me."
And yet you find it hard to know
Inside of the mask of your own interior
When you rise from its moonless night
Dancing on castoffs of last evening's
Make believe, come back to haunt you
As though the face were real.

My eyes grow accustomed to the dark.
I see a dimestore mask, friendly ghost,
Sheets of scarecrows, powder on your locks.
On its side a bag of candy spills
A milky way of sugar, candy corn,
Three musketeers on mounds of almond joys.

And so I would contend against phantoms,
Show a steady face unto the world.
You hear the credo in my voice,
Comfortable words of someone saying
Blessings before dinner, bedtime prayers,
Speaking such conviction about the place
For this and that, certitude of answers
To your questions, talking as if the world
Made sense, because it does not make sense
And the cry of someone in the darkness
Does not allow another solution
Than the one of wearing consolation's mask.

My gift to you? Habit, and the custom
Of words gathered to a mask for meaning,
Manners, and detachment, airs we wear
Not to push thinking beyond the limits
Of endurance, to fit the illusion
That we all must take upon us to survive.
When you reach that status of respect,
Age that tells of the house within,
Of all the ghosts that prowl beneath the skin,
Will you recall this jack-o'-lantern's light
In whose glow you first stepped the shadowdance
Of night?

You are sleeping now. I listen to the rise
And fall of your covers, ever so faintly
Motions of release. Behind the shades
Dawn spreads its vague pressure of seeing
Across this house, these objects, and your room.
On the porch the milkman leaves, as he must,
Twice a week the duty of an agreement
Made somehow long ago. Moments of silence
Smack of the morning paper on the walk,
Carrying as it must the record of what was,
A day's routine, summary story
Of an understanding made somewhere
Yesterday that the shadows, the origins
Of longing, must needs give way to arrange
A world that has no truck with make believe.

So it must needs be, but for these chances
In the night where vision is dimly worn,
Where hands search for a line to follow
Through hallways. So it must needs be, masks
Detach themselves and float across the room
Between the urge to wear them and be sure,
The urge to cast them off and struggle free.
So it must needs be, we come upon
The unprepared for time, fingers touching
A purity of flesh, nothing to hide,
No funny face, no mask, no just pretense,
Cry without a use asking only that
We come back to it, hear it once again,
And again look at the one remission
That can give, in the repetition
Of its looking, a pattern to eclipse
The shadows, dancing out from end to end.

CHARLES TISDALE

PRAYER IN AN AGE OF CRITICISM: THE HOPKINS PROBLEM

Warren Leamon

In 1932 F. R. Leavis said of Gerard Manley Hopkins: "He is likely to prove, for our time and the future, the only influential poet of the Victorian age, and he seems to me the greatest."[1] Most would consider the statement an exaggeration born of the battle Leavis and others were waging against the pedants, the dry scholars, the pseudo-classicists for the serious study of modern literature in the academy. Yet who can say for sure that Leavis was not right? If one does not measure greatness by bulk but by the simpler yardstick of delight in reading, then quite possibly more readers enjoy Hopkins' splendid "nature poems" than Browning's marvelously involuted monologues or Tennyson's magnificent bombast. There is about Hopkins' work an immediacy—a sense of the author's confronting emotional reality directly and struggling for a language suitable to the reality. Hopkins inflicts a bewildering combination of intensity, beauty and obscurity which produces in the reader a feeling that he has experienced something even if he has not understood it.

Also, though practically every critic begins by asserting that Hopkins lacks "range" as a poet, most end up asserting that only portions of Hopkins' achievement can be considered in a short study. Even book-length studies, such as those by Gardner, Pick, Schneider and others, are incomplete in their consideration of Hopkins' thought and practice. Range is a deceptive concept: Hopkins narrowed his vision inward and opened a world as many-faceted as that of other "great" poets.

Bernard Bergonzi is the latest of a number of critics who have tried to wrest from that world the secrets of Hopkins' genius.[2] His book is competent. It contains a coherent account of the life of Hopkins as well as an adequate summary and synthesis of various critical opinions. It is on the whole a "safe" book, and like Bergonzi's previous critical biography of Eliot it will be useful to any reader beginning a study of Hopkins' poetry. But what Bergonzi, like everyone else, gives us is one of a number of possible Hopkinses.

In the world of literary criticism Hopkins is a kind of nineteenth-century Wallace Stevens: each lived his life outside literary circles, each had doubts about the importance of poetry, and each created a body of work largely alien to the general aesthetic climate of his time. But on the other hand, each was in some irritating way vitally connected with his age. Hopkins' fierce nationalism and utter devotion to

[1] F. R. Leavis, *New Bearings in English Poetry* (London, 1932), p. 193.
[2] Bernard Bergonzi, *Gerard Manley Hopkins* (New York: Macmillan, 1977).

religion are curiously Victorian just as Stevens' detachment, aestheticism, atheism and dandyism (whether a pose or actual) are very much in harmony with the literary *theories* of his time. Yet the task of defining exactly the relationship of the life of either to his age and to his work is extremely difficult if not impossible.

Not surprisingly, studies of Hopkins have tended to concentrate on two problems: the effects of the Society of Jesus on his life and poetry and his own attitude toward his poetry. The two problems are, of course, related, and taken together they form the Trojan War of the Hopkins myth, all other problems revolving around these two. Critics are either pro-Jesuit (Pick) or anti-Jesuit (Abbot). No one is really neutral although a number of critics (Read, Gardner, Bender, etc.) appear to be. Bergonzi, for example, falls into this last category. His view is about as balanced as is possible unless one has simply no opinions about life and art at all. But in calling one of his chapters "The Two Vocations" he disagrees with Hopkins himself, who saw his poetry as at best an avocation.

I do not mean to imply that all the critics are extremists like Pick and Abbot. Pick (who by the way is never mentioned by Bergonzi) takes the position that Hopkins would never have been a successful poet had he not been a Jesuit; Abbot argues the opposite, that Hopkins' poetry was created out of a fierce battle with the tyrannical Jesuits. There are all kinds of more respectable positions between these two poles, but always the question of emphasis is crucial. Hopkins, perhaps more than any other poet, forces the critic into polemics and I wish to investigate briefly why this is so.

In the first place, because of the paucity of biographical information, speculation is bound to dominate any evaluation of the man. For example, we have certain knowledge of only a few incidents in Hopkins' life before he went up to Oxford: he rather daringly climbed a tree; he abstained from water and salt for a long period and made himself sick; he had a battle with his headmaster and was, presumably, severely punished; he wrote some poems, one of which won a school prize and another of which was published. From these facts critics develop elaborate constructs, one of the main ones being that Hopkins had an ascetic-aesthetic temperament with a strong rebellious or independent streak; accordingly, he rebelled (became a Catholic), chose Jesuitical self-denial as a way of life (asceticism), fought against the unreasonable demands of the order (rebellion), primarily through art (aestheticism). It sounds good, but of course the reasoning is backwards, from what Hopkins became (a Jesuit who wrote poetry) to what he must have been to become that. What Hopkins was as a child depends upon the way the critic interprets him as a man. In fact, probably any number of

coal miners climbed trees and argued with teachers when they were children.

The Oxford Years are more fully documented, but there is still woefully little to generalize from, and once again there has to be much backward construction. Bergonzi, like others before him, is forced to make copious use of the word *must*: Hopkins must have read the *Apologia,* which first appeared in a series of pamphlets in 1864, but there is no good evidence that he did; he must have sided with the Tractarian Pusey in his battle with Jowett, but Hopkins was a student in Jowett's college (Balliol), and what's more they seemed to get along; Pater, who was one of his tutors, must have exerted an influence, but Pater was at the beginning of his career, and though there is evidence that they liked each other and though a surviving essay was probably written for Pater, what influence he had, if any, must be purely conjectural. That Hopkins was familiar with Ruskin's work is obvious (Hopkins' sketches are very Ruskinesque), yet even this raises difficulties: granted Hopkins' conversion to Catholicism and then to the priesthood, he must have been very adept at separating artistic achievement from morals and ideas (as indeed he was, as his later admiration for the "Intimations Ode" makes clear), but how does this jibe with the struggle between ascetic and aesthetic which supposedly raged within him? And finally, there is the enigmatic relationship with Digby Dolben. To what extent was it homosexual? Or was it simply another of those Victorian asexual attachments which seem to have been so common? Whatever it was, it certainly *seems* to have been crucial in his movement toward Rome and the priesthood (Dolben comes up in some retreat notes years later), but again, there is no hard evidence (although publication of Hopkins' notes for confession during his Oxford years might cast new light).

We don't even have a very clear idea as to why Hopkins became a Catholic or why, when he went on to become a priest, he chose the Jesuits. Again, there are hints and critics speculate that (1) he became a Catholic as the result of a spiritual crisis which resulted in a leap of faith and (2) that he became a Jesuit priest because he felt he needed strong external discipline. Such speculation is plausible but there is also evidence (1) that his conversion was the result of a rational process and was even motivated to a certain extent by social concerns and (2) that he joined the Jesuits because they were the most "English" of the orders and (a fact often overlooked these days) because they were not an "intellectual" order. One could extend the argument right on through the Dublin years, but if we don't know exactly why Hopkins became a Catholic and a Jesuit, it is safe to say that everything else we know about him will not answer other important questions.

Secondly, there is the question of Hopkins' expressly Christian overtones. Since we have such sketchy knowledge of his life, critics are bound to treat his Christianity according to their own predilections. Once again, Bergonzi takes a balanced reasonable view, but in so doing he seems to reflect that general indifference to religious values which characterizes most modern criticism. That is, while admitting the value of religion to lives of certain individuals and while admitting that religion may well have played a part in shaping the art of such individuals, there is at bottom a belief that art is separate from religion, that it must transcend religion in order to become universal.

Such a view is born of an age increasingly convinced that Christianity, like earlier religions, is coming to the end of its cycle. Thus the appeal to Christ must be seen in the light of the appeal to Zeus, and many critics try to prove that Hopkins' poetry succeeds divorced from his belief in Christianity. In a sense, this view of things began in the Renaissance, but only of late has the attempt to reconcile non-Christian belief and morality with Christianity been completely dropped; now the effort is all in the other direction—to reconcile the Christian with the non-Christian. Such is necessary if Dante, for instance, is to survive.

What effect does this critical climate have upon interpretation of Hopkins' poetry? It causes the critics to categorize the poems written between *The Wreck of the Deutschland* and the Dublin years (roughly 1876 to 1884) as "nature" poems, which succeed because of their marvelous evocation of the natural world. The Dublin poems (1884-1889) and the *Wreck* are linked as "psychological" poems and are praised for their insight into the tension betwen doubt and belief. Even Christian critics have succumbed to moral and religious relativism. Eliot, for example, asserts that Hopkins' overtly Christian view makes him a "devotional" poet as opposed to a religious one. This obviously won't do since Hopkins is not "pious" in the manner of devotional poets, so Eliot is forced to reverse himself almost immediately and refer to Hopkins as a "nature" poet.[3] Harold Weatherby, in discussing Hopkins as a Christian poet, excludes the Dublin poems (which he seems to think include only the "Terrible Sonnets") because they are psychological and not religious poems. However, when he comes to assert Eliot's superiority over Hopkins as a religious poet, he has no qualms about discussing *Four Quartets* as religious rather than psychological poems.[4] What seems to be at work here is a feeling that lyric poetry must be connected in

[3] T. S. Eliot, *After Strange Gods* (London, 1932), pp. 47-48.

[4] Harold Weatherby, *The Keen Delight* (Athens, Ga., 1975), p. 98. He says of the "terrible sonnets" that they "constitute the finest poetry [Hopkins] ever wrote" but that they are "essentially a poetry of private, psychological experience, not sacred poetry."

some way to a coherent philosophical system in order to achieve greatness as religious poetry.

Such a belief brings us to the final difficulty critics experience in dealing with Hopkins. To survey all the criticism of Hopkins—from Middleton Murry's early review to the latest explication of "The Windhover"—is to come to the conclusion that Hopkins should never have revealed his love of Duns Scotus. Duns Scotus' Latin is practically unreadable and only of late have systematic well-annotated translations of his work begun to appear. Thus it still remains something of a mystery what Hopkins actually found in Duns Scotus (though it is safe to assume that the "Star of Balliol" who took a first in classics understood him as well as or better than any of his critics).

If we turn, however, to those who have dealt extensively with the relationship between the two men, Christopher Devlin comes out much the best not so much because of his understanding of Scotus' thought from a Jesuitical point of view, but because his feeling for poetry draws him back from dogmatic assertion. Weatherby, for example, finds in Scotus a force working against the basic principles of Thomism on which he seems to think the future of traditional Christian thought depends. But Hopkins was a poet, not a philosopher, and the greatness of his poetry as religious poetry depends upon his ability to produce in the reader an emotional response to God and to nature as an expression of God. If Hopkins found in Scotus ideas which gave him confidence that the imagination of the poet can experience reality directly and instinctually without a simultaneous rationalizing and ordering of reality, then Scotus served to reinforce ideas that Hopkins was developing as early as his Oxford years (when the term *inscape* first appears). In other words, Scotus reinforced his belief in concreteness and detail as vital to the imagination's awareness of God.

Hopkins, then, presents one of the most curious cases in the history of literary criticism: a devoutly Christian poet, he achieved fame in an age of extremely "left wing" and often overtly Marxist criticism (the thirties); a man about whom relatively little is known, his fame has continued to grow during an age increasingly committed to biography. His poetry, it would seem, strikes a deep responsive chord in what should be if not hostile at least alien readers, and we would do well to ask why this is so.

His experiments in prosody in part account for his popularity in the thirties. Though his Christianity was out of tune with the age, his interest in meter and rhythm was very much in tune with the attempts of modern poets to break out in new directions. Certainly the critics of the thirties—Richards, Read, Day Lewis, MacNeice, Auden—seem to have been not very interested in his ideas, and many accepted without

question that his art was developed out of some kind of conflict with his religious beliefs.

But the great attraction to Hopkins could not have resulted solely from interest in his experiments; rather the *success* of his experiments must have turned the tide toward him. One senses that critics and poets liked his poetry and justified their taste by turning to the radical prosody. That is, there must have been some vital connection between Hopkins' beliefs and his metrical experiments. What the thirties' critics sensed, I think, was that Hopkins needed a new language to express himself.

The need for a new language resulted first from his position in his society. A patriotic Englishman, Hopkins actually saw English art as an expression of English superiority. And though Day Lewis and others tried to use "Harry Ploughman," "Tom's Garland," and a brief quote from a letter to prove that Hopkins was a "communist," what they were really responding to was Hopkins' belief that art is somehow ultimately bound up with society. But Hopkins, in becoming a Catholic and a Jesuit, cut himself off from the Victorian middle class he loved. He became an alien, an outsider who feared that England was doomed because of a spiritual failure. Thus the tradition of English poetry had resulted in an expression of spiritual failure, and he felt that he had to go outside the tradition to create an art which would be at once in harmony with society yet restore that lost spirituality. Denied the English "nature" poetry of poets as diverse as Wordsworth and Clare and denied the poetry of spiritual disillusionment and despair of poets as diverse as Tennyson, Arnold and Thomson, he had to find a language which could combine a celebration of nature with a spiritual affirmation.

The first great example of this new style was, of course, *The Wreck of the Deutschland.* What is most interesting about this poem—and most radical—is the yoking of his own spiritual crisis with the physical crisis of the nun. The "language" of the poem, the "new rhythm," derives from this attempt at unification, and its striking images, metaphors and rhythm reflect in every line his passion to express the link between thought and action, the link for Hopkins being *prayer.* The rigorous immediacy of the poem, its aesthetic quality even, was born of the first and last passion of the true religious, to find a language with which to converse with God. All thought and action for the Christian are joined in such a language, and appropriately a prayer for the conversion of England closes the poem. Such an ending was not for Hopkins an aesthetic device (if it were it would be a failure) but rather the natural result of his struggle to use the nun's crisis as a means to make concrete his own appeal to God.

What the thirties' critics detected in Hopkins, then, was not so much a radical form as a fierce integrity. It took Marxists (and critics

like Leavis as well) to understand that there is a vital connection between a great poet's language and what he hopes for the world. The affinity between the thirties' critics and Hopkins was to a large extent an affinity between ages, both of which were polemical. Hopkins' struggle to reconcile his religious beliefs with his love of England was much closer to the thirties' temperament than Eliot's and Yeats's concern with the breakdown in traditional cultural values. For a Marxist art as prayer was preferable to art for art's or tradition's sake, since he considered the former effete and the latter an attempt to restore a rightfully (in his opinion) doomed culture. At least poetry as prayer asserted the power of language itself to change the world.

"Poetry as prayer" is the key to the appeal of Hopkins' poetry down to the present. A criticism often brought against Romanticism was that it attempted to turn art into religion. Of late, however, many consider this attempt to be the basis of its greatness. Thus Romantic poetry becomes religious poetry which seeks to develop a language through which one speaks to God. Such a language is necessary but not peculiar to the "Promethean" stage of Romantic poetry: one needs a language to join with God as well as to rebel against Him. But the language of religious experience quickly hardens into convention because any individual religious experience can be expressed only through a unique language which very few poets are capable of. This is not to say that one may not reach God through the language of another but only that one cannot express the ultimate uniqueness of that union except through a language he shapes from his own individuality (one need only compare the Terrible Sonnets with "The Hound of Heaven" to see the difference). The final cry is either "I will not serve" or "Thy will be done," but the full emotional impact of either cry must be translated into appropriate language if the union or rejection is to make any impact outside the purely religious sphere.

What the religious poet reaches in the journey inward is that point at which "I will not serve" and "Thy will be done" intersect: rebellion becomes damnation; damnation becomes triumph; triumph becomes rebellion. Round and round the circle goes, and the artist most often breaks out by becoming a Romantic, a secularist (positivist) or Christian. Of the three the Christian poet must make intelligible not only personal discovery but also the whole moral and spiritual complex known as Christianity. Not surprisingly, then, Hopkins created an eccentric language which attempts to translate conventional symbol and ritual into the immediacy of fresh metaphor; the Romantics attempted the opposite: to make intensely personal and individual vision and symbol familiar. The obscurity of the Romantics is the obscurity of individuality

becoming common; the obscurity of the Christian poet is that of the conventional becoming unique, personal.

But Hopkins went a step further; he attempted to use metaphor for a direct apprehension of created being; that is, he sought a language with which he could translate to the reader the sheer ecstasy and terror of the soul's confrontation with what it is: created being. Nowhere does the maxim that art resides in the struggle seem more fully realized than in Hopkins' best poetry. In his lines the reader experiences what Hopkins expresses: an irrational, instinctual awareness of created being and the initial chaos of the mind's struggle to bring that awareness in line with some kind of system. Thus his poetry is in some ways strikingly similar to twentieth-century poetry, but it is different in one important way—Hopkins' direct apprehension of himself and his world grows from a supreme confidence in God (even when he was in the depths of despair or desolation, such confidence gave form to his most passionate feelings and insights); in the twentieth century such attempts to achieve irrational understanding almost always betray a deepseated insecurity, a fear of chaos, of the void (thus Williams' and Stevens' customary aestheticism, Eliot's Thomism, Pound's secularism, etc.). Only Yeats was able to maintain the post-Promethean impulse of the Romantics into the twentieth century, the century of Nietzsche and Kierkegaard. One should not puzzle, then, over the popularity of Hopkins in an age in which the inadequacy of systems is becoming more and more apparent.

Which brings us back to Bergonzi and his biography. Criticism inevitably lags behind the realities of its own world, and now the critical battle against the easy "traditionalism" of Eliot and other Modernist authors produces daily yet another way to yoke together artist, critic and reason. For even when the critic argues with his father, he argues within his father's context. Just as the eighteenth century, coming at the end of a rich creative era, attempted to turn criticism into art, so current criticism, coming at the end of the Romantic movement, daily champions criticism itself as the highest form of art. But just as in the eighteenth century, today the stirrings of a new creative impulse are being felt. Bergonzi is solid, competent and helpful; he gives us a map of the past and such maps are useful if not indispensable. But the vital center of Hopkins' vision eludes him, just as it has eluded other critics. Hopkins speaks from the past to our own age but only in the language we devise for him. He will speak directly to the next age in his own unique, eccentric language, for what he really has to tell us, most of us, as yet, do not really want to hear.

THE KISS

MARIANNE GINGHER

One year it seemed to Nicodine that the familiar Carolina hills lay magic with winter and did not look the same. They took on live and slumbering shapes, bristling spiny backs against the wind like big old porcupines. The magic changed Nicodine's ears, too. The cold blue lips of January piped the chimney for her like a flute: whole, bright little tunes that made her dance with her mop or broom and stir the corn cakes faster. Her hands moved almost too quickly for her chores, flapping like chased crows about the house; and she felt a tender power in them that made each thing she touched seem shaped to her, loved by the very blood that sang beneath her skin. She brought a little pig into the house and taught him to dance on his hindlegs.

And after she had spooned Mama Dear the nighttime cup of honeyed tea with the one old wrinkled prune at the bottom that Mama Dear liked to gum when the tea was gone, after she had waited for her to spit the prune pit into the palm Nicodine held open like a small pink china saucer, after the pillows had been plumped and fluffed and Mama Dear's wig removed and hung on the bedpost so that when Nicodine clicked off the lamp, if a full moon rubbed against the window, the wig gleamed high and silver in the dark like a sleeping possum, then, as Mama Dear began to doze, Nicodine crept barefoot into the attic where she kept a candle and the Roebuck wishbook and the books that had been her brother's before he went off to war and got killed. She had discovered the books accidentally. There were fourteen—one for each of her years. Squinting in the dust-colored light, she had read each one at least that many times, so that if she was sleepy she could close her eyes and turn the soft worn pages; her memory urged simply by the feel of the books got the stories told. Often as she read, she would recall her brother's face, rowdy with dreams, his eyes roving the distant hills of their farm. And she would wonder if in all his travels he had seen the ocean or walked a blazing desert or hidden from tigers and panthers like the ones that prowled the jungles of his books. She read tales of cowboys and pirates and thieves, of soldiers and sailors, murderers and kings. But her favorite book was a love story. Its cover showed a dark, handsome gentleman kissing a lady whose face glowed white and round as a cotton boll. Her bright yellow glory of hair looked like a hat covered with buttercups, and she smiled from heart-shaped lips that parted to show teeth white and sharp as stars. This was a lady who wore (and took off) crinolines, who pinned brooches to a soft pink bosom and dusted herself with violet sachet. And if Nicodine did not know what a crinoline was or a brooch or sachet, she hunted in the

wishbook until she usually found a picture. She kept a list of the things she would need in this world to become a lady, for she had learned to write as well as read before Mama Dear got old and sick and the mule which had carried her down the road eight miles to school each day had died.

Sometimes she read until cockcrow. But if she fell asleep, awaking in the middle of the night to the bawling of a calf or the scream of the old Barred owl who hunted the moonbleached garden for a small fat rabbit or mouse, she would lie pretending it was a man in the yard who called her with a voice secret and dark as an animal's. Sometimes she thought that if she did not kiss someone soon, her lips would turn inside-out with wishing and stay, stuck that way, so that no man would look at her twice. Ever.

At sunrise, when it seemed to her that the clouds tossed red and sassy as valentines across the sky, she rose from her dreams not sulky with regret but happy for a day in which anything might happen. The pale January air hummed in her nostrils with all the clear cool expectations of space, and, sucking it deeply, her head felt like a flower, cloudy with bees. She did not know what he would look like when he came. It would seem a long time, like waiting for the kettle to boil, but he would come. He would probably arrive on horseback, and she might first see him through the kitchen window as she peeped through a droop of leaves that sprouted from the sweet potato she'd put in a Tube Rose can. As he rode up the drive, he'd have to duck the limbs of the horsepear tree or lose his hat which she knew would be the tall, black silk hat of a gentleman. She wondered what she would say to the stranger. If she could not think of any words, she would fetch her little pig to dance, and they would laugh together.

It seemed to Nicodine that the land waited for him, too: dreamy and wide and blank as a page in the winter sunlight. Where no tree grew and no house sat it waited to be filled with the surprise of shadow. It waited for him as it did the wild flowers of Spring.

She did not tell Mama Dear about the books she kept in the attic. The only book Mama Dear cared for was the Bible that rested beside her bed on a pink lace doily. Each night, before she brought the tea and prune, Nicodine read to Mama Dear from the little white Bible that looked prim as a teacake but old and crumbly as if someone had nibbled it around the edges. It had a sky-blue, grosgrain ribbon sewn into its binding that always marked the spot where Nicodine had left off reading the night before. And on Sunday evenings, the first thing Reverend Mister Bimbo did when he paid his weekly visit to all shut-ins was open the Bible to the page where the slim blue ribbon lay and check how far Nicodine had read.

Mary Magdalene was about to bathe Jesus's feet on the Sunday Reverend Bimbo came and told them about the circus. He was a short fat man with skin dull and dark as coal. His black morning coat, fastened neatly with half-hidden safety-pins, parted to show a cheerful orange vest that stretched across a stomach as round as if he held a pumpkin in his lap. He wore a clump of nandina berries in his lapel and, on three of his fingers, the wedding rings of the wives he had outlived.

He sat at the kitchen table by the hearth and talked with Mama Dear through the bedroom door that Nicodine propped open with the old black iron. Mama Dear always felt better when the preacher came. She fastened her wig to her head with big mother-of-pearl haircombs and powdered the shine from her face with cornstarch. After she and Reverend Bimbo had taken tea and said a prayer (they always blessed Nicodine for her industry and kindness) the two of them gossiped like jays, Mama Dear giggling and hooting and slapping at her throat as if it were on fire with so much talk.

That night Reverend Bimbo had the circus on his mind, but he waited until he and Mama Dear were finally talked out, and before he commenced to tell his story he turned to Nicodine and out of politeness said: "I be wanting to see that little pig of yours now." Nicodine was proud of the little pig. She whistled it inside, and they all watched and clapped as it jigged about the room. Then, because entertainment made her thirsty, Mama Dear panted for another cup of tea. Nicodine poured four fresh cups. One cup she set on the floor for the pig who did want a drop after dancing so hard. The Reverend praised her for her gentleness with God's creatures.

They set quiet for a spell while the Reverend sucked down the last of his tea through the hole where two teeth should have been. Then, he told them all about the circus.

"They don't have no dancing pig," he said, "but they's a man who hammers nails up his nose and a alligator lady and a full-growed baby they got pickled in a jar."

"Jesus have mercy!" called Mama Dear from the bedroom.

"Amen, Sister."

"Amen," said Nicodine.

"They got a midget man rides a goat and a lady eats glass and razor blades and live bees. I seen it." Reverend Bimbo smiled at the pig and the pig smiled back.

"Do you reckon they got a handsome man in a tall black hat?" asked Nicodine. She didn't know how the words got out. They came alive by themselves and hopped from her throat, sparrow-quick. She felt giddy and light with their leaving. She slapped a hand across her mouth too late.

"They got a magic man," Reverend Bimbo said. "I didn't see no hat, but a magic man has got to have hisself a hat somewhere, I spose. *You* know," and he winked, "for keeping rabbits. Why you ask, Nicodine?"

But she never answered because just then the little pig of his own notion began to dance and dance around the kitchen, and Nicodine had to put him on her lap and whisper in his ear to quiet him.

"My my," said Reverend Bimbo, scooting back from the fire. He winked at Nicodine again. "I believe I feel a warm spell coming on not natural. Two weeks till Febberary but I got me a taste for groundhog pie." He shook from one trouser pocket a red bandana broad as a flag and mopped his shiny face. He looked at Nicodine with his wise old elephant's eyes. "Mr. Pig feels the sap rising in his toes."

"You stay close by your Mama Dear," he told Nicodine at the door. "They's gypsies and ruffians following the circus got feathers in their hats for every young gal they stolen."

And after he had been gone a long while, Nicodine still stood on the front porch, holding the door wide open and feeling a strange warm wind on her face and arms. Overhead the sky boiled reckless with stars and the January moon throbbed hotly in the horsepear's limbs like a piece of fruit ripe for picking.

Just inside the door Nicodine stopped and caught a cricket, and she carried him with her to bed so that he might sing to her all night. For she could not sleep. The patience that had made waiting seem like nothing better and whole days quick and dream-lazy as the yawns and stretches of a cat had left her. Outside the crazy weather echoed her own restless sighs with big winds warm as March.

In the morning her brain burned with the fever of purpose. And after breakfast and the flurry of chores, when Mama Dear began to doze into that dreamless daze of sleep that would last until suppertime, Nicodine crawled quietly into the attic to fetch from her wishbook the secret list.

A lady needs shoes. Downstairs she found in the cupboard two empty flour sacks, pretty and white and not very wrinkled. She tied them on her feet with scrappy red twine that she looped into nice neat bows.

A lady needs a pocketbook. She took two biscuits from the piesafe and some slices of dried apple which she tied into a handkerchief. Then, carefully she unhooked the egg basket that hung by the kitchen door and placed the bundle of food inside, because a pocketbook should never be empty.

A lady wears a hat with a long bright ribbon. Quiet as could be, Nicodine tiptoed into Mama Dear's bedroom. Her brow felt rainwet as if she stood under a leaky spot in the roof, and for a moment she stopped still and hardly breathed, thinking lightning from out of nowhere might

pounce and strike her dead. But the fever that had started in her head had worked its way to her fingers. Trembling, she opend the Bible to where the sky-blue ribbon lay and gently tore the ribbon from its binding. Then, she tied it to the pink lace doily which she set atop her head.

A lady needs perfume and lipstick, rouge, a petticoat, gloves and silk stockings. She slipped through the little house, opening drawers and peering into chifforobes to gather what she could. But oh she would look silly with clothespins on her ears for earbobs and socks on her hands instead of gloves! And she was about to cry for not having all the things a lady should have when she suddenly touched, deep within Mama Dear's cedar chest, the raggedy black umbrella that Papa Dear had carried on his arm to church. She lifted it out; it smelled sweet enough to eat. She felt like doing a little dance, because more than anything else a lady needed a parasol. For what would happen when the sun beat hot on a lady's face? Her skin might shrivel hard and dry as an old pecan, and she would not look beautiful in spite of the finest clothes in all the world.

Finally, although it was not written on her list, Nicodine knew that a lady needed someplace to go when she was all dressed up: a shimmering ball or a wide green park filled with lily ponds and live oak trees with skirts of shade where a lady might sit and be cool and eat herself a picnic. But a circus will do just fine, thought Nicodine. A circus will do me just fine.

There she stood, looking at herself in the halltree mirror, smiling at her hat and the basket on her arm and the flour sack shoes out of which her legs sprouted thin but firm as young plum trees. And she smiled for the umbrella that she wouldn't dare open until she got outside for fear of evil luck. And she was about to turn and walk outside, up the narrow road eight miles to town, when somebody whistled and tapped at the door. It was not the wind.

Nicodine didn't know what to do. First she grabbed off her hat; then she stuck it back on. She tossed the pocketbook basket on the halltree bench; then she snatched it up again. She spun around in the mirror and checked her skirt hem for loose strings. All this motion in the blink of her own two eyes. Her heart fluttered up and down the insides of her ribs, shy as a butterfly. The whistling came again and a rat-a-tat-tat and a rat-a-tat-tat. "That you, Reverend Bimbo?" she whispered. And she half-hoped it was so that somebody who knew and loved the old Nicodine could forgive her for being so brand-spanking new that she didn't know what to do with herself. But she knew it couldn't be Reverend Bimbo because today was Monday.

Mama Dear turned over once in her bed, and the mattress springs sounded like an angry hen fussing. Nicodine almost ran into the bedroom until she remembered the blue ribbon in her hat.

Slowly she crept across the parlor to the window and peeked through the frilly curtain she might have tied around her waist for a petticoat if she had thought about it earlier. Outside, parked under the horsepear tree, she saw a fat white horse hitched to a wagon. On the side of the wagon in big gold letters was written: OTIS SUNSHINE CIRCUS. When she saw what sat on the wagon seat she giggled and gasped all at once. At first she thought it was a monkey. But when it drew a cigar from its pocket and struck a match across its knee and bent its tiny perfect fingers around the flame, she saw it was a little man no bigger than a blackbird.

She pressed her face to the window and tried to see who stood on the front porch, knocking and whistling. All of a sudden the blackbird man started laughing and pointing and before she could think to let the curtain drop, a face on the outside drew near to her own with just the pane of cloudy window glass between them.

"Oh!" cried Nicodine.

"I see you," said the man. "You come out on the porch. I want to ask you something, Darling-pie." She could hear him easily through the glass, and his voice poured cool and clear as creek water into her ear.

On the way to the door, trembling and happy, Nicodine decided what she would do. She would do it gracefully, and if he were a gentleman she would find out soon enough. She turned the doorknob carefully as if she held an egg. Then, moving dreamily to the rhythm of that January wind that waltzed into the house, she lowered her eyes, dropped one knee in a deep deep curtsy and held out a limp, small, delicate hand to be kissed.

"Looky there at her foots! What's she got there on her foots?" screamed the blackbird man from the wagon.

"My goodness, are you a clubfoot, Darling-pie?" said the man on the porch, reaching for her outstretched hand. "Steady now. Don't fall."

Nicodine looked at him. He was the whitest man she had ever seen. He was so white that her eyes hurt to look at him, and his hand closed over her own, cold as frost. "There now," he said, dragging her upwards from her curtsy. "I'm Otis Sunshine himself, ma'am," and he tipped his hat. A black hat it was and tall, but burnt-looking as an old piece of stove pipe. "Am I addressing the lady of the house?" His eyes were small and red as a rooster's, but his voice warbled gentle and low, and Nicodine wasn't afraid when he spoke.

"I knowed you'd come," she said. "Why, it's a miracle."

Otis Sunshine laughed and ran one long white hand through a crackly zigzag of hair. Nicodine blinked. His hair was the color of lightning. "Yeah," he said, "We're miracles all right, ain't we, Mr. Bub?"

From his perch on the wagon Mr. Bub cawed and stomped his feet.

"You ever seen a man so little?" Otis Sunshine asked.

"*No sir.*"

"Mr. Bub's fingers is skinny as shoestrings, and he can sleep down inside of one my socks. I'll bet you never seen a man white as me neither."

"No sir. You white as sun on snow," she said dreamily, half-blinded by the sight of him.

"White as *nothing*," said Otis Sunshine proudly. "If I was any whiter, I'd be invisible."

"For sure," said Nicodine.

"You ain't afraid to touch me, are you? Go on. Take a holt of my skin."

Nicodine lowered her eyes and touched the bare extended arm with one shy finger.

"Poke on it," he said, laughing. "I ain't no snake. It won't fall off."

Nicodine poked the arm and grinned.

"It's normal skin except the color," Otis Sunshine said matter-of-factly.

"Go on and ast her," Mr. Bub called impatiently. "Ast her what we come for."

"You must be kindly parched," said Nicodine, remembering that a travel-weary gentleman always took refreshment. "Would you like some tea and a biscuit?"

"Well now. That's right fine. Mister Bub, would you like a taste of tea?"

"Go on and ast her!" Mr. Bub said. "What's them bandages wrapped around your foots for Missy-girl?"

"Mr. Bub don't see too good," Otis Sunshine told Nicodine. "They're flour sacks, ain't they?"

"Shoes," she said, lowering her eyes at the flour sacks that looked silly to her now.

"Forget it. They're only shoes," he called to Mr. Bub. "Pretty shoes," he added. "Practical for walking. Come up high so the mud don't get on your ankles. And, by the by, that's a fancy hat, too."

"Thank you, sir," said Nicodine. "I made it up all by myself."

"I'd say it was a fancy church-going hat what with that pretty ribbon hanging down your back."

"Ribbon come out of the Bible," she said.

"I knew it," Otis Sunshine said. "I told Mr. Bub we'd come to the house of a lady. Anybody else at home 'sides you, Darling-pie?"

Nicodine shook her head. "Only Mama Dear who's fast asleep and feeling poorly."

"What's she look like, your mama?"

Nicodine wrinkled her brow and thought for a long moment. "Old," she said.

"She got any great big ugly birthmarks?"

"No sir."

"Got any hair growing on her face?"

Nicodine giggled. "Mama Dear ain't even got hair growing on her head!"

"You hear that?" Mr. Bub called excitedly, flapping his tiny black arms. "I told you we just got to get out and beat the bushes."

"You mean, Darling-pie, that your mama's a bald-headed lady?"

"Oh, she don't let nobody see her without her wig on."

"Well then," said Otis Sunshine, scratching his head. "You got any menfolk with extry arms or fingers or eyes different colors?"

"No sir. Menfolks is all dead."

"Do you got any odd-looking critters around this place?" His voice had grown loud and husky. He put his hat back on and stood with one hip out of joint, looking suddenly full of business and in a hurry. "Got any two-headed chickens?"

"No sir," said Nicodine, feeling dizzy with so many questions.

"I got a dollar bill has your name on it," Otis Sunshine said. He rummaged in his pocket and pulled out a dollar. "And there's other dollars where I got this one."

"Where's that?" she said, her eyes large.

"At the getting place, that's where." He laughed. "You ever been to a freak show?"

She shook her head.

"She seeing one for free right now in her own front yard," whooped Mr. Bub.

"Well I got a dollar says you're hiding two belly buttons under that dress or maybe them feet is all wrapped up because you were born without your rightful number of toes. Huh?"

"No sir," said Nicodine. "I got all my toes for sure."

"Don't be shy now. You got a little deformity you can show Mr. Bub and me why it would just about make us kinfolks."

She shook her head, truly sorrowful.

Otis Sunshine sighed. "Sorry to take up your valuable time, then, ma'am. Folks normal as apple pie stay poor." And he put the dollar back in his pocket. Her head spun like a spool as he turned to go.

"You ain't even had refreshments yet!" she cried.

"Good-day, Darling-pie. Bye-bye."

"But you ain't even—you ain't even—" she closed her eyes feeling the words in her mouth so hot that they would melt her tongue if she did not get rid of them. She grabbed hold of the porch railing for fear she would faint. "Why you ain't even kissed me yet," she said. And she

wished she could will her lips to turn inside-out and stick that way forever if that was what Otis Sunshine was looking for.

It seemed to her that she kept her eyes closed a very long time, afraid to look after the bold red words had been spoken. When, at last, she peeked, she saw him whispering with Mister Bub. The fat white horse pawed the ground and whinnied like a horn.

"You come along here," said Otis Sunshine, wiggling a finger long and white as Mr. Bub's cigar ash.

The yard had thawed to a soft red mush, and Nicodine felt the dampness seeping through her new sack shoes as she crossed to the wagon.

"Mr. Bub here says we need us some dancing ladies," Otis Sunshine said. "Do you know how to dance?"

"Oh!" she gasped, her face suddenly brightening. "You just got to stay so I can show you my little pig."

Years later when Nicodine sat on the porch of her own snug house, telling the stories of her youth and how she had come to marry the Reverend Mister Bimbo, she never forgot to mention her rescue from Otis Sunshine who had carried her and her little dancing pig away to join the circus that January spring. For it was Reverend Bimbo who met them on the road to town, who later said he would not have known her save for the ribbon fluttering at her back. Who for punishment made her leave the little pig behind in Otis Sunshine's wagon, because anyway Otis Sunshine said he'd paid a dollar for the pig, and sure enough he had. When they got home Reverend Bimbo built a big fire in her yard and burned the books and sent her inside to wash her hands and arms for touching man-flesh which is something a lady wouldn't do unless it was her husband or kinfolk. And then, because she looked so sad, still dreaming of the circus and the big, bright world of Otis Sunshine whose name would have rhymed with her own, Reverend Bimbo took her inside and they finished the story of Mary Magdalene together, whispering so as not to wake Mama Dear. It was a warm night, a dancing night, and she missed her little pig. A fly, warmed from its crack in the ceiling by the crazy weather, buzzed drowsily about the room. She never forgot how Reverend Bimbo snatched it from the air with a motion quick as light, and from his trouser pocket he took a toy he had made: half a pecan shell fitted with toothpick legs. Gently he plucked off the wings of the fly and set the fly under the pecan shell. Magically the shell came alive, swirling across the tabletop, and Nicodine had to laugh. Everything good in the world was in her laugh. And the Reverend Bimbo turned to her then and kissed her on the forehead. It was her very first kiss.

FOUR POEMS BY ROSANNE COGGESHALL

FOR ROSS

Ross is afraid of tornadoes.
I am too.
Once, driving to the island,
the radio warned
of tornadoes in the county;
I ditched the car
and ran two miles in rain
to an old house where older people
gave me tea and stale dry biscuits,
never asking why I'd come.
And I didn't tell;
tornadoes suddenly became
unsprung and easy
in my mind.
I found the couple
knew my father's aunt,
had cousins buried
in my family's ground,
knew everything there is to know
about old pottery
and chess.
Hours later
I walked dark fields
to find my car.
Stars were stuck
in every shadow overhead;
dead possums glared
with starry eyes.
I thought of Ross,
I tried to tell him
in my head
that fear
can be displaced;
I traced the old man's face
in my mind's bend
and drove the hundred miles
To Pawleys in clear silence,
looking up at clouds
and little lights
that told of something other,
close,
beyond.

BERRYMAN

By Bunsen burner he wracked word on word
until the *Songs* stretched longer than a year
w/ thrice as many midnights hardly any noons.
Croon he could to his heavy daughter:
her heft lifted him.
But trafficked too plentifully w/ ghosts:
witchman
switchman
sluggerman
poor:
poorer maybe than we knew
w/ his shook soul his mansioned heart.
Called *curtain* at last
assuming inheritance
his latest prance:
grieved himself into deep grave
to save the hacked-up face
from more regular ruin.

SWIM

I slit Black Creek
w/ my own aimed hands
my own primed hull.

It seals itself above me
simply as I pull
into its current
& head across
toward the flat smooth stone
below the bend.

Under its sleek skin
I mend steep absences
tend creek motion w/ my own
until we recognize each other
one more year for good.

My body loosens
offers its paired pieces
to the stream exchange
for the carved prize
the mansioned prize
the prize of reatonement

w/ the land's one vein
that held & blooded me
that charged my newest hinges
w/ the word:

wings restore themselves
when the air returns
to flood.

MISSION

If you count all the verbs in Michigan
& pin small slips of parchment to their shins
gathering them like ducks behind you
as you sweep wheat from stoops of weddings
& clock sundown with your teeth
you too will bleach steadily
to a fine cool plague

You too will match
the underside of last Sunday's toast
propped against a fishbowl in the sunroom
where your father stacks tins or artichokes
& whistles refrains from trains to Winnipeg
& your mother scalps onions weaves rain
to veils for you & your bride-has-been
who bore you through a creaseless sleep
through trenches where Indians fasted
their unstitched blindfolds tied
loosely to the tongues of oaks
thinner than rat's breath
slicker than fish blood
a fine steep green

the color

of the conjugated verb
you daily reenact
as you press fist to fist
& dive backwards
to relinquish balance
only for the echo
of a peddled prayer

REVIEWS

Steven Gould Axelrod, *Robert Lowell: Life and Art.* Princeton: Princeton U. Press, 286 pp. $13.50.

Donald Hall, *Remembering Poets: Reminiscences and Opinions.* New York: Harper & Row, 252 pp. $10.00.

Louis Simpson, *A Revolution in Taste: Studies of Dylan Thomas, Allen Ginsberg, Sylvia Plath, and Robert Lowell.* New York: Macmillan, 198 pp. $10.95.

What does contemporary poetry have to do with the general culture? Many people feel contemporary poems often read like exercises in hyper-sensitized, rather oddly coded escapism. The poets, for their part, often insist their attempts to confront the interior life, filled as it is with emptiness and anomie, are in fact heroic counter-statements pitched against the deadened surfaces of America's commercialized, urbanized, post-industrial society. When the general culture does take some interest in the matter, it almost invariably wants to know, not about poetry, let alone individual poems, but about *poets*. As analogues to the life of the proto-typical celebrity, facing a crisis in his or her life, facing down defeat, re-building a career, or "breaking-through" to some yet unknown area of experience (or exposure), the careers of poets are perhaps their most marketable assets. Every poet knows the dangers, especially rife in this country of commodity consumption, of what Henry James called the "awful devouring publicity of life." (And this was before "publicity" had been reified into yet another portion of the "consumption-oriented" society!) But how hard such dangers are to resist, and, after all, what good is a poet who won't face our most delectable dangers for us, risking all to dramatize and finally embody our deepest patterns and longings for destruction? Andy Warhol's mordant prediction that one day everyone would be famous for fifteen minutes has come a step closer to realization with *People* and *Us* magazines, products perfectly "market-researched" for today's consumer. If poets are to be relevant, is there a better way to be so than to throw in with Erica Jong and the other ephemeral "celebs" who seem to structure their lives to fit into a three-page layout?

But this sort of sociological musing ultimately doesn't help. Somehow the question persists: does poetry have anything to do with the areas of our life that extend beyond the private sphere of intense but subjective personal emotion? When we read biographies of writers we implicitly assume some vestigial hagiographical notions: the life here is exemplary; it's large enough to touch others; the issues it raises bear on all of us; we can learn from it, if not how to live, at least how living one way is sharply distinct from living another. And we might even learn more about poetry in the process. The persistence of interest in literary biography testifies to the strength of the notion of artist-as-celebrity, but it also continues to challenge our assumptions about the intersection of artistic talent and cultural values, how the single artist "stands out" from and yet illumines his or her social and historical nexus.

The title of Mr. Axelrod's book on Robert Lowell perhaps promises more biography than it means to. In fact, the book contains little more biographical information than might be gathered from, say, Lowell's obituary in the New York *Times*. Axelrod had access to some of Lowell's correspondence, but he used it mainly to discuss literary questions, such as Lowell's development, his shift of aesthetic allegiance from Allen Tate to W. C. Williams, and the poet's sense of a recurring artistic "drought." Furthermore, as literary criticism Axelrod's book falls short of what is already available on Lowell, who has been the subject of several book-length studies. Hugh Staples is better on the early Lowell; Alan Williamson is much more informative about the poet's political vision; Stephen Yenser is more sophisticated on questions of poetics, and so forth. Axelrod's book is the first to discuss Lowell's entire life, as the poet died shortly before the book appeared, and to try to relate the

life to the poetry (the plays are not treated, and the translations are virtually ignored). So what, if any, insights can Axelrod provide about Lowell as a prototypical contemporary poet? Can he show Lowell's career in sufficient force or with clear enough outline to increase our awareness not only of the individual poet, but the literary and general culture which helped produce him? I'm afraid not.

Occasionally Axelrod provokes new considerations of well-known poems. He says the "Quaker Graveyard" is "a Christian poem without being a Godly one." The reverse may be the case, but I think I understand "Christian" in a different sense than Axelrod does. In "Waking Early Sunday Morning" Axelrod hears Pauline echoes as the poem ironically revises II Corinthians. I remain thoroughly unconvinced, and though Lowell is a highly allusive poet, this poem could be read just as profitably without looking to the Bible as a negative matrix for its final vision. Axelrod dwells on the lack of resolution in this poem, though I find its final stanza a perfect example of Lowell's rhetoric and sensibility, one of the more stunning closures in recent American poetry. Axelrod finds the last stanza of "Near the Ocean" one of "the supreme moments in American poetry," whereas I find it clotted, stagey, and syntactically uncertain. Such disagreements over taste and judgment are inevitable, but in Axelrod's case he doesn't spend enough time on enough individual poems to establish his authority as a close reader. (The end of the book feels rushed, and Lowell's final volume is treated in a cursory manner.) And since he does little to construct with any sense of detail Lowell's private life (for example, we're told almost nothing about Lowell's first marriage and what role, if any, his religious commitment or apostasy played in it), the book's value is very limited. Now Axelrod may have been unable or unwilling to find out much about Lowell's relationship with Jean Stafford. Fair enough, but why then go on with a seemingly exploratory account that argues the poet "realizes himself most fully in the act of writing, and the writing therefore is a living record of his own self realization"? Isn't this just critical claptrap, which could be true or not true regardless of what we knew about the writer's life? For Axelrod, Lowell's inner hell is more important than the social reality that shaped or was colored by the psychological tensions, and so he remains essentially a formalist reader. Again, this is fair enough, but casting a series of unremarkable readings of "key" poems onto a thread of barely dynamized biographical moments doesn't make for compelling arguments. This book might have been strengthened if all its biographical structure had been eliminated and more time spent on reading more poems. An artist's life can't be made to illumine his work unless, so to speak, we know more about his life than we need to know. Then a biographer can do what all good literary criticism tries to do: render some homage to the "creative" work by offering a version of the work's import, and in this instance, the import of the work seen against and in the import of the life. In Axelrod's book, neither Lowell's life, nor the intersection of the life and the work, is made to matter enough.

Louis Simpson, in the introduction to his book, seems intent less on biographical studies than a general literary history of recent American poetry. The historical scheme he sets out is skeletal, but provocative, and one regrets that he didn't do more to explore it. Briefly, American poetry after the War, under the influence of Auden, turned to traditional models of poetry grounded on "irony and multiple ambiguous meanings." But with Dylan Thomas, and also with Charles Olson, there came a return to the energies of modernist experimentation; Thomas reminded readers that passion was missing from poetry, while Olson set his attack against the assumptions of Western European "humanism." Simpson, however, feels no sympathy for Olson, and cannot "enter into the processes of his work." This seems odd, as one comes later to feel Simpson isn't really sympathetic to Lowell's processes, either. But Simpson says he wants "to immerse [himself] in the writings of the poets, seize

upon what seem[s] vital, and convey [his] impressions to the reader." This puts him in the line of, say, Ezra Pound, as an intuitive critic. But, he adds, "attention shifts [for the poet] from the work to the life, and the lives of most poets won't bear inspection." Therefore, the poet "works up his feelings, his occupation now is seeming to be sincere, and the fabric collapses." In lamenting this confessional element in contemporary poetry, Simpson seems unaware that his own critical approach relies on a concern with the poet as celebrity. In each of his four chapters, we are given the standard life-and-works approach: "Getting to know Tate and Ransom worked a great change in Lowell" (note, not in Lowell's poetry, but simply "in Lowell"); "Her [Plath's] idea of fiction agreed with that of the editors [of the 'slick' magazines]: it was a "problem" that was solved at the end in a pleasant entertaining manner"; "Any discussion of Ginsberg's poetry must take his use of drugs into account," and so forth. Simpson at his best produces a lively sense of the poet's career; the narrative breezes along, as individual poems are lingered over just long enough to avoid the discussions degenerating into "literary appreciation," and the background of literary history or ideological struggle is explored more than superficially but less than profoundly. The book has little more weight on the intellectual scale than an average review, and resembles very closely Simpson's earlier effort, *Three on a Tower*, about Pound, Eliot, and Williams.

Donald Hall's book resembles Simpson's in several ways. A number of individual poets are portrayed, not to ram home a thesis, but with some larger pattern implicit among the singular lineaments. But Hall's book has the advantage of knowing what its limits are, what its generic possibilities offer. He begins by invoking Hazlitt's essay on the Romantic poets and the whole tradition of personal reminiscence and literary gossip. Thus, Hall must succeed or fail on the strength of his own voice rather than the depth of his insights or even the worth of his opinions. Judged in such terms, his book is the most rewarding of the three here reviewed. At the same time, Hall's book offers useful musings and speculations about poetry, the individual poets (Thomas, Frost, Eliot, and Pound) and the relation between literature and the general culture. By placing himself, albeit unobtrusively and often self-deprecatingly, in his portraits of such "masters," Hall earns the right to be listened to when he later, in a brief but stimulating final chapter, offers his own poetics. His book doesn't sufficiently apply his poetics to each of the poets, I think, but to do so would be to change genres abruptly. One senses with Simpson that he wanted to write a more aggressive literary history than he has, and with Hall one senses that a muffled theoretician hides behind the book's anecdotal structure.

A good way to compare Simpson and Hall (once co-editors, with Robert Pack, of an important anthology) is to see how they treat their one common subject: Dylan Thomas. Simpson's account is more colorful, though as he admits he draws many of his details from Paul Ferris' recent biography of Thomas. Hall's account centers on Thomas in Wales and London, and by saying little about the poet's upbringing or his later American tours, he produces the least interesting chapter in his book biographically speaking. But in terms of literary criticism, and the larger issues of aesthetic and cultural speculation, Hall commands more interest than Simpson. Simpson's sense of Thomas is underdeveloped theoretically, and shows his general limitations as a critic. Thomas, according to Simpson, was undeniably oral in his fixations and obviously Oedipal in his character. But "when we expect too much of psychoanalysis . . . it is plainly inadequate." So Simpson, having introduced orality and Oedipal conflict, almost as quickly drops them. He deals with them only long enough to show he doesn't really intend to test them or use them at any depth. Simpson says one would expect Thomas "to grow up hating his father, but Dylan respected his"—but of course even the most initiatory use of the Oedipal complex

would stress that its "real" difficulties always occur when the envy and antipathy towards the father are mingled with respect and awe. And later, when Simpson relates a key period of poetic growth to Thomas' discovery that his father had a cancer on his tongue, no mention of orality or Oedipal conflict is made. If Simpson's psychoanalytic explorations are to be no more deep or consistent than they are, one wonders why he bothered to interject them at all. This casual mention of things in psychoanalytic terms says a lot about the intersection of literary culture and the larger culture in America today, but it says it in a murky, un-self-reflective way.

Even at the level of "pure" literary criticism Simpson raises a host of questions that he leaves unanswered, and even unsatisfactorily framed. On the tired question of Thomas' emphasis on sound over sense, Simpson quotes the poet's anti-intellectual formulation: "images *are* what they say, not what they stand for." Simpson seems to approve of this dictum, and implies it answers most of the over-interpretation of critics (such as Elder Olson's super-mediaeval six levels of meaning in "Altarwise by owl-light"). "It is only wrong to interpret too much," argues Simpson, in what sounds like an operating rule for the general culture as well as for poetry. The way to read Thomas is to visualize what his lines say. But then Simpson quotes such lines as these: "When no seed stirs/ The fruit of man unwrinkles in the stars,/ Bright as a fig." Surely these lines aren't visualizable without bathos or a fund of interpretative assumptions (which fruit of man? the apple? the mango?). Very few would disagree with Simpson's straw-man formulations ("We must not let the possible meanings of the poem overwhelm the experience of listening and seeing"), but the critic has to be aware that phrases such as "fruit of man" have very little real or useful visual content. And once the visual content of a poem isn't photographically accurate or readily assimilated into some emotional complex, all we have left is "interpretation." This is part of why poetry is separate from the general culture, which often restricts itself to the most readily apprehended "experience" that doesn't require interpretation.

Donald Hall spends little time interpreting Thomas' imagery, or even whole poems. He is more concerned to present Thomas as a figure of the poet in the world, the man twistedly demonized, whose alcoholism finally destroyed a talent that had been arrested since his twentieth year. Hall indirectly shows the limitations of Thomas' poetry more effectively than Simpson demonstrates its strengths. For Hall, Thomas finally didn't write poems, he wrote *poetry*. And desiring *poetry*, Thomas was both a success and a failure: "Dylan wanted *poetry*, and he got it, but he asked for nothing more; and he never found the enlarging, enhancing wisdom that is poetry's real wickedness and real salvation." I agree with this assessment, though I cannot presume how to say Thomas could have (or *should* have!) gotten the necessary wisdom, nor, for that manner, can Hall say how. But Hall has some notions; for him poetry must "add metaphors of the forbidden child to words of the rational adult, making a third thing, which enlarges human consciousness." Simply put, it's an acceptable formula for *describing* the special cognitive powers of poetry, as acceptable as any other. But is it a workable formula for *writing* poetry, for discovering the not-yet-written third thing? I think there it's as flawed as any other formula as a guide for making poems, however it might help to identify the already made utterance as poetic. But we shouldn't fault Hall for failing to do what even Aristotle or Coleridge couldn't do, namely, turn a descriptive poetic into a prescriptive formula, an "open sesame" to new and better poems.

For Simpson, Dylan Thomas was a victim of a shallow society; the account of the poet's last days is the best passage in all of Simpson's book, as we see Thomas devoured by the world of poetasters and hangers-on and ravenous matrons of the art. It's a well-known explanation for Thomas' demise, but Simpson puts feeling

and drive into the imagined details of an exemplary dinner-party-before-the-reading. Hall, for his part, concludes his account of Thomas by suggesting that the poet was unable to master his demons, that he was obsessed by a fateful, Puritanical sense of his own unworthiness, and his alcoholism was the only way to bring the oblivion near and hold it off at the same time. Hall's version of Thomas' death-wish is no more a new discovery than is Simpson's version of the harpies, but it is equally convincing. Simpson's estimate of Thomas is much higher than Hall's. One wonders what would happen to a critical estimate that was based on Simpson's fuller biographical picture combined with Hall's more probing psychological musings.

There is another way to juxtapose Simpson's and Hall's books. For Simpson, Lowell was a "representative man" in *Life Studies*, whereas in *History* the life presented "was only Robert Lowell's." Simpson argues this distinction because he thinks *Life Studies* much the better book, and whatever we feel about the books' respective merits, Simpson's view is consistent. Hall's portrait of Ezra Pound is inconsistent; he makes clear his dislike of Pound's politics, yet ends by writing a (nearly sentimental) personal account of the aging poet's tragic suffering. He cites Pound's anti-semitic broadcast, and quotes a lyrical passage from a late *Canto;* then he asks, "how do I fit these pieces together? I do not fit these pieces together; they *are* together, in the mystery of a man's character and life." But, we ask, can you say something about the "mystery" that brought them, together, out of the same person? Hall doesn't answer this question, he only dramatizes its inherent difficulty. By showing us two "different" interviews—the one he had over a three-day period with Pound, full of moments of sagging physical and psychic strengths and sudden bursts of ego and charity, and the one he constructed for the *Paris Review* out of fragments of that three-day marathon—Hall produces the best literary biography in his book. Here we see that literary biography succeeds *in some sense* as a lyric poem succeeds: it finds the right moment of tension, the right figurations of language, to reveal not only itself but the complex of cognitive yearnings it is trying to mediate. To rephrase Frost, Hall's portrait of Pound begins in discomfort and ends in wisdom. What we see here is how hard it is to see Pound, either steadily or whole. One is satisfied with this chapter not because of what it tells us about Pound, but because of the difficulties it dramatizes in trying to see how a man's life is both his own *and* representative. We see Pound's strength and his folly, even his evil, and we see how that complex of character is simultaneously the result and the denial, as well as the cost and the retribution, of the life it mysteriously epitomizes. Pound is thus seen as the representative poet of modernism, with all its heroic failures and its foolish wisdoms.

Literary biographies, even literary reminiscences, remain, at their best, a subgenre of literature itself. Their self-reflective characteristics make them comparable to other such self-reflective utterances in the general culture. Thus they might resemble funeral orations, or political speeches at opening or commemorative ceremonies, and are subject to the same laxness of standards as these modes of discourse. But good biography presents us with the template of a life lived as if it mattered, not only to the subject, but to all the witnesses. It must itself bear witness, not only to the man, but his lengthened shadow. Looking back always implies looking ahead, and deciding not to mention someone's failures, or rather to analyze them at length, always involves ethical vision. Because it "waits upon" literature, in the sense it always rests on a more considered view, literary biography is more value-oriented, more directly engaged in judgemental assessments than is the thing it feeds on. Whatever its rewards as entertainment, a biography of an artist can be read as an exploration of cultural values not otherwise apparent. As such, literary biography gives us a chance to see

what values are operating, not only in our literature, but in our assessments of what it is to be fully human.

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Gerald Graff, *Literature Against Itself: Literary Ideas in Modern Society*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1979, 260 pp. $15.

> How long can the needle of the human gramphone stay in the rut of *Angst* without wearing out and ending in the repetition of a ghoulish gibbering?
>
> —JAMES THURBER

I. In this stimulating and important book, Gerald Graff examines the function of "literary thinking" (p. 1) at the present time. His judgment is stated sharply:

> Almost as if a formal partition-treaty had been negotiated, the creative faction (or the creative side of the individual) has renounced its claim to be a seeker of rational understanding and identified itself with an outlook that makes rational understanding sound contemptible. There is no deterministic theory of degeneration at work in my diagnosis. Our literary thinking has gone wrong because we have, by our own free will and conscious reasoning, sold ourselves a certain conceptual bill of goods. (pp. 28-29)

Teaching and scholarship are in disarray, and, Graff charges, we bear the responsibility for it. We tolerate the decline of critical standards in the academic journals and in the classroom; we allow our beliefs and principles to change according to the fashionable tastes of the moment; and we produce scholarly work in abundant measure, and debate the most rarified questions of literary theory and methodology, without asking ourselves what is the point and purpose of all our industry. Perhaps the most disturbing fact about our work as teachers and scholars is, as Graff rightly emphasizes, our willingness to divorce literature from culture and society. Even as we arm ourselves with extravagant, highly charged rhetorics (often supplemented by the latest theoretical offerings from France), we insist that literature has nothing of value to say about the real world: the more sophisticated our terminology, the more irrelevant it seems; and its irrelevance is not seen as a limitation, but a necessity. In a recent study, Eugene Goodheart has observed that "humanist criticism, which has as its object the quality of life as well as works of art, no longer has authority" (*The Failure of Criticism*, p. 8). After reading Graff's book, and reflecting upon the declared tenets of many in the profession, one is tempted to claim that *no* criticism carries a firm and clear authority. Few critics and teachers—or at least few on the vanguard of today's critical movements—believe that "literary thinking is bound, in a crucial and resourceful way, to our thinking about culture and society.[1]

Graff describes *Literature Against Itself* as an "argumentative" book, and it suffers from the common failings of other books in this mold—the repetition of points made several times before, the selective quotation of the opposing side to make the argument even stronger, flagging energy in the final chapters, much more

[1] Graff's other articles on these issues include: "Yvor Winters of Stanford," *American Scholar*, 44 (1975), 291-98; "Do It Yourself," (a review of Frank Kermode's *The Classic: Literary Images of Permanence and Change*), *American Scholar*, 45 (1976), 306-10; "Fear and Trembling at Yale" (on Bloom, Hartman, Miller, and De Man), *American Scholar*, 46 (1977), 467-78; a review of Kermode's *The Genesis of Secrecy: On the Interpretation of Narrative*, *The New Republic*, June 9, 1979, pp. 27-32; and "New Criticism Once More," *Critical Inquiry*, 5 (1979), 569-75.

diagnosis of the problems than advice about how best to cure them. But *Literature Against Itself*, I think, tackling the right issues, and unlike many books on critical theory, it is not imprisoned in its own vocabulary, and is not unmindful of the social and institutional contexts for the work we do (or fail to do). Graff's analysis is wide-ranging and detailed, covering, for example, modernism and post-modernism, New Criticism, the profession (which Graff explores by reviewing Richard Ohmann's *English in America: A Radical View of the Profession*), structuralism, and deconstruction. He is particularly good at tracing the continuities between the New Criticism and recent "deconstructive" criticism. We often assume, Graff notes, that deconstruction, as practiced by Jacques Derrida, Paul De Man, and others, marks a full-fledged assault on the legacy of the New Critics. But while there are obvious differences between the two critical movements—John Crowe Ransom and his allies would surely scorn the verbal pyrotechnics and obscurity of the deconstructive style—they both devalue, even renounce, the ties between literature and the world. The New Critics maintained that the text exists as a discrete object, and stressed that we should probe its subtleties and patterns without attending to the author's intention or historical period. The literary text, in other words, is not to be sullied by the brute realities of the world. With the coming of structuralism and deconstruction, this position is not reversed or overthrown, but rather taken to its logical conclusion. Derrida, Roland Barthes, and others first argue, like the New Critics, that the text does not refer to reality, and then proclaim a "liberating" corollary to this point: reality is not so much separate or different from literature, but "textual" itself. Textuality is disseminated everywhere; as Edward Said once observed, there is nothing but discourse—"wall to wall." According to this view, when we affirm the power of literature to refer to the real world, we are naively failing to perceive that our statements of "the real" are always a form of textual interpretation. Reality is, at bottom, just another fiction; it is never something other than a text—never something towards which a literary text revealingly gestures.

Literary critics thus subvert the possibility of their own enterprise. Objective thinking is said to be impossible; textual and fictional categories can never be transcended; "reality" and "reference" are simply other names for the illusions generated by our interpretive desires. As Graff demonstrates, many advanced theorists are oddly pleased with themselves for deciding that analysis is always futile, and that the real and true are merely whatever our perceptual strategies and conventions make them. "At the very moment," he writes, "when external forces have conspired to deflate the importance and truth of literature, literary theory delivers the final blow itself" (p. 26). As critics and intellectuals, we often define ourselves in opposition to the established culture. Yet, Graff remarks, we now act in league with the society we claim to be opposing. We agree that the study of literature is not a valuable use of one's time, for it does not provide us with any special explanatory power to make statements about the world in which we live.

II. I share many of Graff's concerns, and commend him for prosecuting an important case. *Literature Against Itself* is part of a major critical tradition that includes the writings of Lionel Trilling, F. R. Leavis, and Raymond Williams, who share (whatever their differences in temperament and method) a deep respect for the value of "literary thinking." But despite my admiration for Graff's book, I think he encounters difficulties at the center of his argument for the "referential" capacity of literature. And Graff, like other foes of recent, unsettling trends in the profession, is thus caught in a bind between admirable goals and dubious arguments for attaining them.

Graff argues that we must embrace a referential theory of literature in order to relate literary studies to the real world. There is, he contends, a "reality" independent

of our interpretive categories, and literary modes of thinking can help us to understand and strive to change it. By splitting off literature from the world, and by refusing to move beyond texts and fictions, we rule out the possibility for change; and we have no basis in fact for challenging our very real evils: "injustice, poverty, triviality, vulgarity, and social loneliness" (p. 101). "The notion," Graff states, "that there exists an objective reality 'out there,' independent of our perceptions of it, far from being an ideological rationalization for the existing order, is a prerequisite for changing the existing order, which has to be understood before it can be altered" (p. 27).

But later in his book, Graff seems to shift his arguments about literature and reality. We must have standards and principles, he insists, or else face chaos and "radical cultural relativism." "Is there no standard of *good reasons*," he asks, "that can be invoked to show that democratic freedom constitutes a wiser choice than genocidal extinction" (p. 38)? But it is one thing to emphasize the presence of an "objective reality," and another to appeal to "good reasons," or persuasive formulations (p. 89), or "extremely convincing" readings (p. 159). Here, Graff is describing verbal constructs, techniques of persuasion, language used as an instrument of power—in a word, rhetoric. And it is precisely the burden of the history of rhetoric that its verbal means are not always tied to the "real" and may even (as Plato warned) substitute for it. When we deploy language as a means of persuasion (for its rhetorical force), we are attempting to solicit support for our way of seeing things; and this is not necessarily the same as asserting an "objective reality" for our statements.

Graff is, of course, aware of our post-Kantian heritage, which affirms that we understand reality through our perceptual categories. Yet even as Graff agrees with this philosophical principle and uses terms like good reasons, persuasion, and convincing strategies—all of which testify to the way we form and construct reality—he talks about objective, "disinterested" reports of the "facts." He says, for example, that "value-free objectivity is a necessary first stage of making value judgments—the descriptive, disinterested determination of what it is that is to be judged" (p. 86). This is an admirable ambition, but it cannot be accepted if one endorses Graff's other remarks about our *interested* perception and interpretive categories. At one point, Graff tries to have his argumentative cake and eat it too: "That we cannot conceive of a fact without *some* interpretive paradigm does not mean that this fact can have no independent status outside *the particular paradigm we happen to be testing at the moment*" (p. 202, Graff's emphasis). Again this signals a praiseworthy effort to maintain a reality separate from our interpretations, but the obvious question is: where and how do the "facts" exist when distinct from our interpretations? What is their status? Graff proceeds, on the next page, to call upon Ralph Rader (who is summarizing Karl Popper) to buttress his position. But he discusses his lengthy quotation from Rader by first describing it as an "argument" and then as an "assumption." The quoted passage does not seem to me to constitute an "argument"; and it is less an "assumption" than a desire for a certain state of affairs, where a galaxy of independent facts illuminates the truth or falsity of our interpretations.

Without a firm basis of facts, an objective reality, then, in Graff's view, "anything goes" (see pp. 39, 50). This is a common fear, shared by E. D. Hirsch, Wayne Booth, and M. H. Abrams. But perhaps we should ask ourselves if it is truly the case that "anything goes." Though Graff may not be satisfied by my answer, I would suggest that there are always some limits and constraints on interpretation: it is never the case that just "anything goes." We practice our interpretive work within an institution; and while its norms and codes may be elusive, confusing, and even objectionable, they are nevertheless present and influential. Many things "go"

(not all of them good) in interpretation, but not anything at all. Interpretation is never totally random or arbitrary, and as Graff's own analysis often suggests, we should not underestimate the institutional pressures that direct and shape our work. As Michel Foucault, Stanley Fish, Frank Kermode (not three of Graff's favorites), and Quentin Skinner have argued, no one can say just anything, because there are contextual boundaries to what one *might* say in a particular situation. These constraints are not easy to specify, and they are not the same for all situations; and it is possible to amend or oppose them—though we usually pay a price for doing so. In a curiously apt phrase, George Meredith once referred to the "unwritten but perceptible laws binding [us] in consideration one to another." Their shape is not absolute or unchanging, but they never disappear, and never leave us in a chaos where "anything goes."[2] Graff's goals in *Literature Against Itself* are laudable, and I respect his work more than most of the post-structuralist criticism. But at several key points, his arguments are as over-stated or misguided as those he rejects.

To bring order to literary studies, Graff proposes that we should encourage "a historical view." We must, he explains, return "the student to his history" (p. 124), showing him the critical perspective "from which to assess the richness and poverty of the contemporary, to see what has been gained from this break with the past and what has been lost—and might be regained." English teachers should work in "collaboration" with teachers in other departments, and thereby indicate to our students the complex historical nature of what may seem at first to be purely "literary" issues. "The fact that scholars do not agree on the nature of history," Graff concludes,

> does not defeat such a program, for its purpose would not be to indoctrinate the student with a single theory but to bring him into the debate, to introduce him to the issues, and to equip him with the means to form his judgment of them and see his personal connection with them. The point is not to destroy pluralism but to transform it into a pluralism defined by a community of debate rather than a pluralism of incommensurable positions. (p. 125)

Like so much of Graff's writing in *Literature Against Itself*, this moving declaration strikes a responsive chord. But even as one welcomes his commitment to historical understanding and pluralistic debate, one wonders how he will make a place for "judgment." If Graff's recommendation is to be taken with full seriousness, then he must explain what it is directed towards—what better "reality." Without such a referent, he comes close to the position that he rebukes in Sontag, Barthes, and the rest—crippling the power of literature because it is denied the right of precise, truthful judgments. How do we embrace a pluralistic program without falling into the defeatism that Graff warns us about in others? To put this another way: how do we avoid "the patronizing of diverse viewpoints" that characterizes "contemporary society," and that reflects "a contempt for ideas, which are seen as impotent, and not of a disposition to take them seriously" (p. 213)? Graff is often perceptive in noting when two apparently different positions share some common ground. But he misses, I think, the most disturbing of these correspondences: because his proposal

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[2] I can only trace the outlines of this argument here. For a more detailed account, the interested reader should consult two essays by Kermode: "Can We Say Absolutely Anything We Like?," in *Art, Politics, and Will: Essays in Honor of Lionel Trilling*, ed. Quentin Anderson, Stephen Donadio, and Steven Marcus (New York: Basic Books, 1977), pp. 159-72, and "Institutional Control of Interpretation," *Salmagundi*, 43 (1979), 72-87.

for "a historical view" lacks concrete definition and reference, it seems to return us to the weak forms of "literary thinking" that he attacks.

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Margaret Atwood. *Selected Poems*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978, 240 pp. $9.95.

Richard Pevear. *Night Talk and Other Poems*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977, 64 pp. $7.50.

Bin Ramke. *The Difference Between Night and Day*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978, 75 pp. $7.95.

Dan Masterson. *On Earth As It Is*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1978, 84 pp. $7.95.

"Escaping from allegories / in the misty east, where inherited events / barnacle the mind," Margaret Atwood's narrator in her early poem, "Migration: C.P.R." recounts: "we ran west / / wanting / a place of absolute / unformed beginning." The difficulty with such a founding project is that one encounters the "not quite- / forgotten histories," the "secondhand / stores" of prior explorers, the "hieroglyphics / carved in the bark"—the "always already" that Derrida says undermines our desire for absolute origins. We become, as Atwood says, like fishermen "untangling their old nets / of thought" for, whenever we journey to discover our origins, we always carry with us our language which is itself a history—"and language is the law." Yet if the origin is never achieved, the desire for it is always sustained, and in fact becomes, as recent criticism has suggested, the motivating force for much post-Romantic poetry. As Rousseau once wrote:

> It is no light undertaking to separate what is original from what is artificial in the present nature of man, and to know correctly a state which no longer exists, which perhaps never existed, which probably never will exist, and about which it is nevertheless necessary to have precise notions in order to judge our present state correctly.

For the contemporary poet, unlike his Romantic predecessors, the consciousness of the fictionality of origins is a special burden, and the four poets examined here provide us with important strategies for dealing with that burden.

Margaret Atwood's first volume, *The Circle Game*, deploys a cluster of spatial metaphors that establish a relation between outside and inside, surface and depth, in an attempt to find a continuity between origin and present. A number of these early poems, such as "After the Flood, We" (which re-tells the Ovidian Creation myth) and "Pre-Amphibian," are frankly myths of emergence, surfacings from the originating, antediluvian depths of the world. "This Is a Photograph of Me" describes a very old photo of a lake, and the narrator "in the center / of the picture, just under the surface" though it "is difficult to say where / precisely." However, if the exact site of the origin for the poet is uncertain, its basis is not; it rests upon a conjunction of word and world, of single utterance and the cyclic process of nature that always returns to its origin. This conjunction of word and world is itself represented by "totems"—pebbles "enclose what they intended / to mean in shapes / as random and necessary / as the shape of words," and objects themselves, like words, "keep / the image of that inner shape" which is an essence, an absolute presence. The result of this strategy is that by the end of this first book outside and inside have collapsed into one; the myth of origins is held in the poem's form, "not above or behind / or within it, but one / with it: an / identity" of word and thing, report and event, history and origin.

This identity sustains the poet's vision through most of her second volume, *The Animals in That Country*, but the sense of "an ordered absence" develops, an acknowledgement that there is a "tension / between subject and object," that the world resists the word: "Things / refused to name themselves; refused / to let him name them" ("Progressive Insanities of a Pioneer"). This knowledge leads eventually to *The Journals of Susan Moodie* where the problem of the pioneer in a strange land serves to dramatize the "tension"—unable to be held by a name, the world becomes inexplicable, unpredictable: "my damaged / knowing of the language means / prediction is forever impossible" ("First Neighbors").

In the midst of this tension the very status of the self is brought into question. The self beneath the surface that was an "identity" of the speaker in earlier poems, now becomes "the other creature," more "real" than the one in language ("A Fortification"). The poems confront, from the *Journals* on, not the presence of the self, but its absence: "I began to forget myself / in the middle / of sentences" ("Thoughts from Underground"). Now the representation of the self becomes more problematic; in "Tricks with Mirrors" the self and its image enter an unsolvable play of surfaces which leads once again to the image of depth, the inside as a renewed source of the self: "Perhaps I'm not a mirror. / Perhaps I'm a pool." But this is not a return to the stance of the early poems, for the two realms of surface and depth are alternative possibilities, not identities. Between these two possibilities the poet establishes an orphic line of communication; the inhabitants of the "underland," she says, are always "beckoning you / back down" ("Procedures for Underground").

This creative vacillation produces a double consciousness containing two complementary voices, the natural and the mythic. The first voice is found to be always already implicated in pre-existing voices. So the rat in "Rat Song" (one of several similar "Songs of the Transformed") exclaims:

> It's your throat I want, my mate
> trapped in your throat.
> Though you try to drown him
> with your greasy person voice,
> he is hiding / between your syllables
> I can hear him singing.

The second voice is that of Circe who, in a sequence of poems, is the dispenser of "muted syllables / left over" from previous languages, a Circe whose re-formed words offer hope of a new beginning. The visions of the two voices are, as she says in another poem, like "two islands." On the first, events "run themselves through / almost without us," but the second "has never happened" though the poem goes on to create a fiction for it. The first we cannot escape, the second we cannot do without. With the second we can imagine each thing to be unique, new, original so that next "summer, will not be / grass, leaves, repetition, there will / have to be other words," other poems.

It is this very inadequacy of language, according to Richard Pevear in his *Night Talk*, which provides, in Heidegger's words, a clearing away in order to found a new beginning ("The Origin of the Work of Art"). For the poet, according to Peaver and Heidegger, the signifying quality of language is not as important as its ability or "presence" or "house" being, the world, by the very act of its being spoken. And ironically this act of presencing is accomplished because our language cannot completely, and thus statically, contain the world—some of the world's dynamic, evasive nature appears through the very equivocation, polysemy, the sense of openness and possibility, that mark our attempts to contain things. "Speech," for example, describes

A wooden facsimile of the perfect language
Heard for a moment and lost, vainly sought for,
Although it sings calmly in the air, the earth, the water.
These are words that would clothe the simplest object
In its own simplicity, but twisted from their purpose
They burn on your tongue like an acid penny.
Words which, yet, if you face them squarely,
Yield a hard light and, being inadequate,
Leave space enough for the world to flow into.

This is, then, an intertextual relation between speech and being. So, Pevear exclaims in "Provisional Ode"—

And now I see you, finally, and can speak:
A sudden spring of words in the desert
Of my mouth. That is only an image of you
In my speech, my speech in your being.

But all this is not to suggest that there is a desire for a Shelleyan interpenetration of world and word, even within the space of language's inadequacy, for, as Pevear says in "Double Labor," our "impenetrable states of mind" eventually produce "the inevitable, head on crash against the wall."

What the poet attempts to do is locate our origins in a pre-historical context where particular origins are "forgotten" but where all being is forever on the verge of becoming:

Not lost
But as if asleep, the horses
Move into an almost classical distance,
Into August, into the rift, the calm eye
Of the unreaped meadow. But to abide
Is to be forever expectant.

The state is, as Pevear says in several poems, a unity of motion and rest. We realize the state of expectancy inadequately, of course, and only through the flawed "traces" of the origin in things and time-bound words we find around us. Thus, in "Talisman," Pevear studies

the structure of a seashell, whorled
Out of its lost beginning, and the seed
Your talisman, final reduction of the flower,
Round, hard, and purposely flawed.

And in "La Beale Isode" the "first meeting" of characters becomes an originating event founded upon the "wordless/ Promise of the first words," a language that resides in the "space" or "rift" in speech. This "promise," this sense of possibility and openness, the "beautiful acceptance of the unavoidable," characterizes the whole book; there is everywhere in Pevear's voice a sense that "the world at any moment/ May become translucent" ("The Beautiful Acceptance"). The emphasis on the non-signifying aspects of language comprises the very notion of "night talk," a speech that refers not to particular things hidden in the dark, but which can allow, by its very utterance, an *unsaid*, a sense of presence, of fullness, to enter that speech:

Unseen
The stars come out above the city,
The unsaid is a caught breath
Between us: all is, nothing moves.

For Bin Ramke, as the title of his book, *The Difference Between Night And Day,* suggests, there is also a critical rift between word and world, founding imagination and historical reality. In the day vision, as he suggests in "Summer 1956: Louisiana," there is an acute consciousness that nothing can be originated, that everything has already occurred: "What happens in this state is always memory/ even before it happens." Memory for Ramke proves a burden and as it becomes less and less a means of imaginatively dealing with the world, it also becomes, increasingly as the book progresses, the harbinger of guilt. The last section of the book, particularly, deals with this burden, especially in poems such as "Infidelity" and "The Husband's Guilt." Burdened by the past, one becomes like the woman in "An Old Woman Walks Home" who exclaims: "There is no story to my future but my past/ is warm and rancid."

The night vision offers the poet a more successful means of dealing with time. In this vision the tracks and traces of the past vanish:

> Late at night snow covers the tracks of small animals:
> we grow smaller in the dark
> until our rooms lose us in corners
> and our mothers' slippered feet
> move farther down the hall.
> ("Mourning His Mother's Death")

As the past and history diminish as forces, imagination becomes more free to quarry its own order for things founded upon its own authority: "I tell you a star is green/ but you cannot see it" ("The Difference Between Night and Day"). The poet's aim, in this context, is not to search after origins, but to simply begin, however intransitively—not to measure the past but to become part of time's passing, to be always beginning:

> When necessity lugs us into another year
> do not be misled by calendars, a new year
> begins with each tick, each time you
> remember time is passing.
> ("Martyrdom: A Love Poem")

For Dan Masterson, the passing of time marks a distance not from a metaphysical origin, but from a beginning rooted firmly in time, in the physical world. It is a beginning that can be found only within the self during moments of profound loss (as in "For A Child Going Blind" where the parents have forgotten to tell her how rainbows originate and progress towards shadows), or at the approach of death (which so many of these poems deal with). The "Old Drummer in the Poorhouse," for example, recounts the man's life spinning away from an origin it reaches, in himself, in the end: he watches "his life spin across the ceiling/ and down the wall, finding itself/ again in the cracked and shadowed/ mirror." More optimistic is "Recovery" where a small girl near death is revived, it seems, by the metaphoric action of a butterfly who will fan the soul's flames:

> She discovers her own image
> reflected beneath the lid,
> and passes through the eye
> to find the soul's wick
> flickering in the last
> of its shadows.

It is precisely such a flickering world, always on the verge of collapse, always conveying a sense of great risk, absence, loss, that constitutes life in *On Earth As It Is.*

The beginning, in this flickering world, occurs in sudden recognitions or projections, or as Heidegger says—"a genuine beginning, as a leap, is always a head start, in which everything to come is already leaped over, even if as something disguised" ("Origins"), even if beyond recognition. So Masterson says in "Reunion," the dead, our pasts, our origins, return to us unexpectedly when we search, through the rituals that are our poems, the traces the dead have left behind :"Only then will you see them clearly, / bursting a moment beyond recognition."

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David I. Grossvogel. *Mystery and Its Fictions: From Oedipus to Agatha Christie.* Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979, 203 + xi pp. $12.95.

"Unable either to grasp or to abandon mystery, [man] resorts to a familiar fraud: he attempts to absorb mystery in speculation; he invents incarnations with which he can cope. Literature plays a part in this process," writes David Grossvogel, "and most literature is tinctured to some extent with the effects of that concern." The average fan of the mystery story might immediately object that Grossvogel has opened his door too wide, has taken the mystery out of mystery fiction by noting the degree to which all fiction participates in its devices. But the door is wider yet, the mystery deeper; for as Grossvogel defines it, "mystery extends beyond god: god represents only man's most strenuous efforts to overcome mystery."

The theological edge suggested in his opening remarks is and is not borne out in Grossvogel's subsequent analyses of "mystery" fiction—*is not,* insofar as theology proper is beyond his province; but *is,* to the extent that he is concerned with documenting the centrality of a grappling with mysteries interior to the modern mind, even if in oblique and disguised ways. "At some time between *Beowulf* and that modern consciousness" whose precarious workings we recognize as our own, Western fiction, according to Grossvogel, has become "less interested in describing a world beset by the mystery of ultimate realities than in describing the effect of that mystery upon an individual consciousness—engaging in a metaphysical rehearsal that is not unlike the psychological exploration of Freud. . .[and whose] failure to apprehend the unapprehendable turns into a speculative brooding about the limits of the self." But at the further reaches of such modern, fictional internalization of the processes of mystery, not only has man (or the "hero") displaced god as the object of intense brooding, but man in fact begins to evaporate into the processes themselves; since "the mode of the detective story is to create a mystery for the sole purpose of effecting its effortless dissipation." Grossvogel remarks, "the hero of the detective fiction is a void created by his functional dependency on the 'mystery'. . . ." In the modern metaphysical novel, which takes its lead from detective fiction, "an existential alienation" is substituted for "the resolvable mystery," and the "ultimate vacancy of the genre [is] recapitulative and total: at the end of the book, the mystery [is] turned into transparency extending from cover to cover."

I omit reference here to the more metaphysical speculation that Grossvogel himself undertakes (speculation couched in a mildly Heideggerian and post-structuralist vocabulary), but want to reassert that the average mystery fan may be baffled or disappointed to find that Grossvogel's is more a book on modern comparative literature than one on mystery or detective fiction in a narrower sense. Of the two chapters concerned with the latter, the one on Agatha Christie does not go far beyond a simple rehearsal of *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* that issues in the unstartling conclusion that Christie's world is finally little more than "nostalgia and illusion," while the other on Poe's "The Purloined Letter," though certainly more sophisticated, gets bogged down in an explication of Jacques Lacan's essay on it, an essay that is

a mystery in its own right and the subject of much recent brooding. The other chapters treat *Oedipus*, Dostoevsky, Camus, Pirandello, Borges, Kafka, Robbe-Grillet, and—in an epilogue that reaches back to the origins of Western mystery—the Book of Job. Each has its own rewards and perplexing omissions, but together they constitute a serious inquiry into the crucial questions of modernism. Because Grossvogel so limits his discusson of the mystery and detectve genre, however, and is prone to do so by raising interesting questions that get brushed aside (for example: "the detective story is always in danger of becoming something else. With the advent of the 'hard-boiled' genre. . .the detective story becomes a saga of the American industrial city as the locale of a man facing the corruption of individuals and of government"), his book at times seems strangely self-defeating.

The chapters are also uneven in approach and methodology, ranging from a compelling, although tortuous, reading of *textual* figures in *Oedipus* to (as I noted) a near-plot summary of Agatha Christie and on to more conventional and controlled considerations of the function of "masks" and "rehearsals" in Pirandello, of the "parable" as simile in Kafka, or of the partial "deconstruction" of Oedipal myth in Robbe-Grillet. Grossvogel's readings of the twentieth-century writers are individually illuminating and collectively important in establishing for us some of the implementing motives and defining limits with which modern literature is obsessed. The student of modernism will find his curiosity deepened and satisfied by much of *Mystery and Its Fictions;* the serious reader of mystery and detective fiction will wish that Grossvogel had probed further into the motives and limits of the genre from which he takes his clue.

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Madison Jones. *Passage Through Gehenna.* Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978, 277 pp. $8.95.

Some of Madison Jones's earlier novels suffer from obvious attempts at being topical. Even Jones's *A Cry of Absence,* one of his best novels, depends much on the topic of racial conflict for its effect. But *Passage Through Gehenna,* Jones's new novel, is a timeless allegory of universal interest. In *Passage* he has created a stirring Southern "testimonial" in an almost epic tone. The novel is an extended moral parable, but it has plenty of realistic action. The masterful blend of religion and sex leads to two killings. But the violence does not obscure the moral theme of the novel.

The action takes place in the town of Hallsboro, where most people are of a rural origin. There are several well-rounded characters, but the novel is mainly a study of the initiation of Jud Rivers. The rural mind of Jud has been created by a man who has spent his life among country people in the South. Madison Jones has exact knowledge of the details of country life.

Whether he uses country talk, country preaching or the filthy whisper of the local whore, it is clear that Jones is a seasoned stylist. He is an experienced story teller, who does not let us off until the story has been told. A great tension is maintained also between the climactic parts, for Jones has worked hard at reducing "the elocution." The chapter transitions are unrivaled in smoothness. Jones always moves on to new aspects at exactly the right moment. The economy is praiseworthy. Every detail is essential in relation to the novel as a whole. But the austerity of the form does not diminish the richness of the texture. Every detail is fully dramatized, and entire scenes are brought to life with just a few details. An expert craftsman avoids coincidences, but accepts the unavoidable. People kill, become pregnant or commit suicides also in Hallsboro, but the events are not in the novel as shock effects. The reader accepts the violence as organic and unavoidable.

In Hallsboro there are grotesque characters, barking dogs of ancient folklore, and an ever-threatening violence below the apparent ease. Hallsboro is a type of Old Testament world, drawn with the artistry of a Flannery O'Connor. Yet the every day of these Tennessee characters is full of blue jeans and pot-smoking. The clash between old traditions and modern mores is reflected in the struggle in Jud's mind.

Jud is brought up in The True Bible Church of Jesus Christ, one of the many churches of the Tennessee hills of a Fundamentalist persuasion. Salter, the leader, works miracles routinely; and we are not allowed to doubt his miraculous powers. Jones has grown up attending faith-healings and tent-revivals. He knows what people look like when they come to meeting: "And the people came, ignoring the cold. They drifted mutely into the tent, one or two at a time, in scrubbed-out denim jumpers and shapeless woolen coats, and sat down on the chairs. Their faces looked empty, and they appeared to gaze only at the light bulb. . . ."

The novel moves from religion to the moral sphere. The stern Puritanism of Jud's childhood emphasized rectitude at the expense of Christian love. He must try to liberate himself from this world to be capable of the love that Hannah Rice shows him *does* exist. Jud chooses the outcast role for a while, and the book becomes a study in the psychology of loneliness. Jud's ordeal is generated out of the absence of love. His learning to love is the theme of the novel. What is a world without love, as Jones puts it: "Just a torment of wanting things that don't satisfy you. Till it burns you up, finally." It is through the sacrifice of Hannah that Jud is restored to himself. He only makes it through Gehenna with her help. Unlike some of Jones's earlier novels, *Passage* is not pessimistic. The earlier novels often left the reader with nowhere to go, but at the end Jud is at least capable of love.

The origin of the basic idea for *Passage* is Choderlos de Laclos's *Les Liaisons dangereuses* (1782), an epistolary novel on the perversions of the soul. Laclos's female seducer is unusually evil. In *Passage* she has survived as Lily Nunn of great sexual attractiveness and obscure origin. Jud is eighteen when he meets Lily and his sexually inflamed idea of her is unreliable. But she is no ordinary woman. Her name recalls Lilith, the wife Adam is fabled to have had before Eve and a woman who is supposed to have become the Devil's dam, the terror of children and pregnant women. In *Passage,* Lily Nunn is a modern witch doing the Devil's work. She hopes to prove to Jud's satisfaction that all the Christians of Hallsboro are hypocrites. Ultimately, this costs the lives of Salter and Hannah Rice. It is a result of Jones's skill that personified evil fits in so well in a modern novel.

Jud must come to terms with the evil in the world and with the results of his strict upbringing. But he must also try to reconcile his sexuality with reality. There is a good deal of comedy when Jud attempts to stare down his libido. His first sexual encounter with Dorcas Poole, called Goldie, from the local café has the shattering impact of reality on a dreamer's mind: "Yet the event finally happened. It was quick, like goats. . . ." Jud tries not to go back to Goldie's bed, though it is predictable that he will.

Both Salter and Goldie were created for a novel Jones wrote fifteen years ago, called *Tales of Dixie.* Except for two sections, the novel has not been published. It was a comic novel on the Northern idea of what was going on down South in the 60's. It is fortunate that Jones decided to revive these characters in the setting of the Hallsboro microcosm.

Madison Jones's sixth novel is his best so far; and that is saying a great deal. *Passage Through Gehenna* is a potential classic, and it deserves a large audience.

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