Numéro Cinq

Deirdre Baker

Peripatet | Essay — Grant Maierhofer
I walked through the city limits
(Someone talked me in to do it)
Attracted by some force within it
(Had to close my eyes to get close to it)

“Interzone” – Joy Division

Whether factually or not, I’d trace the severe moments throughout my life to stretches of movement. I pace. I walk. When writing my first novel, I’d finish some mornings at four and walk outside in my father’s neighborhood in underwear and lie down on the street at the intersection. Nobody came, I wasn’t worried. I’ve convinced myself somewhere over time that all we do is bound up in all that’s done: i.e., you pore over documents researching projects, say, and feel it’s this that leads to good days of work done. What about the menial tasks? The mailbox walks. The family calls. The television watched. The food prepared and not;
even eaten, not. We pay attention to apparently massive events of import and neglect the steps it takes from where you sit to the place wherein your bladder can be let. I do this, in turn. I care little while the small moments are happening and even belittle them to my detriment, often feeling I’ve done nothing all day when to recount it require sincere attention. I think of walking in these terms. I thought of it as necessary toward a particular kind of relief nothing else brought. It wasn’t constant, I didn’t walk great lengths daily but when I made time for it something else seemed to happen.

Walking for me changed when architecture changed, cities or long rural stretches suddenly took on meaning, became signs warped. In Jarett Kobek’s novel of the 9/11 attacks, ATTa, Mohammed, Atta, wanders cities hearing voices in their materials. I hadn’t known this prior to reading but Atta was a student of architecture, had written a dissertation in fact regarding the imperialist dominion of metropolitan architecture over the Middle East. The heft of these sentiments is largely unimportant to my purposes here, but I often wonder about the post-9/11 psyche and its relationship to architecture. Like the possibility of burned, sacked, destroyed works of art, either by the hands of their creators or fascists or mere accident, the anticipation of destruction alters our sense of the landscape in ways it simply couldn’t prior to the explosive power of our present. To be sure, it isn’t only terrorists who alter our cities, our landscapes. I grew up in a town in apparent constant search for redefinition amid advancing norms. Restaurants in husks of old diners, college campuses redone in glass opposed to brick, these are familiar shifts to anyone alive today. Although his final acts warp any logic one might glean from either the real or fictional Atta, this notion of an intensely personal, intimate, physiological relationship to one’s comparably inanimate surroundings would seem a thing not duly mined, considering its likeness to questions of AI, the Singularity, or our soured relationship to ecology.

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In Tsai Ming Liang’s brilliant short film, Walker, perhaps the polar...
opposite to Kobek’s citydweller can be found. What happens: a bald monk walks slowly, almost frustratingly so, through the bag and by film’s end removes—slowly—a burger from slow, meditative bites. It’s my understanding that this sort is occasionally a form of actual meditation. This makes perfect sense. Turning inward and simply sitting there is often trying while focusing in minute detail on every movement and deliberate steps, asserting the body’s form against the world, this makes perfect sense.

I’ve always viewed walking as a literary matter, an art before discovering figures like Iain Sinclair, or Guy Debord, or Baudelaire and conceptions of the flaneur. Walking has proven therapeutic, whether doing so aggressively late at night, apparent danger of the world present itself, or doing an afternoon after being inside for too long, the act simultaneously transcended a basic corporeal state, and

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Rogers Park is a neighborhood in north Chicago. Where you’d exit the El and through a smear of shops and bodies have a wonderful nodding of demographics. I lived in an apartment with one room surrounded by large family apartments always hubbubing and boiling these complicated wafts. I never came to know them of minor nods and kept to myself that year from this perpetual tendency I have of eating or not the wrong medicine, worldview, or daily set of acts that led through all their variation to the same gutless solitude, a bitter living spoken aloud to myself and only made to wane through incredible heaps of television and the few far-between obsessions with the arts.

Leaving my apartment after turning right once you’d find entry to a beach. This beach is on Lake Michigan and I typically walked along it late at night. At my entry, a jut of large rocks allowed for a sort of pier whereon you could easily fall into water were you careless. I was often
careless and ill-dressed for whatever occasion it was but I never fell in.
I’d walk out, say, mildly winded from the trek from studio there, and sit on some rock’s jagged seat to watch the sky and water. This area isn’t exactly dangerous regarding crime but all the same one would do well to focus on matters and turn any potential needs—directions, whatever—inward. For myself these were paranoiac times. I’d come upon a unipolar depression summer previous after meddling with my skull since a youth and being poked at by various abbreviated meds. Then I took a heap of medicine each day and returned to Chicago. I then threw my medicine into the toilet and sat in the bath without good light and read at pages of Jim Thompson or Céline until dropping the former into the tub to watch it waterlog, and leaving apartment night on night with latter gripped to ward off the world’s moods and chisel idiot notes upon my head.

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So this beach was particular, dirtied, humming and full of death. I’d wear what clothes were there and sit on wet sand spreading my arms out beside me making bellows.

An aside: on arriving second year in the city of H.H. Holmes I wound up broke downtown without means to ride the L back up to Rogers Park. It being midday and having eaten—I bodily, have diabetes mellitus and thus would note these things at moments—I decided to walk home. This walk took me eight hours and for the last two I dug in the garbage bins lining the lake for sips at discarded Powerades as my blood sugar had made its plummet.

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Endless hubbub has, can be made of the opening to Wim Wenders’s masterpiece, Paris, Texas. I first saw this film when living in Chicago. I watched it and, some point after Harry Dean Stanton’s miserado “Travis” made his long walk through the desert valley, “this is my favorite film.” What happens in its opening,
in a tattered suit and red baseball cap walks. He’s returning, he’s so disheveled, and carries a two gallon jug with remnants of dirty water. Simple, droney guitar emanates, and his walk continues. I know of nothing like it in cinema, not to mention films taking place in America, and I can’t watch it without feeling buried in some abstract sense.

Just as often as walking shaped my days and hours were spent focused on the few feet of ground just next, I’d create arbitrary treks to add small blips of meaning to otherwise empty, useless days. This was at a time when I’d begun work on my second novel. I’d turned 21 and read Frederick Exley’s trilogy and Céline’s *Journey* and when I’d come home from school or movies or walks, I’d etch away at staccato bits of narrative I then called *Shadows to the Light*. I’d wake and have coffee and work, then walk for X amount of time. I’d return with ideas or scribbled notes and work until I couldn’t, then leave and of an all-night grocery not wanting to go home just yet.

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Long walks then along the beach and through the park as coffee’d stints of work. Short, staccato blips I’d map out from block to block nearby so as to stave off this constant note of failure. Exley walked, if memory serves, after a hospitalization; he’d sat on his mother’s couch with dog to watch television for months. Eventually, and abruptly, he took to foot and spent his days walking until he couldn’t breathe or take it. I admired this and understood. All my life I’ve tended to saturate my head in often rotten media: literature sure and film but also hours upon hours of television. I’d do this then and came to realize that movement, physical movement, could right the muck. Perhaps it’s never entirely right but it at least put the muck to work in interesting ways. I’d walk say after reading Jim Thompson in the tub or watching police procedurals and edges of paranoia scattered my thinking.

There is, then, at best, a kind of art ingested through covering the city, letting the city cover you. My body would be anxious, slow of step and
my head I’m frantic. In retrospect it becomes simple to toss figures at it. Remember the monk, remember Baudelaire, remember the foundation here, walking as transmutative, compelling, fundamentally human, Iain Sinclair covering the M5 and allowing himself to become swathed in the narrative where he stepped. I’d aspire to it, and perpetually fail. I remember Molloy into the unknown and bodies affected by their environment. That’s left is a withering tramp, a citizen without shoes sucking on stones and keeping time this way. Once I felt chased through the park to music. I turned Beethoven loud in my ears and covered ground where nobody would follow. Followed still, I turned and faced them and screamed at them and wandered off. I was losing myself. I saw me later and spoke with me. He flattered me. He flirted with me, he told me all would be O.K. and the person likely just wanted to speak to me. I imagined a life with that old man. I wanted to hug him and feel his history pass through me. I stood there eventually he did hold me. I do not know how I looked. A confused person, thinned by anxiety and in search of something. I told older men that way, though typically it never went beyond conversation, always in transit. He was sweet, however. He sort of held me in his words. That night I returned to my apartment and received a strange message. I didn’t know where it came from and it showed a male stood up in his kitchen, a kitchen. I didn’t respond but it didn’t make sense. I was losing it. I’d continue my frantic pacing contacting strangers online and speaking with them on the phone, always older men and always touched with some bit of the anxiety of lust. The problem of walking is imagining your lives in every step, what might’ve been. The problem of reflecting is you’re brought back, wherever you’ve been, to feel the heap of potential history wash over you. I walked, then, to put myself at the feet of living and submit to human beings, to open myself and fail to welcome entirely the lonely glints returned in eyes as I went past.
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Mother Tongue | On Doris Lessing — Victoria B

“I think Miller was an early essay and Lessing a much later one, by which point I had grown quite practiced at entering imaginatively into an author’s life (and was probably overconfident about it!). I really loved writing these essays...”
writer I chose, once you got down to it, was a hapless flake, making mess of their life and yet stalwartly, patiently, relentlessly processing every crisis and turning them all into incredible art. How could you not love these people and their priceless integrity? I felt like I had found my tribe. the least that they were pretty much all dead. There was just that p vital, creative attentiveness to everything wrong – that I cherished.

942 in the land that used to be Rhodesia. A 24-year-old mother spreads a picnic blanket out on a lawn beneath the delicate leaves of a cedrillatoona tree. On the blanket she sits her two children: John, a lively three-year-old and Jean, a sweet-tempered baby. They watch their mother with steady interest.

She explains that she is going to have to abandon them. She wants them to know this is a carefully considered choice. She tells them ‘that they would understand later why I had left. I was going to change this ugly world, they would live in a beautiful, perfect world where there would be no race hatred, injustice, and so forth.’

Her comrades in the Rhodesian branch of the Communist party have been encouraging her for several months now to break away from her family. For the first time in her life, the young woman feels solidarity in her aims and her principles; the group has given her both strength and freedom to take this extraordinary step. But it is not really – or at least not wholly – politics that has provoked it.

‘Much more, and more important: I carried, like a defective gene, a kind of doom of fatality, which would trap [the children] as it had me, if I stayed. Leaving, I would break some ancient chain of repetition. One day they would thank me for it.’

The children, she believes, are the only ones who ‘really understood me’, unlike her husband, who is bewildered and s
decision, and her mother, ever a stern critic and now in righteous rage. ‘Perhaps it is not possible to abandon one’s children without moral and mental contortions,’ the young mother would write. ‘But I was not exactly abandoning mine to an early death. Our house was full of concerned and loving people, and the children would be admirably looked after – much better than by me.’ In her own mind, her act was one of desperate self-rescue. ‘I would not have survived. A nervous breakdown would have been the least of it. I would have become an alcoholic, I am pretty sure. I would have had to live at odds with myself, riven, hating what I was part of, for years.’

The young woman went on to become Doris Lessing, author of 27 novels, seventeen short story collections, numerous non-fiction works, and winner of the Nobel prize for literature. But when she left her children she had scarcely begun to write. She was D Doris Wisdom, a bored and miserable housewife, irritated by her husband, ambivalent towards her babies, and terrified of repeating the strains of her parents’ marriage. All she had was her literary ambition and a hatred for the inequalities of the country she grew up in, which were as fierce as her love of the land.

From these disparate ingredients she would produce a first novel of raw, corrosive power, a novel that would take London by storm when she arrived with the manuscript in her suitcase, and inform a colonizing power of the desperate abuses that took place on either side of the colour bar.

But before she left Rhodesia, she was going to make the same mistakes of marriage and motherhood all over again.
Doris Lessing was born in 1919 to the dispirited aftermath of the First World War. Her parents met in the Royal Free Hospital. Doris’s mother was Sister Emily MacVeigh, the clever but unhappy daughter of a disciplinarian father. Doris’s father, Alfred Tayler, had lost a leg, his optimistic resilience and half his mind in the trenches. While Emily nursed him, the doctor she intended to marry went down with his ship. Neither could have the life they wanted, and so they determined to make do with the shared burden of their disappointments. Alfred married in order to make restitution to the woman who had saved his life and his sanity, whom he knew wanted children. Emily did indeed want children, but marriage meant she had to refuse the offer of a matronship at St George’s, a famous teaching hospital. She did not do so without inner turmoil. And then, depressed and shell-shocked still, Alfred was insulted to the core when handed the white feather by a group of women in the street who could not see the wooden leg under his trousers. Unable to tolerate his feeling that his own country had betrayed him, he took a post in a bank in Persia.
Doris Lessing believed that her mother was as depressed as her father, conflicted over the choices she had made, the sudden emigration, and the weariness of having worked so hard in the war. As a couple they had been advised not to have children too soon, but Emily was already thirty-five and may not have wanted to wait. They joked she fell pregnant on their wedding night. In Persia, after a difficult forceps birth, she was handed not the son they wanted, but a daughter for whom they didn’t even have a name. The doctor suggested Doris. ‘I do believe this difficult birth scarred me?’ Lessing would later write in her memoirs. ‘I do know that to be born in the year 1919 when half of Europe was a graveyard, and people were dying in millions all over the world – that was important.’

The early years in Persia were, in fact, to be some of the happiest her parents would know. On arrival, it was as if they sloughed off old identities, her mother taking on her middle name ‘Maud’ and renaming her father ‘Michael’, which she felt sounded classier. They enjoyed the rounds of colonial parties with the ‘right sort’ of people, her husband was content at the bank, and another baby arrived, the much hoped-for son. Doris Lessing’s earliest memories were of slouching against her father’s wooden leg in social gatherings, hearing herself relentlessly
discussed by her mother: how difficult and naughty she was, how she made her mother's life a misery. Her baby brother, by contrast, was perfect. To the cross, elderly nursemaid who ruled the children's lives, Maude would say 'Bébé is my child, madame. Doris is your child. But Bébé is mine.' It was a psychologically unsophisticated age, in which childcare was dominated by the strictures of Truby King, who advocated strict discipline in the nursery. Lessing never forgot her mother's gleefully recounted tales of how she nearly starved her daughter on a rigid three-hour feeding regime that failed to take into account the thinness of Persian milk. Both Doris and her brother were potty trained from birth, held over the pot for hours each day. 'You were clean by the time you were a month old!' Lessing remembers her mother saying, though she did not believe it. Nor did she believe her mother's romantic expressions of love as the basis of her mothering. 'The trouble is, love is a word that has to be filled with an experience of love. What I remember is hard, bundling hands, impatient arms and her voice telling me over and over again that she had not wanted a girl'. Doris's birth had been inauspicious, and now her upbringing was proving catastrophic. 'The fact was, my early childhood made me one of the walking wounded for years,' she wrote. 'I think that some psychological pressures, and even well-meaning ones, are as damaging as physical hurt.'

In 1924 their time in Persia ended, but after a few months in an England that felt as depressing as ever to the Taylers, Michael went to the Empire Exhibition and was seduced by the thought of farming in Southern Rhodesia. With ill-prepared impulsiveness they sailed to Cape Town (though they both had all their teeth removed on the unsound advice that there were no dentists in Rhodesia). Michael was laid low with seasickness and remained in the cabin for most of the journey, whilst Maude had a wonderful time consorting with the Captain, regardless of the rough weather. They enjoyed 'hearty jollity' together and Doris found to her discomfort that the Captain was a keen practical joker. He told her one day she must sit on a cushion 'where he had placed an egg, swearing it wouldn't break... My mother said I must be a good sport.' Doris was wearing her party dress, which was spoiled,
roared with laughter. There was worse to come. ‘When we crossed the Line I was thrown in, though I could not swim, and was fished out by a sailor. This kind of thing went on, and I was permanently angry and had nightmares.’ Looking back, she did not believe her mother was a naturally cruel person; she was simply grasping at a good time with both hands, drunk on pleasure and anticipation, falling in with the ‘done thing’ on board. But for Doris, it was an early, wounding lesson in how those in control could so lightly and easily humiliate others, barely noticing what they did.

By the time they arrived at the Cape, Doris was starting to steal things and lie. ‘There were storms of miserable hot rage, like being burned alive by hatred.’ She took a pair of scissors, thinking she might be able to stab her much-disliked nursemaid, Biddy, with them. And unexpected balm to her spirits: for five days they travelled in an ox wagon, leaving behind the niceties of home – Liberty curtains, trunks of clothes, silver tableware, Persian carpets and a piano – to follow on later by train. For Doris, bumping along into a vast emptiness ‘there is only one memory, not of unhappiness and anger, but the beginnings of a different landscape.’ Her sensitivity was being given a new world to work on. The spiralling horns of a koodoo, the glistening green slither of a snake, beetles and chameleons, thick red soil churned by the monsoon rains. It was a landscape to echo the intensities and vastness of her misunderstood emotions, a harsh landscape for such overwhelming beauty.

Her parents had chosen a grand hilltop site for their home, but they could only afford to construct a traditional mud house with a thatched roof upon it. It contained both the piano and furniture fashioned out of petrol boxes, the Liberty curtains and bedspreads made of dyed flour sacks. There were no ‘nice’ people in the district, to Maude’s despair. She had had dresses made for entertaining, calling cards printed, bought gloves and hats that she would never wear. Instead of the glamorous life she imagined, she had a toilet that was a packing case with a hole in it over a twenty-foot drop. The farm was too big for a man
Maude's illness brought Mrs Mitchell and her son into their lives, supposed to act as ‘help’. Doris experienced them as another chip of nightmare, the woman a heavy drinker and her son a bully. Writing about them in her memoir, she realised they came from the extreme end of white poverty, from a life she could not have imagined as a child, and which the immigrant farmers around them never acknowledge as a depth to which whites could sink. Mrs Mitchell roundly abused the black workers, and decried Michael Tayler’s attempts to treat them well. It was, Lessing remembered, the first encounter she had with the ugly white clichés. ‘They only understand the stick. They are nothing but savages. They are just down from the trees. You have to keep them in their place.’ The Mitchells left after a few months and Doris and her brother took to joining their father down on the land. Eventually Maude rose from her bed, having decided it was the weight of her hair that was giving her headaches. She cut it all off, reducing her children to tears as they rolled in shanks of it.
Doris was eight years old when she was first sent away to the Roman Catholic Convent. The main subject was fear. The dormitories held grisly images of the tortured Saint Sebastian, the broken, whose swollen heart disgorged gouts of blood. At bedtime, one of the nuns would stand in the doorway and tell them: ‘God knows what you are thinking, God knows the evil in your hearts. You are disobedient to God and to the good sisters who look after you for the glory of God. If you die tonight you will go to hell and there you will burn in the flames of hell’. They were allowed a bath once a week and were supposed to wear boards around their necks that prevented them from seeing their own bodies. In her memoirs, Lessing calls the atmosphere ‘unwholesome’, a notable understatement. Her parents’ attitude...
towards her was disquieting and she had a dawning sense that all was not right for the blacks on the farm. But this must have been her most clear and immediate experience of abuse by authority known power except self-indulgent or corrupt.

When a bad kidney ailment brought Doris into the sickroom and the care of one of the few kindly nuns, she found a power of her own in illness. It was a button she could push that made her mother pushed it repeatedly. Lice and ringworm would sign he from the nuns. At the next boarding school, measles gave her blessed quarantine and then a bad eye infection – violent but not serious – set her free. She insisted she could no long and made her mother take her home.

And so, at fourteen, Doris finished her meagre education full attention to the covert cold war with her mother. ‘I was in nervous flight from her ever since I can remember anything and fourteen I set myself obdurately against her in a kind of inner emigration from everything she represented,’ she wrote in her memoirs. When she returned to the farm, it was to a new level of her mother’s intrusive care. Her father had diabetes by now and had entered a long, slow decline that cemented his general air of helplessness. Maude nursed him with obsessive attention, and extended her compulsive care fretting over what she ate, and worrying about her going alone in the bush. It was not love that provoked this behaviour, Doris believed, but a struggle over control. For the biggest argument between them was over clothes: her mother wanted her to wear smart, frilly dresses, entirely inappropriate for her age and surroundings. ‘I knew what it was my mother wanted when she nagged and accused me, continually holding out these well-brought-up little girls’ clothes at me. “Well try it on at least!” They were sizes too small for me.’ When Doris sewed herself her first bra, her mother noticed, called for her father, and then whipped her dress up over her head so he should see it. “Lord, I thought it was something serious,” her father grumbled, edging away.
Both Doris and her father hated the way she treated the black servants, always talking to them in a 'scolding, insistent, nagging voice full of dislike'. "But they're just hopeless, hopeless," she would wail when confronted. The 'Native Question' had become a topic of hot debate between Doris and her parents. 'I had no ammunition in the way of facts and figures, nothing but a vague but strong feeling that there was something terribly wrong with the System.' She read letters in the Rhodesia Herald, arguing that the black workers were inefficient because they were housed and fed so badly, and Doris felt ashamed at how little they were paid on her own farm. But such opinions felt vague against the pervasive conviction that blacks were simply lazy and stupid. Her father was kinder in his views but he was as ineffectual against his mother's virulent opinions as he was in everything else.
that Doris was determined to escape, physically, mentally, emotionally.

Doris had already created a false self, a kind of persona she could hide behind in an attempt to keep her mother out of the private parts of her mind. She had early realised that ‘it was [my mother’s] misfortune to have an over-sensitive, always observant and judging, battling, impressionable, hungry-for-love child. With not one, but too few.’ After a bout of family enthusiasm for A.A. Milne as a child, Doris began to live up to her nickname of ‘Tigger’ was a daughter in her mother’s image, capable and resilient with brutal good humour, a good sport with a thick skin. At 18, she had jobs to be had at the telephone exchange in Salisbury at night. Tigger Tayler was all about love and excitement, in a strong, beautiful young body. She smoked, she drank, she danced – and was a good dancer. It was 1938 and she knew, as everyone around her knew, that war was coming. Tigger dreamt of becoming an ambulance driver, a spy, a parachutist, whilst throwing back the cocktails and losing herself to the rhythms of the music. The adventure she actually chose would be the most mundane on offer.

‘A young woman sensitised by music, and every molecule simpering in an abased response to the drums of war, a young woman in love with her own body – she did not have a chance of escaping her the same as all young women at that time,’ Lessing determined self-absolution in her memoir. Tigger Tayler with her gung-ho attitude and smouldering sexuality had found a way to coincide with the lost, lonely, hungry-for-love child she was trying to cover up, although she would describe her reckless rush into marriage as happening under the effects of ‘the same numbness, a kind of chloroform, that overtakes someone being eaten by a lion.’

And so it was that, at 19, she returned to the farm with a fiancé in tow to introduce to her parents. He was Frank Wisdom, a respectable profession for which her parents were grate
assumed Doris was pregnant. In fact she was, but didn’t know it at the time. They had a ‘graceless wedding,’ which in retrospect she claimed to have hated: ‘It was “Tigger” who was getting married.’ There were two children born in quick succession: a hyperactive boy, John, and a sweet, affectionate girl, Jean. For a few years, she played at the conventional role of housewife, with competence and much inner anguish. ‘There is no boredom like that of an intelligent young woman who spends all day with a very young child,’ she wrote. She was perpetually exhausted, partly from the children, partly from the pretence of being Tigger, partly from suppressed rage at her mother who now visited regularly and criticized her decisions, often calling her selfish and irresponsible in a way that must have utterly infuriated her, given her own memories of childhood.

Frank did not understand why Doris took to bed, weeping with fury, once she had gone. But then Frank and Doris had quickly grown apart. The war was on, but Frank had been turned down for active duty on medical grounds. He nursed his resentment and shame over too many drinks at the club. He agreed that Doris would write when she had the time and energy, but he grew angry when the poetry she produced was fiercely critical of apartheid, afraid it might undermine him in his job. She would become increasingly involved with subversive organisations, and

Salisbury, Southern Rhodesia, 1930 via Wikimedia Commons
Not long after Jean was born, Doris made the decision to take a month off and travel to Cape Town with John. Her health had been suffering; she was tired all the time and had fainting fits. ‘I was wretched and confused, being torn apart by these two babes,’ she wrote. The demanding task of caring for two small children was complicated by an unformed, unarticulated sense of profound self-betrayal. A neighbour, who, according to Lessing, had longed for a daughter all her life, was lined up to take baby Jean. ‘I did not feel guilty about this then, and do not feel guilty now,’ she wrote. ‘Small babies need to be dandled, cuddled, held, comforted and it does not have to be the mother.’ This was to be a formative month, in which she met, at the boarding house where she was staying, a woman from a Christian organisation promoting good race relations by way of the sort of straightforward talk that hypnotised Doris. ‘“How can one describe a country where 100,000 white people use 1 million blacks as servants and cheap labour, refuse them education and training, all the time in the name of Christianity?”’ she asked, and Doris found it a ‘revelation’.

She returned home rested, revolutionised and newly inspired to write. Frank agreed help was needed and it was a sign of the times that a mother leaving her child for a month never raised an eyebrow, whereas hiring a black nanny and inviting her to live in the house was cause for scandal. Doris’s mother even ambushed Frank in his office to express her outrage. The nanny had to go, and Doris’s political and personal claustrophobia worsened.

It was at this time that she joined the Communist group that would have such an influence; Communist, socialist, progressive, these were very blurred lines at the time for her, but she knew for sure that her attitude marked her out pejoratively. ‘All over Southern Rhodesia were scattered people whose attitude toward race would be commonplace in a couple of decades, but now they were misfits, eccentrics, traitors, kaffir-lovers.’ The persona of Tigger Tayler – briefly Tigger Wisdom – was finally breaking down, under sustained assault by subversive political ideas.
and her suppressed rage and resentment. She was destroying her energy with domesticity, when she could be doing something of good to the world. Her situation was chaotic, messy, emotionally distraught. Frank hated her politics but didn't want her to leave. Doris felt she hated him – because she was treating him so badly. She was desperate to be free. The holiday she had taken now turned out to be a rehearsal for something altogether more audacious, politically. Her new friends encouraged her. Those years behind the false self had left her feeling she was a stranger to herself and she could not bear it. Nor could she tolerate the ‘terrible provincialism and narrowness of the life.’ She knew that if she left she would be doing something ‘unforgiveable’.

She left anyway.

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Doris Wisdom abandoned one family in 1942. In 1943 she married again, this time a man whom she didn’t much like even when she married him. Gottfried Lessing was a committed Communist, a hard-working lawyer, a German intellectual and, in Doris’s eyes, a cold, humourless soul. But they had met through the Rhodesian Communist group and he was at least a match for her politically. ‘It was my revolutionary duty to marry him,’ Doris wrote. Gottfried felt it would increase his chances of obtaining British nationality, for both he and Doris now longed to escape South Africa for England, and he believed that marriage would protect him from the threat of the internment camp, where his political interests could still land him. But what was really going on? Why would Doris, even out of a misplaced sense of duty, rush back into marriage with such impetuous self-abandon? She would claim it was because the marriage was a sham, just a matter of convenience, but it seemed as if she needed the impetuosity and the thoughtlessness to whitewash a deeper, more shameful need.

She was struggling hard to find out who she was. After leaving her husband and children she fell ill for a long time because, she believed, ‘I
was full of division.’ The Communist group that she had placed so much faith in was not providing her with the certainties she hoped it would, for it had swiftly ‘dwindle[d] into debate and speculation. We were too diverse, there was too much potential for schism.’ Doris’s family were ever more horrified by her political engagements and her messy personal life. And her sex life with Gottfried was a disaster. But one positive change had been effected: she had finally started writing with commitment – the first draft of a serious novel about the deep inequalities that wracked her country and had spoiled her early life. Division might have been destroying her, but it would be translated with power and beauty into her writing.

Then, as if in sabotage of this step in the right direction, around Christmas 1945 Doris fell pregnant again. She and Gottfried had to be married for a while, so they might as well ‘fit in’ a child, they told their friends, ‘we’ve got nothing better to do.’ Her parents were horrified. ‘My father said: “Why leave two babies and then have another?” My mother was fiercely, miserably accusing.’ Lessing’s own explanation was casual and bizarre. ‘I believe it was Mother Nature making up for the millions of the dead… Besides, I wanted another baby. I yearned for one.’ Doris was at the mercy of her own poorly understood compulsions, and more so than ever as she tried to find her authentic self. But maybe her instincts, or the experience of thinking and writing seriously about the inequalities of power, were covertly working on her side. When baby Peter was born, something seemed to click into place. ‘I was in love with this baby,’ she wrote in her memoir, in a way that seems a thoughtless judgement on her abandoned children. One thing seemed to make a huge difference: she had discovered Dr Spock and the idea of feeding on demand. Her mother’s insistence on the timed feeds of Truby King had felt wrong and punitive to her when nursing her first two babies. Now feeding was a dialogue with her child, not an act of oppression.

Finally at the end of 1948 the official papers arrived, permitting Doris and Gottfried to leave South Africa for England and the decision was...
made that Doris would sail to London ahead with Peter. In her suitcase she carried the manuscript of the novel that she had worked on in a fragmented and frustrated fashion, between the demands of her baby, her mother, and her wide circle of political acquaintances. She hoped it would make her name.

What she did not know, in her elated escape to London, was that she was heading for a decade of single motherhood. Of all her situations, this one might seem on paper the worst of them all, scraping a living by writing whilst bringing up a son alone. But later she would claim this child saved her. Although she finally sent Peter to boarding school aged twelve, those interim years saw her stuck to her writing from sheer necessity. She could not go out and party and find new lovers and make more disastrous marriages. She was obliged to commit to work, despite fatigue and loneliness. It is not certain whether Peter had the kind of mother that textbooks idealise, but it was these years of hard apprenticeship that transformed Doris Lessing from a natural talent to a phenomenally successful writer.

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When she arrived in London, Doris Lessing sold the manuscript of her first novel quickly and easily to the publishing house Michael Joseph. *The Grass Is Singing* was the novel that had been written as she searched long and hard for her sense of a true self, that came out of the mire of hatred and resentment at the injustices she had suffered as a powerless child, and which she saw mirrored in the cruel country where native ‘children’ were oppressed by a harsh and loveless white authority. In that shared suffering she had found her story—though the great audacity of her novel was to speak of racial prejudice in the voice of the white oppressor, to make the ugliness and the injustice of the colour bar stand out starkly.
She had been warned over and over as a child against black men and one true story had stuck in her mind: a white woman had been brutally murdered by her black manservant in Lomagundi. That memory provided the opening of her story: a (fictional) newspaper of the death of Mary Turner, a white farmer's wife at the hand of her manservant, Moses. The opening chapter takes place in the shocked aftermath of the discovery of Mary’s slaughtered body by Tony Marsden, a recent arrival at the farm who is learning colonial stewardship. Tony is dumbfounded by the attitude of the other men on the scene: the police sergeant and Charlie Slatter, the nearest neighbour and a farmer of the rich, efficient and brutal kind. The two men have more contempt for the victim than for the killer: a black man will always kill if suitably provoked. Tony wants to tell them the truth of the situation as he sees it: that Moses and Mary Turner had a strangely close and complicit relationship. But he comes to realise ‘in the silences between the words’ that he must never give voice to his testimony, because it opens up possibilities that cannot be held in the colonial mind. He understands his own social survival
would have to adapt himself, and if he did not conform, would be rejected: the issue was clear to him, he had heard the phrase “getting used to our ideas” too often to have any illusions on the point. And so it is understood that Mary nagged her servant and he killed her for it. The rest of the novel returns to the beginning of Mary’s story to reveal the unspeakable, complex truth.

Mary is an indigenous white whose parents belonged to the lowest echelons, her father a harmless, useless drunk and her mother a bitter woman who treats her husband with ‘cold indifference’ and ‘scornful ridicule’ in the presence of her friends. Mary is pulled into her mother’s orbit as her unwilling confidante and escapes from Doris did, to an office job in town. Here she lives contentedly in a sort of arrested development, feeling only relief when her parents die, until one day in her 30s when she overhears the unkind gossip of her friends at a party. They poke fun at her girlish clothes and make snide remarks about her unmarried status, and she is distraught: ‘Mary’s idea of herself was destroyed and she was not fitted to recreate herself…She felt as she had never done before; she was hollow inside, empty, and into this emptiness would sweep from nowhere a vast panic’. It is enough to propel her into the arms of the first available man. He happens to be Dick Turner, a cautious, uneasy man who dislikes the town and only feels comfortable on his beloved veld. For years he has been farming in a small, unprofitable way, loving his land and managing nothing more than meagre self-sufficiency. It has recently occurred to him that a woman about the place might be nice; someone to comfort and support him, and to boost his wavering morale.

What follows is the slow, painful and inexorable failure of their marriage. Mary is left to fend for herself in a tin-roofed shack, prostrated by the heat and half-dead from boredom. Dick, meanwhile, fritters their money away on overly optimistic schemes – pigs, turkeys, rabbits, all of which fail gently. Dick longs for love but is too isolated in himself, too caught up in his own foolish schemes and ventures to give Mary what she needs to be happy. Mary can’t assert herself against his implacable small-mindedness, her energy ebbing away as she real
in a situation designed to drive her crazy. It is all too like her hated childhood, and their relationship starts to mirror that of Mary is capable and intelligent; if she believed there were any happiness to be had she would work hard for it. Instead her feelings towards fury and contempt, which she then has to work hard to subdue because it is unbearable to admit they are wrong for each other and lack the ability to change.

Mary’s emotions are vented on the succession of black servants in her household without her even fully realising it. She is enraged by their neutral submissiveness, which she reads as shifty dishonesty, finding in the lack of relation between them an uncomfortable analogy to her marriage with Dick. The servant is ‘only a black body ready to do her bidding’ which angers her even more. When Dick falls ill with malaria she is obliged to oversee the men on the farm and the experience turns her into a vicious bully – her fear and insecurity, her claustrophobia channelled into an acceptable outlet. When one man insists on fetching himself a drink she brings her whip down on his face rather than bear his disobedience, and several months later she is horrified when Dick brings the same man to the house as their new servant.

Mary and Moses now begin a psychological dance to the death around each other. The scar of the wound she inflicted reminds Mary inexorably of her mistreatment of Moses, a crime she cannot admit to herself for then she would have to unpick a whole series of feelings that lead to even more unbearable truths. And so her anger and her violence turn inwards instead and she becomes terrified of him. Moses is aware of this and his blank, neutral servitude becomes tinged with curiosity, contempt, his own unresolved anger. As their situation intensifies Mary’s ‘feeling was one of a strong and irrational fear, a deep uneasiness and even – though this she did not know, would have died rather than acknowledge – of some dark attraction.’ Mary gives up the fight in her own mind and the narrative shifts to a different perspective. Now we catch glimpses of her allowing Moses to help her into bed for her rest, and buttoning her dress when she gets up again.
relationship, it is untenable. Unable to tolerate the situation any longer, Mary sends Moses away, knowing he will return to kill her.

Doris Lessing had taken all the ugly, entrapped, rageful relationships she had experienced – her mother and her father, her mother and herself, old Mrs Mitchell and her son, herself and Frank Wisdom, every relationship she had ever witnessed between a white man and his black slave and had distilled the awful essence from them. What she wrote in *The Grass Is Singing* was that any relationship based on domination and submission was doomed to disaster for all parties concerned: the dominant had to rule so absolutely, the submissives were so crushed, that no full humanity was available to either of them. Instead they were locked in airtight roles, waging a futile war to maintain a status quo that damaged and reduced them both. On one side was fear and contempt, on the other resentment and bitter self-righteousness. Compassion and sympathy – love itself – had no room to breathe, no space to nurture joy and pleasure. The complex reality of the individual was lost, and in the absence of that true self, perversity set in. She had witnessed it and she had lived it, over and again. She understood that thwarted people lived stubbornly in self-division, pleading with others for the things they didn’t want, setting their faces obdurately against the things they did. Her unholy triangle of Mary and Dick Turner and their houseboy, Moses, provided a graphic, psychologically brilliant diagram for how the catastrophe took place.

Doris Lessing would go on to write more detailed autobiographical novels about her upbringing and early marriages in Africa, but the one she wrote as she waited impatiently to leave behind everything that was hopelessly wrong about her life. It was the one she wrote as she struggled to put her false self behind her and find a way of being that corresponded more accurately to her genuine desires. For the rest of her life she could be shockingly lacking in self-awareness when it suited her; it was a strategy that she never abandoned for its usefulness was too great. But when she wrote this first novel she was trying most sincerely to be as truthful as she knew how. She had done ‘unforgivable’ things in order to win herself that freedom. And in the shift from
another, in that new relationship she forged with her third child, she did seem to break free from the tyranny of motherhood that had haunted her for so long. Right back at its origins, the imbalance of power began at the mother's breast, and the consequences could be seen in the colonised nations. She believed she could mother differently to her own mother, and in doing so she would break a vital chain that kept all slaves in their place.

**Notes on Sources**

All the biographical material in this essay is drawn from Lessing's two magnificent volumes of autobiography, *Under My Skin* (1994) and *Shade* (1997). The story I have picked out here represents a tiny wealth of incident and insight that the books contain, for they are, as one might expect from her, wonderfully wide-ranging, brutally honest and suggestively rich. I warmly recommend them.
Victoria Best taught at St John’s College, Cambridge for 13 years. Her books include: Critical Subjectivities; Identity and Narrative in the work of Colette and Marguerite Duras (2000), An Introduction to Twentieth Century Literature (2002) and, with Martin Crowley, The New Pornographies; Explicit Sex in Recent French Fiction and Film (2007). A freelance writer since 2012, she has published essays in Cerise Press and Open Letters Monthly and is currently writing a book on crisis and creativity. She is also co-editor of the quarterly review magazine Shiny New Books. http://shinynewbooks.co.uk
For Doug Glover

When Doug wrote to me this morning, to announce “decided to cease publication” of Numéro Cinq new life,” he added two points. The first was effacingly untrue: “Maybe I’ll try to become a writer.” As that attempt has long since been an actual and impressive achievement. The second remark was both truthful and encouraging: “I’m not gloomy or regretful.” Considering what he has accomplished over the past half-dozen years—making available a trove of fiction, poetry, art, and critical commentary, and bringing together a community of writers and artists in this warm place—neither Doug nor the rest of us have reason to be gloomy. Quite the opposite.

I believe that the cliché that “All good things must come to an end” has its origin in Chaucer’s great 14th-century narrative poem...
Criseyde. As it happens, that five-book masterpiece is complete long poem, and, for all its tragic love-story, it does not end with either its author or the poem’s hero “gloomy or regretful.” In the finale, at last aware of everything, Troilus ascends to the eighth sphere, from which celestial vantage point he looks down and “laughs” at all that “cannot last.” But Troilus’s laugh is disdainful; from his observation point in eternity, he sees all in amused perspective, and knows that in his mortal ending there is a new beginning.

Numéro Cinq will survive in its own, secular, version of eternity. Doug said at the end of his announcement, “All the pieces we’ve published will stay up on the internet.” No new issues will be added, but “the site won’t disappear.” The magazine’s temporal ending coincides with an ending beginning, its internet afterlife. By way of valediction, I would like to dedicate to Doug, in admiration, affection, and gratitude, this new essay on beginnings and endings. In truncated form, it was presented at the eighth Mark Twain Quadrennial Conference, where Huckleberry Finn was completed in 1885, precisely five centuries after Chaucer published Troilus and Criseyde.

Pat Keane

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The beginnings and endings of all human endeavors are untidy…

John Galsworthy, *Over the River* (1933), 9th & final novel in *Saga*

I.
In *The Pound Era*, Hugh Kenner introduces T. S. Eliot in an odd way: “Elegant, shy from great sensitivities and youngest of eight children, he came, by way of several Academies, from a birthplace by Twain’s Mississippi in Twain’s lifetime.” On to note, Eliot’s was “a family of some local prominence moreover, with the Massachusetts Eliots.” Of course his deep and distinguished roots in England, in East Coker and, when young Eliot left Boston and Harvard for then London in 1914, he rapidly became, in manner, dress, and speech, more English than English, certainly more English than American. Just as Sam Clemons of Missouri had reinvented himself as “Mark Twain,” the world-traveler decked out in that iconic white suit, so Tom Eliot of Missouri, the American who, along with Henry James, reinvented himself as an Englishman, became “T. S. Eliot” who, in 1928, pronounced himself “classicist in literature, royalist in politics, and Anglo-Catholic in religion”; affected a disdainful English accent that caused an annoyed Robert Frost, in that same year, to dismiss him as a “mealy-mouthed snob”; and took to wearing a white rose on the anniversary of the Battle of Bosworth, in memory of Richard III, whom Eliot, Shakespeare notwithstanding, considered the last true English king.[1]
Equally worth noting, however, once he was established as a major literary figure with a comfortable income, Eliot made trips back to the United States. After a visit in the late autumn of 1950, these trips became part of his routine, “a regular event” in the final decade and a half of his life. There was, as Peter Ackroyd observes in his biography of Eliot, “a sense in which he was returning home.”[2] Eliot visited in 1950, not to his own St. Louis and Twain’s Missouri but to the city he visited, along with relatives, old friends Emily Hale (who preceded Eliot’s first wife, Vivien, as a romantic interest and hoped to succeed her) and Djuna Barnes (whose lesbian novel Nightwood he had admired and shepherded, delicately edited, through Faber & Faber in 1936). Novelist and translator Willa Muir, who also saw him at this time, reported: “Tom Eliot is much more human here than in England. He was less cautious, smiling more easily, spontaneous.
enjoying the teasing he was getting from Djuna,” in whose “company he seemed to have shed some English drilling and become more American.”[3]

Eliot may have “become more American,” in part, because he had just written an Introduction to *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Like “most of us,” Eliot suggests early in that Introduction, Mark Twain “never became in all respects mature. We might even say that the adult side of him was boyish, and that only the boy in him, that was Huck, was adult” (322). In the transformed Eliot Willa Muir described in 1950, we may have not only a man loosened up by the liberated Barnes, but, as Ackroyd suggests, filled with memories of his own childhood, “still to be wished for although lost and gone forever” (301-2).

Willa Muir’s observation of the American humanizing of the priggish Eliot in 1950, her refreshing account of his spontaneity and boyish enjoyment, may indeed remind us of the Huck he had recently been writing about. That relaxed pleasure might also remind us, if we have been rummaging among his unpublished papers in Yale’s Beinecke Library, that Eliot confided to Ezra Pound in 1961 that there had been only two happy periods in his life. The last was during his second marriage, to Valerie. The first, he said, was “during his childhood”: a lost boyhood that may have been glimpsed, in part through the prism of Huck, by the adult and successful Thomas Stearns Eliot (in 1950 almost as world-famous as Mark Twain himself had been), returning to America to lecture and see his sisters.
Huck’s impact would have been all the more powerful since, as Eliot tells us in the second paragraph of his Introduction, the novel, deemed “unsuitable” by his strict parents, was kept from him as a boy. It was “only a few years” prior to writing the Introduction that “I read for the first time, and in that order, Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn (321). Eliot perceptively saw Mark Twain as a “composite” of Tom, applause-seeking, and Huck, “indifferent” to fame and conventional success; and he may have had in mind his own situation as a famous public figure in describing Mark Twain as a man who sought success, approval, and reputation, yet simultaneously “resented their violation of his integrity” (322).

But there are two interrelated problems with this 1950 connection
between Huck and Eliot’s inner boy. The first is that Ackroyd quotes from Eliot’s Introduction (the impossibility of either Huck or the river having “a beginning or end”) may remind us of Eliot’s defense of the much-disputed ending of the novel. Eliot insists that “all great works of art,” among which he numbers *Huckleberry Finn* much more than the author could have been aware of, what seems to be the rightness, of reverting at the end of the novel to the mood of *Tom Sawyer*, was perhaps unconscious art” (326).

One can agree with Eliot that for Huck “neither a tragic nor a happy ending would be suitable” (327), and that no “book ever written ends more certainly with the right words: ‘But I reckon I got to light out for the territory ahead of the rest, because Aunt Sally she’s going to adopt me and sivilize me, and I can’t stand it. I been there before’.” But one resists his repeated insistence on the “rightness” of the novel’s so-called “evasion” chapters, to the mood of *Tom Sawyer*. 
Eliot’s final formulation—“it is right that the mood at the end of the book should bring us back to that of the beginning” (326)—seems more appropriate to Eliot, as poet and as man, or to Mark Twain himself, who...
famously came into the world, and left it, with Halley’s Comet lighting up the sky, than to the conclusion of Twain’s novel. Eliot enacts that rondure; and his own ashes rest in the Parish Church of St. Michael’s, East Coker, in Somerset, the place of origin from which, centuries earlier, his ancestors had emigrated to America. Eliot had his memorial tablet circumscribed by the opening and closing lines from “East Coker” (1940), the second of Four Quartets: “In my beginning is my end….in my end is my beginning.” But to apply, as Eliot does, a similar circuitous journey to the Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, the flaw in Mark Twain’s masterpiece and to endorse, in Huck’s case, a regression that betrays the boy’s instinctive and articulate commitment to freedom. For most readers, freedom is the principal theme of the book, even if it takes the limited form of “sliding down the river” on the raft, “free and easy”—Huck’s and Jim’s joyous freedom in harmony with nature, in contrast to societal violence, malice, and vulgarity exhibited in the towns along the shore.
The second, and intimately related, problem is that Eliot, who privileges rondure above almost all else, seems less interested in “freedom”—embodied in, and symbolized by, Huck and, of course, Jim’s ultimate goal (Eliot does mention, as an illustration of the controlling power of the River, that “it will not let them where Jim could have reached freedom” [325])—than in the supposed coming-full-circle structure of the novel. Though, as a non-specialist, I am unfamiliar with details, I am generally aware that, beginning with James M. Cox as early as 1966, followed by two close readings in 1991, by Victor A. Doyno and Richard Hill—many sophisticated post-Eliot defenses of the sustained ending of Huckleberry Finn. “But”—to quote Huck himself rejecting ...
of Chapter 3) the early fooleries of Tom Sawyer (as I wish he had rejected his later Gothic grotesqueries at Jim’s expense at the Phelps Farm)—“as for me I think different.”

I’m hardly alone. As early as 1932, in *Mark Twain’s America* DeVoto, the scholar-critic whose professionalism made accessible Twain’s scattered papers, said of the ending of *Huckleberry Finn* whole reach of the English novel there is no more abrupt or more chilling descent.”[6] The landmark attack on the ending came in 1953, in the wake of the publication of both Eliot’s and Lionel Trilling’s introductions to popular editions of *Huckleberry Finn* and immensely influential essay, Leo Marx took issue with both these major critics and men of letters, arguing persuasively that critics see the problem as one of form,” it is the content, farcical tone and the disintegration of the major characters, so many readers uneasy because they rightly sense that the significance of the entire novel.”

This is no minor matter since, as Marx forces us to ending “comprises almost one-fifth of the text.” For Marx, as for much of the book’s audience, if not for its author, whose experience of slavery made him more realistic about racial matters), the novel’s formal unity independent of the joint purpose of Huck and Jim, yearning for a more affirmative conclusion to Huck’s purpose” are bound to find the ending—in which subservient to Tom Sawyer and Jim is reduced, as a antics, to a caricature of a slave—particularly egregious. The formalist stress of both Trilling and Eliot, in particular their defense of the ending, comes at a considerable human and ultimately aesthetic cost. They register the pressure of historical realism, but, for Marx and others, myself included, the movement of the novel, however episodic, into a serious moral world is betrayed by the return of buffoonery and cruel slapstick at Jim’s uncomplaining expense.

Eliot should have known better. In his Introduction, singling out as the best illustration of the relationship between Huck and Jim...
conclusion of the chapter (15) in which, after the two have been separated in the fog, Huck in the canoe and Jim on the raft, Huck, "in his impulse of boyish mischief," persuades Jim for a time that he had dreamt the whole episode. Heartbroken at the "loss" of Huck, and weeping "thankful" tears to see him back again, Jim realizes what actually happened, the trick Huck has played: "En all y 'bout wuz how you could make a fool uv ole Jim wid a lie; is trash; and trash is what people is dat puts dirt on de head er de fren's en makes 'em ashamed." It was "fifteen minutes," Huck tells us, "before I could work myself up to go and humble myself to a nigger—but I done it, and I warn't ever sorry for it afterwards neither."

Illustration by Edward W. Kemble from first ed., via University of Virginia

Aware that the passage had been often quoted, Eliot quotes it again, not only because of the obvious "pathos and dignity of Jim," which is "moving enough," but because of something often "overlooked" and even more profound: the "pathos and dignity of the boy, when reminded so humbly and humiliatingly, that his position in the world is not that of other boys, entitled from time to time to a practical joke; but that he must bear, and bear alone, the responsibility of a man."

Given that insight, it is all the more painful that Eliot should so glibly accept Huck’s resubmission to Tom Sawyer’s leadership and to the protracted “practical joke” at Jim’s expense in the final chapters, celebrating those chapters’ “rightness”—all under the aegis of rondure: a reversion at the end to the novel’s beginning, even to the Tom Sawyer rather than of Huck’s own book.

To embrace as “right,” even “inevitable,” the “Evasion” chapters violates the integrity of Huck’s own maturing character, from his instinctive alliance with Jim (“They’re after us”) to his momentous, “awful,” decision, in Chapter 31, to defy the law and “morality” rather than betray Jim. Having just written a note to Miss Watson, revealing Jim’s capture, Huck, as we all remember, holds the letter in his hand: “I was a trembling, because I’d got to decide, forever, betwixt two things, and I knewed it. I studied a minute, sort of holding my breath, and then says to myself, ‘All right, then, I’ll tore it up.”

Whether or not he recalled that Huck had earlier chosen to go to the “bad” rather than the “good” place, providing Tom Sawyer was there, Eliot says not a word about this crucial decision. That seems remarkable since, as epitomized by his reading of the fog episode, Eliot is attuned to the “kinship of mind and the sympathy between the boy outcast and the negro fugitive from the injustice of society.” He even remarks, finely, that Huck would be “incomplete without Jim, who is almost as notable a creation as Huck himself,” and that “they are equal in dignity.” Earlier, in the context of praising Twain’s pivotal decision to write “in the person of Huck,” Eliot adds that “the style of the book, which is the style of Huck, is what makes it a far more convincing indictment of slavery than the sensationalistic propaganda of Uncle Tom’s Cabin.” But just as he forgets that, unlike Twain’s, Stowe’s novel was written when slavery was still an issue, Eliot is silent about Huck’s defiant willingness to “go to hell” rather than turn Jim in as a runaway slave. One can imagine the conservatively religious Eliot resisting that last assertion as hyperbole, sympathetic or blasphemous, even saying, in a favorite and recurrent formulation of Huck’s (repeated in Chapters 3, 15, and 34):
Eliot was of course impressed by Huck’s demotic descriptions of the Mississippi, its majesty and movement. Its power and thematic unifying force: “It is the River that controls the voyage of Huck and Jim,” the River that “separates them….Recurrently, we are reminded of its presence (325). Eliot had personal experience of the power of the River: evoking that power in his Introduction, Eliot refers to the Eads Bridge,” the river-spanning steel structure which, unlike earlier bridges, “could resist the floods” (325). Two decades earlier, Eliot had told an interviewer that, as a boy, “the big river” made a “deep impression on me; and it was a great treat to be taken down to the Eads Bridge, at the time of its 1874 opening the largest ever built—“in flood time.” It is a useful reminder of Hugh Kenner’s emphasis on Eliot’s “birthplace by Twain’s Mississippi in Twain’s lifetime.”
referring less to American literature than to American locale, landscape, and language. In 1953, Eliot noted that in *Huckleberry Finn* Twain reveals himself to be one of those writers, of whom there are not a great many in any literature, who have discovered a new way of writing, not only for themselves but for others. I should place him in this respect, even with Dryden and those rare writers who have brought their language up to date and in so doing, “purified the dialect of the tribe”

These linguistic observations had been anticipated in *Finn* Introduction. “Repeated readings of the book,” says Eliot, confirm and deepen one’s admiration of the consistency and perfect adaptation of the writing. This is a style which at the period, whether in America or in England, was an innovation, a new discovery in the English language.” Other novelists had achieved “natural speech” in relation to particular characters, “but no one else had kept it up through the whole of a book,” and flawlessly: “there is no sentence or phrase to destroy the illusion that these are Huck’s own words” (323).
That last point is, Huck himself might say, a bit of a “stretch.” Though the history is wonderfully recast in his own terms, the unschooled Huck knows more than seems plausible about British and French royalty, not to mention Hamlet’s soliloquy, as rendered by the rapscallion “Duke.” It might be added that, in terms of Eliot’s own poetry, despite his linguistic insights here, while he may have purified the dialect there he could not catch the working-class vernacular of the pub-scene of *The Waste Land* without the help of his wife, her ear attuned to “lower-class” speech. Eliot never approached the vernacular innovation of Mark Twain in *Huckleberry Finn*. A semblance of that achievement was reserved to William Carlos Williams who, while admiring the brilliance of *The Waste Land*, deplored its impact. In his *Autobiography* (1951), written three decades after he registered the shock of *The Waste Land*, Williams describes it as a “great catastrophe” that “returned us to the classroom just at the moment when I felt we were at the point of escape to… new art form” (164). Though it took years to come out from the shadow of the Eliotic rock, eventually Williams emerged as the pioneer who, fulfilling Whitman and perhaps Twain, achieved a distinctly American poetry employing colloquial speech, and so became, for future generations of American poets, more influential than Eliot.

To return to Twain’s masterpiece: Eliot had asserted that in “the writing of *Huckleberry Finn* Mark Twain had two elements which, when treated with his sensibility and his experience, formed a great book: these two are the Boy and the River” (320). The Boy “is the spirit of the River,” and we “come to understand the River by seeing it through the eyes of the Boy” (325), whose human voice is as much a unifying element as the River. Considerations of style and speech shift attention from the river itself to the life on the raft that is possible for that boy and for Jim; and to the language, the dialect he invents for Huck to express his love of the river. The vital center of the
novel, early in Chapter 19, precedes the intrusive arrival of the “King” and the “Duke.” The days and nights, Huck tells us, “slid along so quiet and smooth and lovely....you see the mist curl up off the east reddens up, and the river,” and then from across the breeze springs up and comes fanning you, so cool and to smell, on account of the woods and the flowers,” though there is also the rank smell of dead fish; “and next you’ve got the full day and everything smiling in the sun, and the songbirds just

Illustration by Edward W. Kemble from first ed., via University of Virginia

Two paragraphs later, our attention is turned to the night sky and to some seemingly casual but in fact rather significant cosmological/theological speculation: “It’s lovely to live
had the sky up there, all speckled with stars, and we used to lay on our backs and look up at them, and discuss about whether or only just happened—Jim he allowed they was made, they happened; I judged it would have took too long to make.

Though far more cheerful than the author of *The Mysterious Stranger* Twain’s other late, dark fables, Huck seems as much an agnostic as Mark Twain. And he is a loner. His companionship, however warm, is temporary, ultimately unsustainable. Eliot notes, “alone: there is no more solitary character in fiction as suggested by this passage, stressing chance rather than providence. Huck—while he believes in providence, heaven and hell, is riverine or celestial. He has, instead, his alert senses and intelligence, even something of Coleridge’s “shaping spirit of imagination,” made flesh in the incomparable language Mark Twain.

4.

To re-focus on the second of Eliot’s two elements: If Huck gives the book style,” it is “the River” that gives it “form, a great book.” Eliot contrasts Twain’s Mississippi to Conrad, who, in *Heart of Darkness*, constantly reminds us of the power and terror of Nature, and the isolation and feebleness of Man. But unlike Conrad, who remains always “the European observer of the tropics, the white man’s eye contemplating the Congolese gods,” Mark Twain “is a native, and the River God is his God. It is as a native that he accepts the River God, and it is the subjection of Man that gives to Man his dignity. For without some kind of God, Man is not very interesting.”

At this point (325-26), agnostic Huck and agnostic Twain have been pushed offstage to make way for theistic T. S. Eliot, a committed Christian believer, who has, nevertheless, more than a few things to say about animistic River Gods. “The Dry Salvages” (1941)
“I do not know much about gods; but I think that the river
is a strong brown god…” This poem, the third of *Four Quartets*, is set on the New England Coast, but its opening movement summons up, as Eliot notes in his Introduction to the novel, “the Mississippi of this book only after its union with the Big Muddy—the Missouri.” The specifically “Southern” muddiness of the river in “The Dry Salvages” becomes uncomfortably clear in lines 117-18: “Time the destroyer is time the preserver,/ Like the river with its cargo of dead negroes, cows and chicken coops.” “Cargo” casually evokes the commercial heritage of slavery, the antebellum world of the *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and, like the more notorious “spawned” and squatting “jew” in “Gerontian” (elevated, more than forty years later, to the uppercase), the dead “negroes,” tossed in with cows and are, if it is not too politically correct to note, subordinated status.

This is hardly the place to relitigate Eliot’s anti-Semitism; but we may legitimately wonder if, despite his expressed admiration for Jim as Huck’s equal in “dignity,” the apparent indifference to Jim’s plight implicit in Eliot’s endorsement of Twain’s final chapters has something to do with vestigial racism. We were alerted to Eliot’s early attitude with the publication, in 1997, of notebook poems written when he was in his twenties, especially the scatological and racist doggerel featuring an imaginary interview with Booker T. Washington titled “Up From Possum Stew!” or “How I Set the Niggers Free!” unfair to saddle the mature poet and critic with ribald and offensive or racially insensitive, quite the opposite, in what Eliot has to say of Jim in the Introduction to *Huckleberry Finn*. But readers hostile to Eliot might wonder if it is possible that, in making the case he does for the final Jim-imprisoning chapters of Twain’s novel, Eliot was, as late as 1950, still less than passionately interested in setting Nig...
To return, with relief, to the River: it is always capitalized by Eliot, who personifies and deifies the powerful, all-controlling Mississippi. Like Huck, “the River itself has no beginning or end. In its beginning, it is not yet the River; in its end, it is no longer the River.” Having many headwaters, it “merely disappears among its deltas.” The people who “live along its shores or who commit themselves to its current” are all subject to its flow, “the River gives the book its form. But for the River, the book might be only a sequence of adventures with a happy ending” (327). In the finale, Jim is revealed as free, Pap as dead, and Huck has $6,000 to fund his next adventure, in the Indian Territory. But Eliot had earlier said that it would be “unsuitable” for Huck to have
either “a tragic or a happy ending.” And in the worst reading Eliot may have decided that the novel’s Evasion chapters, not only illustrate rondural “rightness,” but constitute a “happy ending.” If so, he would seem to have adopted the attitude of Tom Sawyer, who thought keeping Jim locked up the “best fun he ever had in his life,” and hoped to delay his escape indefinitely (Chapter 36).

5.

Since Huck, like the River, “has no beginning and no end,” he “only disappear.” And, Eliot adds, crucially and dubiously, his disappearance can only be accomplished by bringing forward another performer to obscure the disappearance in a cloud of whimsicalities (327). But the more-than-whimsical torments inflicted on Jim following the “rules” of Romantic escape-literature, including snakes, spiders, and rats, a menagerie that kept the terrified prisoner awake since “they never slept at one time, but took turn about” (Chapter 39). In all of this, though he occasionally offers practical suggestions to counter the more absurd of his friend’s literary fantasies, Huck defers to Tom’s authority.

The only time he is seriously critical comes at the very beginning, when Tom, yet to work out what will become his ever-more-elaborate “escape” plan, agrees to help save Jim. Huck merely wants him “to keep mum and not let on,” but “Tom’s eye lit up, and he says: I’ll steal him!” An outlaw at peace with his own decision, Huck is shocked to discover that Tom, a mischief-maker but a “respectable” member of the law-abiding community, is more than willing to help Jim escape. “It was,” says Huck, “the most astonishing speech I ever heard—and I’m bound to say Tom Sawyer fell, considerable, in my estimation. Only I couldn’t believe it. Tom Sawyer a nigger stealer!” (Chapter 33). Only when Tom belatedly reveals that Jim has already been freed in Miss Watson’s will does he regain full respectability in Huck’s
If, despite his development in the course of the novel, Huck is still of the South, so, and even more obviously, is Tom. Whatever we make of Tom’s behavior, we join Huck in admiring his friend’s fertile imagination as well as his “pluck.” The gunshot leg-wound he received during the escape, welcomed by Tom as a badge of honor, might have proved fatal if not for Jim’s help. And yet an inescapable premise of the prolonged ordeal to which Tom subjected Jim is that its victim was somehow subhuman. The real villain is not Tom, but the society that produced him. “All Europe,” Conrad tells us in *Heart of Darkness*, “contributed to the making of Kurtz”; so all of the American South—though unnoticed by Conrad-admirer and Missourian T. S. Eliot—contributed to the making of the racially-unenlightened if far more appealing Tom Sawyer. Nor is Huck untainted. [12]
This recalcitrance of history is often lost in our tendency to lavish affection on the film *Casablanca*—a book which for many, especially in the wake of Ernest Hemingway’s encomium in the mid-1930s, is *the* “great American novel.” Placing *Huckleberry Finn* in the context of longstanding American cultural debates, historicist critic Jonathan Arac registered the novel while also pronouncing it mean-spirited. Writing in 1997, he warned against that overloading of the book with cultural value that had led to feel-good white liberal complacency regarding race. He called the “hypercanonization” and “idolatry” of *Huckleberry Finn*...
flaw-forgiving development contributed to, Arac claimed, by Eliot's
Introduction to the novel.

Four years later, Ann Ryan examined Arac’s view that Huckleberry Finn has an undeserved reputation as somehow resolved the issue of racism. In Ryan’s concise synopsis of Arac’s argument, critics since the 1940s, “self-consciously engaged in an interpretive process, “equated Huck with tolerance with Huck, and America with Twain.” Reacting to the “self-serving criticism” of the “white literary establishment,” A Huckleberry Finn, not as healing or resolving, but “as mean spirit and Twain as an author with a hard heart.” Conversely, Ryan argues that “it is precisely this raw quality, in both author,” that makes Huckleberry Finn a valuable asset in discussions of race, in general and in the classroom persuasively that, while Twain “evades political entanglements,” “intentionally represents this evasion”; and that while the novel “operates on racist assumptions and privileges,” it illustrates how both are expressed and defended.”

Finally, there is the matter, troubling to so many critics, of humor and penchant for practical jokes. Registering Huck’s empathy even for rascals, Ryan reminds us that, sickened by the tar-and-feathered plight of the King and Duke, Huck concludes, “It was a dreadful thing to see. Human beings can be awful cruel sometimes” (Chapter 33). Ryan then notes the final ironic twist: that Twain ends his novel with a grotesque practical joke at the expense of Jim, the most “human’ being in the narrative.” Regarding Twain’s humor as a possible “imaginative response to our racist history,” Ryan concludes: “If Twain imagines that race is a joke, he does not necessarily mean that we should not take it seriously.”[13]

We can appreciate this multilayered irony. And, whether opposed to common readers like it or not, there are genuinely funny moments in the final chapters; Twain himself certainly drew the laughter out Tom’s shenanigans in his stage performances, and di...
he always sought. Still, it hurts to see Huck subordinate himself to Tom, whose extravagant, ever-proliferating machinations simply go on too long (as virtually every critic, even Eliot and acknowledged), sometimes becoming as tedious as they are cruel. If Jim, reduced to a minstrel character, even emasculated, rigged out in Aunt Sally’s calico dress, doesn’t mind, we especially since Tom withholds, even from Huck, the fact that Jim has already been legally freed.

Mark Twain may have been “cheating” at the end, as Hemingway famously charged in nevertheless celebrating the novel as “the source of all modern American literature.” Or Twain may have reverted to his customary cap and bells simply because he remained troubled as he had been from the beginning of his work in 1876, as to how to bring the journey of Jim and Huck to a successful conclusion. Or he may just not have been able to resist an even one as strung out and seemingly anticlimactic Tom’s Great Escape, especially not if, as Ann Ryan suggests, it constitutes a racial joke that Twain “does not necessarily mean we should not take seriously.”

One can understand how, psychologically, back in the shore-world and under the sway of a self-confident leader like Tom, an adolescent boy, even one as experienced and practical-minded as Huck, might regress, and the mores of Southern society reassert themselves. But, all joking aside, realism needn’t require farce, sporadically funny but finally dehumanizing. Eliot insists that the chapters detailing Tom’s protracted buffoonery at Jim’s expense (with the painful complicity of Huck, who hasn’t a malicious bone in his body) have the “rightness” of “art,” whether conscious or “unconscious.” I remain unpersuaded.

Like the issue of racism itself, the debate over the final section of Huckleberry Finn—a debate as protracted as Tom’s evolving escape plans—may be ultimately irresolvable. But those on my side of that debate can only regret that T. S. Eliot—given his immense authority circa 1950, as world-famous poet-critic and Nobel laureate—should have put his imprimatur on what seems to us an error. As Eliot had
1928, re-invented, now more English than American, he was royalist in politics and Anglo-Catholic in religion; he was a "classicist in literature," and so, though a modernist poet, still wedded to what he called (in the subtitle of the book in which he made that announcement) "style and order." In the case of the *Huckleberry Finn*, in mounting so eloquent a rondural defense of the venerable symbol of the ouroboros, Eliot in effect validated Mark Twain's original sin against his own (or Huck's) book—not only, as Eliot himself asserted by emphasizing the unifying power of the River, a series of picaresque adventures, but a *bildungsroman*. In defending what many readers continue to find indefensible, the formalist Eliot himself paid too high a critical price in order to have Mark Twain's novel, to quote one of Eliot's favorite poets, "end where it begunne."

Illustration by Edward W. Kemble from first ed., via University of Virginia

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5. In Mark Twain: The Fate of Humor, Cox insists that, since Huckleberry Finn has never been a “quest,” but an “escape,” a flight “from tyranny, not a flight toward freedom,” his behavior in the final chapters is and that, while we “become uncomfortable when he submits to Tom’s role,” Mark Twain knew what he was doing: “The entire burlesque ending is a revenge upon the moral sentiment which, though it shielded the humor, ultimately threatened Huck’s identity” (312). Two defenses of the ending appeared in 1991, the first by Victor A. Doyno, whose extensive study of the manuscripts of Huckleberry Finn informs his “Huck Finn”: Mark Twain’s Creative Process. In his 10th and final chapter, “Repetition, Cycles, and Structure,” Doyno defends the novel’s unity, including the ending. In arguing that, “in a complex way the aesthetically and thematically appropriate,” he questions both the social and genre-assumptions of those who want a bildungsroman series of “adventures.” In establishing a strong contrary case against those critics put off by the novel’s final chapters, he notes that, however “severely criticized” it has been, the ending “does resolve several problems,” not least the issue of Jim, who is “decriminalized” (223-27). In his acerbic essay on critical “overreaching” in assaults on the end of the novel, Richard Hill attacks Leo Marx and the critics who followed his lead. Hill, too, finds Huck in character in the final chapters. “To expect Huck to
give up instantly both his ongoing personality and Tom Sawyer is to push the epiphany aspect of his decision to tear up the letter to Miss Watson into the excesses of modern social-agenda fiction.” Nor, he argues, is Jim reduced to a caricature. (320, 323-27)


7. Trilling’s Introduction to the 1948 Rinehart edition was reprinted in his *The Liberal Imagination*. Marx, “Mr. Eliot, Mr. Trilling, and *Finn*,” 329.

8. What Jonathan Arac has called the “hypercanonization” of *Huckleberry Finn* at the specific expense of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* began in the 1920s and has continued—despite praise of Stowe’s novel by Edmund Wilson (*Patriotic Gore*, 1962), Ellen Moer (*Literary Women*, 1976), and Arac (1997). That Twain’s novel, a “work of art” written well after which appeared as a book in 1852, galvanized Arac into writing his reassessment and partial debunking of Twain’s novel. One catalyst was Eliot’s Introduction, which put the prestige of the “mid-century’s leading man of letters” and recent Nobel Prize winner on the side of Twain’s novel rather than the “propagandistic” *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* as the “far more convincing indictment of slavery.” This “mythicization of history,” Arac continues, “by which *Huckleberry Finn* gained the prestige of abolitionism despite its having been written at a time when slavery did not exist and was defended by no one, helped provoke me to this book.” *Huckleberry Finn as Idol and Target: The Functions of Criticism in Our Time*, 92-93.

9. Both interviews mentioned in these paragraphs are cited by Eric Sigg, “Eliot as a Product of America,” in Moody, ed., 24, 28. In the first, Eliot is quoted by M. W. Childs, “From a Distinguished Former St. Louisan,” *Dispatch* (15 October 1930), 3B. For the second, see *Writers at Work* George Plimpton, 110.

10. *American Literature and the American Language*, 16-17. Stéphane Mallarmé’s imperative “to purify the dialect of the tribe” occurs frequently in Eliot, most notably in the nocturnal encounter with the “familiar compound ghost” (mostly Yeats) in Part II of “Little Gidding,” the finest section of the last and best of *Four Quartets*.

11. Eliot, *Inventions of the March Hare*, edited with scholarly thoroughness and annotated, copiously, brilliantly, and protectively, by Christopher Ricks.
12. We recall the opening exchange (Chapter 32) between Aunt Sally (pretending to be Tom, and to have experienced an accident)

“Good gracious! Anybody hurt?” “No’m. Killed a nigger.” “Well, it’s lucky,”
replies this affectionate woman; “because sometimes people do get hurt.”

Though admirers of Huck would rather repress the memory, there is that
two-chapter stretch between the running over the raft by a steamboat, with
the apparent loss of Jim (toward the end of Chapter 16), and
in Chapter 18, when he is rediscovered by Huck (less emotionally than we
would expect, even though Jim weeps with joy). In the interim, Huck, engaged in onshore adventures, has had not one thought of a friend he
doesn’t know is dead or alive. This is troubling, whether we attribute the
thoughtlessness to a Southern-inflected flaw in Huck’s character; or to
Mark Twain, guilty of episodic and careless plotting or to a short memory
regarding offstage characters.


14. Hemingway’s hyperbolic but endlessly repeated praise of Huckleberry Finn occurs in that half-memoir, half-fictional account of a
safari, Green Hills of Africa, 22. H. L Mencken was no less effusive in his celebration of Huckleberry Finn (a book he read annually) as a
masterpiece that soared in solitary splendor above all other American novels.

15. John Donne’s “A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning” concludes with his brilliant compass-image—lines addressed to his wife, who
remained at home while he was compelled to roam abroad: “Thy firmnes makes my circle just,/ And makes me end, where I begunne.”
Josh Dorman in his NYC studio

I have placed there a little door opening on to the mysterious.

I have made stories.
I read Josh Dorman’s works like a Mary Ruefle essay — she writes about a revelation she had and the connections for her in her essay “Someone Reading a Book Is a Sign of Order in the World.” “I was reading the dictionary, where I encountered the meaning of the word speculum: 1) an instrument inserted into a body passage for inspection; 2) an ancient mirror; 3) a compendium of all knowledge; 4) a drawing showing the relative position of all the planets; and 5) a patch of color on wings of most ducks and some other birds.” Ruefle asserts, “there can be discoveries, connections… that explode the day and one’s heart and the long years that have led to the moment.”

Just so, artist Josh Dorman discovers a scrap, a tidbit, something recognizable (or not) and turns and turns it in his hand or mind appropriating it in his collage/multi-medium works, intuitively painting, drawing, layering, until it becomes more, becomes Other. The connections in his mind are revealed to him and/or us — or not, labyrinths open to some Home, or swallow us entirely blissfully.

Mary Kathryn Jablonski (MKJ): I’m very interested in how a piece begins for you. Do images you find suggest a narrative? Do you collect some images for use in collage based on the intrigue or beauty they hold for you alone? Do some images, which to the outsider might seem to have nothing in common, beg to be grouped with other images? I’m picturing files upon files named for various subjects in your studio, not unlike in collage artist Michael Oatman’s vast studio space! Tell us some of your sources. I’m most familiar with your paintings on antique maps, but you seem to be moving away from these a bit.
Josh Dorman (JD): I’m first struck by your mention of Oatman’s vast studio space. Picture my studio as more of a small cave packed with collections and piles of moldering detritus. Overflowing shelves filled with hundreds of antique books and yellowing diagrams, ledger books, topographical maps, player piano scrolls, but mostly textbooks. I use only printed materials from the pre-photography era: 1820s-1950s. They’re categorized by subject: Engineering, Biology, Botany, Architecture, Ornamentation, Cellular Structure, Human Anatomy, Geology, Geography, etc. It’s an obsession.

I still can’t resist when I stumble across a crusty tome at a yard sale not that the items are valuable, but that they contain images made by hand and knowledge that is outdated. Last summer I found a hardware catalog that’s eight inches thick, bound with rusty metal shackles. I’ve been mining images from it all year. It moves me that each hammer, hinge and screw was rendered and printed so carefully and beautifully by an artist whose name we’ll never know. I see it as part of my mission to give these drawings a new life.
Only once did I hire an assistant for a month to cut out collage bits from my books. Though those categorized clippings served me well, my process now is more organic, and I usually cut out images as I go. I have no set system for creating a painting (to be honest, I’m skeptical of art that arises out of preconception).

A piece for me can take several paths. As you mentioned, sometimes the beauty of an image can call out to me and I’ll build a painting around it. A good example of this is “A Knight Errant,” where the hardware bits I mentioned were the inspiration. In a clear case of pareidolia, I formed bodies around the faces I saw in the hardware. These then interacted with pieces cut from a 1790s Italian architecture book, reminding me of a childlike fantasy/delusion, I inserted a quixotic mounted rider.

Knight Errant – ink, acrylic, antique paper on panel.
I work in a subconscious state. A narrative may assert itself, often, multiple narratives and connections emerge. You guessed right when you asked about images that beg to be grouped together, almost as if they’re whispering when the pages turn. It might be my formalist training or it may be much deeper rooted, the need to connect forms from different areas of existence. A birdcage and a rib cage. A radiolarian and a diagram of a galaxy. Flower petals and fish scales. Tree branches, nerves, and an aerial map of a river. I’m talking about shifting scale wildly from inch to inch within the painting. The reason I’m a visual artist is because it sounds absurdly simplistic to say in *words* that all things are connected.

As I write this, it occurs to me that most of my closest friends are poets and novelists, who *can* do this with words. I recently did a large commissioned version of “The Tower of Babel” for the writer Michael Chabon. He’s a “maximalist” novelist who takes dozens of tangent paths and generates stories within stories. I’m often inspired by writers: Italo Calvino, Richard Brautigan, and Li-Young Lee. I’m drawn to work that *suggests* rather than prescribes. I’d say the same about my art heroes: Klee, Redon, Turner, Pinkham Ryder, Brueghel.
MKJ: Oh, make no mistake, your studio still sounds a lot many ways, believe it or not, as does your sensi preserving the past. Although I cannot speak for him, I mind me saying that. And his studio may have been va: not mean it was not also cave-like and jam-packed, sor floor to ceiling. I love what you've just said about t writers, especially since you've included one of my fav
see what you mean about generating stories within stories. Like Mary Ruefle, Li-Young Lee is a wonderful example of one who makes remarkable, unique associations. You've mentioned titled a solo exhibition of your work in London *The Missing Pages of the Sea*, a phrase found in the first few lines of his poem "Pillow superb examples of just such associations.

Li-Young Lee is also a perfect example of a poet for us to compare with you because often, like Brigit Pegeen Kelly's, his poem themselves over and over as they are woven, or as they meditate, just as I feel your artwork does in some way at times are inexorably linked. Labyrinthine, they form network of passages that could lead only to the next poem no other possible exit. Take a look at “Words for Worry Father,” printed consecutively in *Book of My Nights*. I feel too in some of your works, both within them, and when seeing them together. Lee also judiciously and poignantly uses the poems, as I feel you do in your works, Josh, addressing and the viewer.

I imagine that once a work starts going for you it takes own. Do you find this to be true — that what you had in or a group of images can end up being far from the direct piece eventually leads you? Tell us about some of the detours your work has taken you on. In this way, what has the act of making art or revealed to you? What would you be doing if you weren't an artist?

**JD:** In the 90s, I would begin a painting by gluing down topographic maps and letting the swirling lines guide my drawing. More often now, my works (especially the larger pane compositional sketch, and maps are only used tangentially). Recent panels begin with a base layer of player piano scroll paper provides a tone, a history, and beautiful perforations rhythmic structure. I then sketch forms quickly and lightly in charcoal and begin the layering of paint and collage. I work on five to 10 paintings simultaneously. Some emerge in a matter of days; others...
If any element of a painting happens too easily, I’m usually destroy it. Part of the reason I use collage is to remove my hand from the process. For the same reason, you’ll see areas in most of my paintings where I’ve rested living plants or metal gears on rice paper, poured ink and allowed it to evaporate. These “stain/stencils” feel like a natural phenomenon, outside of my self. I’m not saying that I give over to Dadaist chance in my work. I need composition and structure. But within that initial framework, it’s endless improvisation.

Looking at one recent piece called “Night Apparitions” might illuminate a bit about my process. This might sound laughable, but it’s a minimalist work for me, since I managed to pare it down to a reduced palette and space. It began with a ream of rice paper I purchased on a trip to Taiwan. In this case, I broke my own “rule” by using non-antique paper.
paper. Since the paper was lightly gridded or lined for calligraphy practice, I cut it into varying sized rectangles and soaked them in India ink of different densities. My initial sketch had two essential structures: the central mountain form and the halo surrounded by a dark border. I expected multiple mountainscapes and horizon lines to emerge, but in this case, the gradation of light to dark from the center itself kept insisting itself until the end. As soon as I’d add a new landscape element, I’d wipe it out with the light or dark. In recent years, I’ve been trying to avoid imagery (animal, vegetable, machine) that identifies as only human-made forms, and there’s only a hint of architecture in the contour of the mountain. I’m always aware of the disconnection we humans imagine and reinforce between ourselves and other living things.

So, each hovering entity is a conglomeration – a hybrid (located at 11 o’clock) contains human-made forms, and the disconnection we humans imagine and reinforce between ourselves and other living things.

Here, I could go off on a lengthy tangent about the election, and the fear, anger and ultimate despair I felt while making this piece. That’s all in there, and that may be why the painting is so dark. But again, I’m not interested in artwork that illustrates or prescribes meaning. I’m interested in what each viewer will bring to the piece.

There are creatures that are buried under the pink haze or in the dark black. Things that aren’t visible to the viewer are still crucial to the evolution of a piece. Some detours and quirks — I could say that the seashell mountaintop came late to eliminate a silhouette effect. The “whole” birds also remained at the bottom, to ground the piece and further call the reality into question (birds should fly). In most of my work, I suppose my goal is to generate a joyful apocalypse. My dreams do influence my work deeply, but I shy away from association with Surrealism, most of which I view as too pat and literal.

It’s a never-ending cycle, trying to understand the world, my own process. In the same way that I don’t like to interpret dreams, I also shun too much breakdown of my work. I need to know just enough to guide me, but not too much to remove the mystery. As Georges Braque said,
“The only thing of value in art is that which cannot be explained.” As for your question about what I’d be doing if not this, I’ve always been fascinated by archaeology and I began college as a psychology major, but I quickly realized that it wasn’t for me. Frankly, I can’t imagine doing anything else.

**MKJ:** I appreciate that you say you’ve been trying to avoid imagery that identifies as only one thing. I’ve always admired this quality in the written word as well: poetry whose lines slant in both directions, tying them to the previous or following line, which can happen with well-thought-out enjambment and punctuation (or lack thereof). And when you say you value things that aren’t visible to the viewer but are crucial to the evolution of a piece, I couldn’t agree more. Perhaps these are the most important aspects of a creative work.

Most viewers expect your collage pieces to be two-dimensional surfaces, yet in your new works you are exploring depth as well, carving pockets into panels and pouring in resin, at times in pools up to two inches deep with a watery shine difficult to reproduce in photographs. What inspired this sculptural necessity? Do you see it going further?
JD: The poured resin layering is yet another manifestation of my own rule-breaking. While I have never been drawn to making sculpture, I’m intrigued by creating illusions of depth, and in this case, tricking the viewer with a bit of tangible depth.

I’ve found in my artistic life that a medium or subject will present itself, and only years later will it find its proper home in the work. It was this way with the topographical maps, which lingered in my studio for five years before I dared draw on them, and it was this way with the clear resin, which I tried out twenty years ago and failed. I’ll admire Tomaselli’s work, but I’m after something different. In fact, just as with collaging gorgeously rendered engravings, one runs the risk of...
gimmickry with resin. Pour this glossy stuff on a child’s drawing or a newspaper page and suddenly it looks luscious. I’m still playing with it, but it’s incredibly exciting. I’d fallen into a rut for a year or so, and creating these space pockets is reinvigorating me. It has reminded me that play is crucial. Ha! Perhaps, I can also credit Trump with causing me to seek new territory. I suspect many artists right now are doing this, making protest statements or constructing even richer worlds to escape to.

**MKJ:** Yes, at a time when we could all use, as Mary Ruefle says, some Sign of Order in the World, we’ll leave that struggle in more things that aren’t visible to the viewer.

Your paintings are really multi-medium works that include collage, painting and drawing (and as we’ve said, now sculptural processes as well). How do these pieces differ in your mind from the drawings that you make, which to me seem very fluid and in some mystical way reminiscent of William Blake.

**JD:** The graphite drawings are almost a form of meditation for me. In making them, I eliminate all questions of medium, color, size, and layering. Even composition and subject matter disappear. I’d never encourage a drawing student to do this, but these horizontally oriented works emerge from the lower left and move eastward, without an outline. I love the traveling journey aspect of Chinese and Japanese scrolls. For me, it’s a mysterious process and not unlike...
journey. I rub the pencil until shapes and images start to reveal themselves. They are not sketches for the paintings. They exist on their own.

**MKJ:** I am delighted to learn about this drawing process and see them as even more riveting. I hope you do not find this diminishment of your collages/paintings, but the drawings may be your works I favor most. They are magical to me and unfold or reveal themselves, to this viewer at least, in perhaps the same mysterious ways in which they were created, which I find marvelous and complex.

Although it took place awhile ago now, I do want to mention that I also found your project for the Memory Bridge Foundation—the internal geographies and memories of Alzheimer’s patients, moving and inspirational. Describe how this project has changed you. Tell us how memory plays a role in your work, if in fact you find that it does.

**JD:** The Memory Bridge project influenced me in ways I didn’t understand at the time. The obvious answer is that the old paper I use has its own memory: it’s physically from another time and place. The images I use were created in a world without the ubiquitous photograph, let alone computers and the thousands of images we’re barraged with daily. I’d like my work to feel like it’s not of this time and place.

When I was commissioned to create the Memory Bridge portraits, I listened and sketched as six people with dementia were interviewed. I could see bits of memory coming and going, intertwining with the present, imagination, and chaos. Later, back in my studio, while making a “portrait” of one particularly unreachable woman, I found myself in a mental state not unlike hers. It was disturbing and liberating. I sat on the floor with my canvas and piles of books and papers. I began reaching for images in a frenzy of free association, pasting them down and drawing on top. This state of unknowing is where I try to be now when I work.
We can never be certain that we are communicating on a common wavelength with anyone else. I trust in that lack of certainty. If people ask me what my paintings are about, I stumble. I know they are not about nothing... I know, in fact, that they are utterly specific. But some people will embrace the ambiguity within the specificity, and others will reject the work, needing a concrete meaning and resolution I can’t provide.

Josh Dorman was born in Baltimore, MD and lives and works in New York, NY. He received his MFA from Queens College, Flushing, NY and his BA from Skidmore College, Saratoga Springs, NY. Josh has been the recipient of numerous residencies and fellowships including Yaddo, Art Omi, and the Millay Colony. He has been a visiting artist and lecturer at numerous institutions recently Skidmore College, Saratoga Springs, NY and Mass Art Graduate MFA Program, Boston, MA. His work is held in numerous collections across the country and he has exhibited nationally and internationally. In 2014, a collaboration of seven animations he made with composer Anna Clyne, titled...
“The Violin,” was released on DVD. Currently, Josh is represented by Ryan Lee Gallery in New York City, Koplin Del Rio Gallery in Seattle, and John Martin Gallery in London.

http://www.joshdorman.net

A gallerist in Saratoga Springs for over 15 years, visual artist Kathryn Jablonski is now an administrative director in holistic health. She is the author of the chapbook *To the Husband I Have Not Yet Met*, and her poems have appeared in numerous literary journals including the *Beloit Blueline, Home Planet News, Salmagundi*, and *Slipstream*, among others. Her artwork has been widely exhibited throughout the Northeast and is held in private and public collections.
Back into the body, may commotion reach her no more. People had disturbed her relentlessly. Bad memories—had showered her, even amid the strain of—inner rhythm, sheer sound. Tension ever at the ready—read attuning to the other, conjuring up any of her own rhythm, any sound she’d ever heard. That which it didn’t conjure up, that,
she composed. No one knew of her rare ability; she kept the secret well. The concealed sounds now began storming within her—all of them, at once. (Making their word heard?) A fine orgy flooded through her. Perhaps her overblown need for a personality, her oversize ability to attune, was linked to her singular sensitivity to sounds. Effortlessly she assumed the rhythm of the other. Only when turning directly its way. She is in sound and she is—as long as she might be. Yet another orgy flooded through her. She would have broken through her own sounds, but a complete commotion?! May nothing happen! “VIRGINITY IS LUXURY, MY VIRGINITY LOOSE HELP ME,” T-shirts once proclaimed. This (grammatically unsound) call to action, which back then was found also on pins, now came to mind. An aftershock of the beat generation. And yet this—still—vibrated. Back then, everyone wore tight T-shirts and jeans emblazoned with words, wrapped snugly around breasts. She should have bulged on the outside—now too. Campaigns bent on conquering—those, she didn’t undertake, after all. Beautifying operations—she was weary of those. No ambition, no action going forward, either. Because externals were all sucked into her at once, they were stuck in her—hiding her. No aligning of perspectives. She’d become mired in authoritarianism. Under a one-way communications blackout she’d been forced into a self-pleasuring (art). The vibrations within her were too many. Sound or prosthesis? No longer did it matter. If only she could be done with them. Her whipped-up body knew that an unanticipated stimuli would one day cause its expulsion. Perpetual doubt about whether she lived up to her body’s demands, satisfying it, had now seen dubious proof. Her unique sensitivity to sounds had heightened to the extremes. At every sound she shrank all the more. Now she herself—putting into practice the performative act of naming—dubbed her unprecedented illness, which she was the first to suffer from, “ego-atrophy.” (In the absence of use, personality fades away. Through sound—it comes,
and so too it goes. In the meantime: totally tied up.) As her body slowly gobbled up her shrinking self, the exertion bent it out of shape. Having formed a parentheses, it was covering its once (already, then) perfect shape; depriving womanhood before it would deprive her of everything. Her shape and form had not overlapped, and so the gaps did occur—there had always been some, and they were for voyeurs to peep through. She tolerated no eyes upon her through the gaps. She wore a cuirass. No one could see—there. Her onetime desire, \textit{slow with the body}, was realized in distorted form and late (in delay is the pleasure—but whose?). In a distorted mirror, she seemed tinier. Her full, sensual mouth—in parentheses; lying fallow (in reserve, words squelched). Doors and windows elsewhere: she had to fear in two directions. As far as goings-on were concerned, mornings were more radical now. The house made a big hoopla over her. It screwed her down— one turn, every sound. \textit{He abounds at my expense, she thyroid minds.} Can the soul be seen, or only if its stain is? Not wanting to injure an ear, she all but thought this only smoothly turning screw; \textit{my soul—a metabolic disorder} really did think, but—still not injuring an ear. A great advocate of silent bouts of being left alone, that she was. But, bewitched by the degree of her exploitation (the screw is turning), still driven by the centrifugal force (\textit{away from the centre!}), words came to the mouth: \textit{“I will not share in your degree of noise.”} Th even think. The late declaration of her stifled demand extruding from the mouth—derailed at once: lost in the general commotion. Thus she was compelled to keep sharing. That every ringing noise pulled in. There was always ready. Continual reinforcements: lines waiting. Her organs cramped; as with heart and soul. Her love organs could not interlock, her working organ went kaput. If a glance couldn’t. By now her hearing had turned cocky: she
between people based on sound alone. The difference was not too big—only a matter of who happened to fling off which portion of his/her own sound back upon her. Of a certain ringing she claimed to know: surely is to be continued. (It was.) She didn’t want to hear it. She switched to her own volume. She opened all her sources of noise and leapt into their dizzying waves.

(Optional musical closure, cadence)

A singular life—she chose: for it a singular—death. Always she drew on her own source, and so on her own she would have run out. And yet she didn’t wait it out.

“Shall I regard you as absence?”

“Feel free.”

Never had—the scene and in it, her: simultaneously—given that she really had gone away, by homeopathic means: with noises. She couldn’t stand them, so with them she killed herself. Her neighbor, who was not at all rhythmically attuned—helped her unwittingly in this. Or too attuned? With noises he murdered his unknown partner into—into—suicide.

II. Bestial rutting; the tension degenerates

Out of the body; ready for noise at once. Bad memories didn’t bother him; his were that too.

(He was quite willing to forget anything.) Not even busy people were one. Most of all he liked to make noise (bent on it, from the mouth), but he irritated (tormented, molested) other organs too. His act hit home patient at once. He screwed onto her with every noise. He kept screwing onto himself, too, until—he became erect and stayed that way. His body, prancing as a sheer exclamation mark (a
priapism?) but feeling no desire (a priapism indeed) covered everyone: to swarm and to occur! Out and in all directions; dispersed and every which way. And in fact: he was constantly flickering and scattered—compliments—properly. His tool gradually took over—on him. His glance—blocked—an operational territory. Storms of communication got stuck there—all of them. He knew it came to noise level. His hyperactivity—mounting to the max—as much as could be. He partook of—singular pleasure. Because his attention could not be riveted, he always adhered to other loose ends. (Perfect cementing.) As a signal of his recognition, at such times he gave forth all sorts of clicking and knapping sounds. He always pulled—constantly subservient threads—rotating them often. They were a tool; a silent partner. When he managed to tie himself down, he had pleasure—lots of it. With them—totally tied up. Thus it was he (became free). Time having passed, his mood having been satiated, his public disturbances became routine. He organized splendid little mornings (orgies) for himself. He could cause a ruckus as he wished on the house. Spirits set ablaze—the screw turned higher and higher. (Squeezed, pressed, screwed.) Passions set ablaze awaited their turn in subservience (in bonds). His whip was frayed, while he was marching on his own. The chronic, pleasureless swelling of his male organ (the aforementioned priapism)—has entered into a chronic ego-hypertrophy. His onetime desire, _May a woman never_ now reversed, distorted, late: _Someone deflate me already!_ entire crowd. His great big ego ensured a spewing of pleasure to behold. So much spewing that it almost emptied out, cut to shreds. The tool, the object, the method changed along the way, but—not the aim: the ear with noise, for he is a homeopathic—murderer. The mass of naked torsos didn’t bother him. Everyone gathered, links in the chain; a public in line (canon fodder). But then one day (mortality?), silence fell. His singular mercilessness (exquisite dispassion) toward noises intensified to no end. He rang the doorbell of a random neighbor. _A door can’t stand in the way_, he thought, indeed—and, intoxicated by this repository of burgeoning opportunities—he flung himself on all potential sources of noise, among them his neighbor, who was just starting to give an overdose of sound,
and who, in the end, died multiple deaths. Opening the sources of noise (like turning on the gas on a stove), she overdosed on the noise (as on medication); jumped (as from the fourth floor); and—drowned—in the waves. Finally, she exploded (like a gas tank) due to the simultaneous inner and outer pressure.

I. and II. Homeopathic murderer and suicide up and away for good.

The bodies, and those who take pleasure in them (both of their own), could get mixed up and away even when exploding (much energy in a tight space) but no later than when plummeting. And in the foams! The organs and events are similar, after all, as is, indeed, the method—homeopathy—though in their lives they could have done so by chance—they were preparing to plop into a black hole. Explosions yielded many of them everywhere. Nearing the event-horizon, its current immediately sucked everything in. No goal was one been, the black hole would have gobbled it up, too. Neither she who (would have) received it nor he who (would have) kicked it—felt it. Enormous anesthesia, as if after orgasm.

—Kinga Fabó, translated from the Hungarian by Paul Olchváry

Kinga Fabó is a Hungarian poet, linguist, and essayist. She is the author of eight books. Her latest, a bilingual Indonesian-English poetry collection titled Poison, was published in 2015 in Jakarta, Indonesia. Fabó's poetry has been included in various international journals and zines, as well as in anthologies. Some of her individual poems have been translated into Persian, Esperanto, or Tamil. One of her poems, “The Ears,” has six different Indonesian translations by six different authors. She has also written an essay on Sylvia Plath. In everything she's done, Fabó has always been between the verges, on the verge, and in the extreme. Kinga lives in Budapest, Hungary.
Paul Olchváry, a native of Amherst, New York, spent much of his adult life in Hungary and has translated numerous Hungarian novels into English for publishers such as Simon & Schuster, New Directions, Houghton Mifflin, and Steerforth. He has received translation grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and Hungary’s Milán Füst Foundation. The founder and publisher of New Europe Books, he lives in Williamstown, Massachusetts.

Footnotes (returns to text)

1. Desire, never yet so fast; maybe—because it is—already it is a
I.

When I think of art I think of an uncluttered state of mind, which doesn’t last, of course, and so call it inspiration. And inspiration, well, it comes and goes, doesn’t it.

Little sister, arranging bottle caps. Little brother, back and forth you run from one side of the pier to the other.

Oh young mother pulling your thin dress
When I think of the artist I think of an attentive state of mind. There is no criteria. No possibility for criticism.

It's risky business. There's no help anywhere. The intellect is useless. Whether looking outward or in, what one discovers can be neither predicted nor controlled.

Paying attention is making oneself present, no matter what's happening.

Immediacy is inspired. Presence is inspired.

Children, without having to think about it, make immediacy and presence possible all the time. Children pay attention.

Children and artists see with their minds.

Thinking is a secondary experience. The critic's pince-nez glasses is the greatest symbol of secondary experience.

For the artist, giving up thinking is called discipline. Giving up hope, giving up certainty, comparison and judgment is called discipline.

For the artist, wasting time, which the French perfected, is called discipline.

“Those who depend upon the intellect are the many,” wrote the minimalist painter, Agnes Martin. “Those who depend upon perception alone are the few.”

Agnes

Here comes perfection. When I think of art I think of my arm around it. Around my mind, I mean.
You may as well give up judging what you’ve done.

young, the grey sun stayed that way.

Here comes an iron shade, partly down. Their heads are gone.

Please don’t print the negative. I love their shoes. I light is.

2.

I am taking a walk in the city. I am enjoying a meal. Someone is running a bath. I have just spilled my cup of tea. The cat steps into a flower pot. A pencil rolls off the desk. I’m working! I’m working!

Two thousand five-hundred years ago, on her birth island of Lesbos, or in Sicily, the island of her exile, Sappho sang a lonely lyric:

for I would not be like these toys

but may it happen to me all

Artwork is not similar to something else. Artwork exists within itself, as tone, as mood, as state of being. All inspired artwork exists within itself.

The insistence on art as reality when you’re doing art, or experiencing art.

messenger of spring

nightingale with a voice of longing

sang Sappho,

and gold chickpeas are growing on the banks

spangled is

the earth with her crowns

In response to an interviewer’s question, Sir Lawrence Olivier said:
always thought that my job was to make people believe the play was actually taking place.” Exactly. The insistence on art as reality when you’re doing art.

And is it not the same when you’re experiencing art? When Charles Simic experiences one of artist Joseph Cornell’s luminous, inexplicable boxes, the reality is clear.

Postage Stamp with a Pyramid

The lonely boy must play quietly because his parents are sleeping after lunch. He kneels on the floor between their beds pushing a matchbox, inside which he imagines himself sitting. In her sleep his mother has uncovered her breasts like the Sphinx. The car, for that’s what it is, is moving very slowly because its wheels are sinking in the deep sand. Ahead, nothing but wind, sky, and more sand.

“Shush,” says the father sternly to the desert wind.

In Cornell’s world, Charles Simic could see with his mind an essence of himself. Visceral, palpable, the whole narrative of a child driving a matchbox, of a child as voyeur among adults, of a child in a desert with “nothing but wind, sky, and more sand.”

Children and artists are happiest when they experience things in which they seem to be identified.

In solitude, children and artists can be happy for hours. And if they don’t recognize themselves in the artwork of others, they don’t return to it, they don’t remember it, it will never become part of them.

“An inspiration,” wrote Agnes Martin, “is a happy moment that takes us by surprise.”

It would take an epic psychological study to explain why...
toward any given poem or story, or film, or painting, or make the kind of art objects we make. And that study human history, so drenched in blood–would be flawed.

The filmmaker Alfred Hitchcock investigated the possibility of having his belly button removed because he found it annoying and unattractive.

He was a neighbor and frequent dinner guest at the home of a friend of mine when she was a young girl in London. And one night when Mr. Hitchcock arrived with a sack of bones, he scarred her to this very day. Different kinds of bones, actually, which he passed around the table. And he took note of each one, as each one was snapped, until he heard the sound of a human bone breaking in his mind’s eye for the scene he would shoot the next day.

Alfred Hitchcock feared above all, by his own admission, arrest.

I don’t know why or how some of Hitchcock’s films have so become a part of me.

A lovably shallow Cary Grant being subdued by feelings.

A quietly intimate and refined Tippi Hedren’s emotional insecurity exploding into outrageous catastrophe.

An aristocratic Ingrid Bergman shunned by society for love.

Or the voyeuristic James Stewart and me sitting in the dark spying on the lives of neighbors.

Or James Stewart and me following the otherworldly Kim Novak around, and falling in love with her, and with her descent into madness, and killing it.

I watched a recently restored copy of *Vertigo*, and, as I after such way-cool experience, I got up the next morning,
again. And I carried it around with me for some time, I suppose. It was already inside me, like an homage. And so I stole the title.

Vertigo

Only one is a wanderer.
And when she was sad she’d go into the street to be
Two together are always going somewhere. They lie
next to a bird. I imagine the sky. It fans her mountains
and waves. She’d left some small town
where they used to make tires.
Stories are made out of stairwells
and rope. I’d been interrupting for years and didn’t know it. This old park. The dark hatchery. Workers in jumpsuits throw down their poison at dawn.
Not everyone can be described. It’s perfectly natural. If she’s thinking about love does she break down

the door of the bedroom. Of course not. Not public speaking. To the left there’s a sofa. We all lived in rented rooms.
That’s how it goes with subject matter.
Nude figures in profile floating among palm trees. The idea was touristy, like a postcard. I was given a small auditorium. I watched over rush hour. I write down everything as I forget it, especially at night.
I lock the door from the inside.

4.

My studio is a mess:
Piles of papers. Piles of books, and open books, every
And I like it, just writing it down. It serves no purpose, but keeps me real.

“All you have to do is write one true sentence,” a young Ernest Hemingway wrote one afternoon in a café in Paris trying to become a writer.

A thousand years ago, Sei Shnagon, an empress of the 10th century court in Heian-kyo Japan, was given a pile of paper which she called “pillow.” A thousand years ago one of the first recorded journals, Sei Shnagon’s Pillow Book, was listed by subtitle:

“In spring, the dawn,” as in “when the slowly paling mountain rim is tinged with red, and wisps of faintly crimson-purple cloud float in the sky.”

“Markets –”

“Peaks –”

“River pools –”

“Things people despise –” as in “A crumbling earth wall. Few people have a reputation for being exceptionally good-natured.”

“Infuriating things –” as in “A guest arrives when you have something urgent to do, and stays talking for ages.” Or “to witness men getting noisy and boisterous in their cups, groping round inside their mouth with a finger or wiping their whiskers if they have them, and forcing the sake cup on others. ‘Go on, have another!’”

“Rare things –” as in “A son-in-law who’s praised by his wife’s father. Likewise, a wife who’s loved by her mother-in-law.” “A pair of silver tweezers that can actually pull out hairs properly.” “A person who is without a single quirk.”

“Refined and elegant things –”

“Insects –”

I encountered Sei Shnagon’s Pillow Book while researching a seminar,
“The Art of the Journal,” that I thought to offer because I had yet to forgive myself for never journaling. But there they were, in the garage, even the Moleskines on this very desk, tens of notebooks of various sizes comprised almost entirely of what other or written.

“You can always come back,” sang Bob Dylan, “but you all the way.”

“Your shadow is—how should I put it? Faint.” wrote Haruki Murakami.

“Everything terribly,” wrote Guillem Apollinaire.

“In poker, it’s better to tell the truth. The other bluffing,” spoke Jean-Paul Belmondo in Jean Luc Godard

“Doing almost nothing,” Marina Abramovic said, “performance, because your story’s gone.”

“I’m not going to get my Coca-Cola,” yelled Louise Bourgeois. “My make-up is wrong. I am afraid to be interrupted. I am afraid not to remember what I intended to do.”

“Let us take down the old notebooks,” wrote Virginia Woolf, “we all have…and find...beautiful things.”

Among the pages of Joseph Cornell’s journals, tens of lists:

January 4, 1943

Into town late – bank – down to Lexington and 24th assortment, Mexican midgets, dancing bear, Hungarian cards, Bay of Naples litho. colored. Over to Madison Square swirl of snow suddenly came covering everything and then letting up before the short bus ride to Unexpected illumination and evocation of the circumstances with feeling about Madison Square, Pajarito and Matta. 2 hours. At Reading Room then Penn Station 1:42. Interest in Savarin Restaurant seen through glass windows in waiting room, etc.
And the poet, James Schuyler, made the list into art:

*Things to Do*

Balance checkbook.
Rid lawn of onion grass.
“this patented device”
“this herbicide”
“Sir, We find none of these killers truly satisfactory. Hand weed for onion grass.” Give old clothes away, “such as you yourself would willingly wear.”
Impasses. Walk three miles
A day beginning tomorrow.
Alphabetize.
Purchase nose-hair shears.
Answer letters.
Elicit others.
Write Maxine.
Move to Maine.
Give up NoCal.
See more movies.
Practice long-distance dialing.
Ditto gymnastics:
The Beast with Two Bucks
and, The Fan.
Complain to laundry
*Any laundry*. Ask for borrowed books back.
Return junk mail to sender
marked, Return to Sender.
Condole. Congratulate.
“…this sudden shock…”
“…this swift surprise…”
Brush rub polish burn
mend scratch foil evert
emulate surpass. Remember “to write three-act play” and lead “a full and active life.”
And music.

Always music in the other room.

And the songbirds there, too. *The Beeptones*, Slick and Trina, from Nicaragua, and Ella and Louie, from South Africa. And the Cesar, a jazz-cat god, the Caruso of the household, belting out one aria after another.

Like waking up in the morning in a pensive, sour mood. "Lighten up, King Baby," they’re singing, ever since the light came.

Today it’s Coltrane, *A Love Supreme*, replaying itself over and over again long into the afternoon. Long into evening.

*Part I: Acknowledgment*

for John Coltrane

We spin
and we deny it.
We speed through space and
hold our ground. We stand firm.
We sprawl out
in the shadows of cobwebs
and swim to the surface
and toast again the staggering
stars and the planets
and our getting away from it all.
We’re nobody’s business—
and the truth,
the truth’s wooden-clock voice
actually lives here.

When the night sky
for example is spattered with paint
and the forest is reduced
to a few glowing windows
and a curling smoke
above a train,
I was at once inside
our cabin after all, and frankly
sick of friends, though
not the close ones,
of people, maybe,
not you.

Like something in the body
reflecting streets and chance interiors
and yelling Silence,
Camera,
your heart, your
family, inappropriately,
your clothes
against my idiocy,
not you.

6.

Upon a mountain top in China, sculptor and performance artist Zhang Huan piled five naked bodies, his own included.

He recalled the ancient idiom: “There are always higher mountains behind a high mountain.”

“When we left the mountain,” he said, “it was still the same mountain. Without change. Life is full of limitations and failed attempts. We tried to make the mountain higher but our attempt was futile.”

In Canberra, Australia, Zhang Huan gathered a hundred sheep and a large number of naked volunteers.

In New York City, a few months after 9/11, Zhang dressed his naked body in a hundred-pound suit of beef. “In New York I see many bodybuilders who, for long periods of time, do training exercises beyond their bodies’ capabilities. They have every kind of vitamin imaginable…, oftentimes it’s more than their hearts can

Zhang Huan invited three calligraphers to write the story and the spirit of his family on his face. By evening his face was ink-black.
disappeared entirely, and nobody could tell the color of his skin. As if he no longer had an identity.

The calligraphy told a well-known story, and its moral is that as long as a person is determined, there’s nothing that he or she cannot achieve. Other characters included predictions of one’s fate. For example, the symbolic meaning of the shape of a cheek bone and the location of a mole.

Zhang Haun hung on to the roots of a tree rubbed with dog food and flour, which the dogs devoured greedily.

* 

The Belgrade-born performance artist, Marina Abramovic, said she “wanted attention to my work, but much of the attention I got was negative.”

“The photographs of me naked in Galleria Diagramma were especially scandalous.”

“What if instead of doing something to myself, I let the public decide what to do with me?”

“In black trousers and a black t-shirt, behind a table of hammer, a saw, a feather, a fork, a bottle of perfume, a rose, a bell, scissors, needles, a pen, honey, a lamb bone, a mirror, a newspaper, a shawl, pins, lipstick, sugar, a Polaroid camera. Various other things. And a pistol, and one bullet lying next to it.”

“For the first three hours, not much happened...someone would hand me the rose, or drape the shawl over my shoulders, or kiss me.”

“Then, slowly at first, and then quickly...the women in the gallery would tell the men what to do to me, rather than do it themselves (although later on, when someone stuck a pin into me, one woman wiped the tears from my eyes).”
“After three hours, one man cut my shirt apart with the scissors and took it off. People manipulated me into various poses.”

“A guy took Polaroids of me and stuck them in my hand.”

“A couple people picked me up and carried me around. They put me on a table, spread my legs, stuck the knife in the table close to my crotch.”

“Someone stuck pins into me. Someone else slowly poured a glass of water over my head. Someone cut my neck with the knife and sucked the blood.”

“There was one man—a very small man—who just stood very close to me, breathing heavily.”

“After a while, he put the bullet in the pistol and put the pistol in my right hand.”

* 

_Holding You Sober Close to Me_

The city’s behind us. The water’s calm. There are many heads above the water.

Show me a victim and I’ll show you a bathroom—a man slathered in honey, a carpet of flies.

Orange blossoms and salt. Even the creepy doorman tastes the salt in the air.

If a child’s brought in, well, that’s something different. We don’t want
our animals to suffer.
You're the last person on earth prepared for the death of your parents.

7.

When I think of art I think of beauty.

It's where the eye goes, autonomously, on its merry way. For children and artists the message is about happiness—all across the sand.

Beauty is writing itself, and I'm always one step behind. Where the throat is. And the tear.

“And to speak again of solitude,” wrote the poet Rainier Maria Rilke, “it becomes increasingly clear that this is fundamentally not something that we can choose or reject. We are solitary. How much better it is to realize that we are thus, to start directly from that very point....”

“For all the points upon which our eyes have been accustomed to rest will be taken away from us, there is no longer any nearness, and all distance is intimately far....”

“A [person] who was taken from his study, almost without preparation and transition, and placed upon the height of a great range, would be bound to feel something similar: an uncertainty without parallel, an abandonment to the unutterable would almost annihilate him.”

Immediacy is inspired. Presence is inspired.

Being this close is everything. It's a discipline, like a child
You’re the Rub

Murmured in loneliness, round and round.
Let’s not go inside. The cliffs drop off, and the ocean
a friend–on the boardwalk
enough people alone
have died.
So relax, take your feet
off–nobody’s
missing. There are many parts
of the mind. On that old
open day we let out our long green grass. A night’s p
and you expected it
to be there.
You’re the rub–the love
that loves the loves. I like especially the puddles
and your wire. I like your mud.
I like your part
of it.

Ralph Angel’s latest collection, Your Moon, was awarded the Green Rose Poetry Prize. Exceptions and Melancholies: Poems 1986-2006 received the PEN USA Poetry Award, and his Neither World won the James Laughlin Award of The Academy of American Poets. In addition to five books of poetry, he also published an award-winning translation of the Federico García Lorca collection, Poema del cante jondo / Poem of the Deep Song.

Invisible Ink | Memoir — Paul Pines
The Tin Palace was a seminal place for jazz in the 70s and many well-known figures today came up from the grass roots of that space. Paul Blackburn was a core figure in the poetry world of that time. The essay doesn’t belabor those points, but is focused on the mystery behind the history.

—Paul P.
1. Intimations

Along with Dick Tracey’s two-way wrist radio watch and Captain Midnight’s decoder ring, invisible ink highlighted the mysteries of my Brooklyn boyhood. The idea that unseen writing might surface with the heat of a flame held under the page was irresistible. I experimented with different solutions, like milk and vinegar, in an attempt to duplicate the process. Unhappily, little more came of these experiments beyond the flaming napkins in my hand.

My fascination was ignited again during hormonal teenage summers cruising the beach that ran along the southern hem of Brooklyn from the elevated BMT subway stop on Brighton Beach Avenue, all the way to Sea Gate. My crew roamed between the parachute-jump, rising like an Egyptian obelisk from Luna Park, to the fourteen story Half-Moon Hotel. Both loomed like thresholds at the edge of the known world. The haunting quality of the place was especially palpable in the shadow of the Half-Moon Hotel, where Abe Reles, as FBI informant guarded by six detectives, jumped or was pushed out the window on the sixth floor. Reles had already brought down numerous members of Murder Incorporated. His defenestration occurred in 1941, the day before he was scheduled to testify against Albert Anastasia. The hotel’s name echoed that of Henry Hudson’s ship, which had anchored briefly off nearby Gravesend Bay, hoping to find a short cut to Asia. The sight and smell of warm oiled bodies on the beach boardwalk, past and future pressed hard against the flesh.
Nowhere more so than at Brighton Private, a pay-to-play beach club bordering Bay #1, one of fifteen numbered sandy plots along the Coney Island peninsula. Brighton Private aspired to the kind of exclusivity prized by the elite in Long Island or Atlantic City, but on the more modest basis of a daily entrance fee, as well as by subscription for those who rented lockers by the season. It offered a pool, steam room, cushioned lounge chairs and a superior cruising ground for boys in heat. Those inside could come and go to the ocean through a beach-side where the gate-keeper stamped the hands of members with a waterproof mark visible under a black light.

My crew from lower Flatbush devised a strategy for entering from the beach. We put together enough money for one person to get in, change into a bathing suit, and exit on the beach, his hand freshly stamped to validate re-entry. His mission was to reach the rest of us waiting out of sight, under the boardwalk, in time to impress the still wet stamp on our hands. This was not without an element of risk. Just as
got smeared or devolved into a smudge. At one time or another, we all had experienced the humiliation of being unmasked by the black light and fleeing the consequences if caught.

2. The Call

Before I opened the doors of my jazz club, the Tin Palace, the situation rang a bell that raised the memory of Brighton Private. There had to be a way of marking the threshold between the space built so lovingly and the war zone outside. Bowery and Second Street had been a no-man’s-land inhabited by winos, fleabag hotels, and those who spilled out of the Men’s Shelter on 3rd Street every morning. Then there were the predators who preyed on them, Alphabet City drawn by the monthly mailing of welfare checks, as well as junkies looking to score. It was also a deep underground network of creative energy. Artists’ lofts lined Bowery all the way; poets occupied the tenement hives and storefronts on the Lower East Side, and jazz lofts seeded by musicians sprang up like wildflowers on the side streets. My partner and I staked out our territory for the Tin Palace on the corner of Bowery and 2nd, transforming the burned-out husk of a bar into an oasis. Our interior featured walls taken down to the brick under a pressed tin ceiling, an art deco mahogany and rosewood bar, cocktail tables and a small stage for musicians. In the years that followed, I heard nightly improvisations that transported the entire room into another dimension, unfolding at the outer boundary of the cultural mainstream where survival is often “writ in tooth and claw.” From the start, I understood that such a space as we had required its own rules and rituals, a way to make the mystery of its existence palpable to those who entered it. I settled on the idea of a rubber seal dipped in invisible ink made visible under a black light.
In August, 1972 there was only one listing in the Manhattan Yellow Pages for Invisible Ink. I traveled up to 23rd Street and walked between Third Avenue and the tenement facing Madison Park in the shadow of the Flatiron Building. An elderly male voice responded to my...
signal on the buzzer asking what I wanted.

I answered, “Invisible Ink.”

The face that greeted me at the door at the top of six flights of stairs filled out the picture.

The Invisible Ink Man had been taller in his youth, his back now bent at an angle that reduced him by a couple of inches. A cloud of white hair circled his head, and frown lines framed a kind but expressionless face, as though hinting at the unseen interior. He wore a white shirt with sleeves rolled up to his elbows and brown pants. The room I entered was dimly lit, flanked by long tables cluttered with newspapers and magazines. There was a living space at far end, a round table circled by folding chairs, a couch behind it. He apologized for the appearance of his digs, letting me know the obvious, that he didn’t receive many visitors these days. His face brightened, and he seemed to straighten when I told him why I’d come.

“I can customize the stamp to your design,” he told me. “Do you have something in mind?”

I emphasized that this stamp would operate at the gateway of two worlds, and wondered if something Egyptian, The Eye of Horus, or maybe Hermes’s winged sandals that allowed him to move between worlds. The Invisible Ink Man nodded, thoughtfully, before saying he had books of designs if I wanted to look through them. He then went on to reminisce, letting me know that his had once been a burgeoning business. The call for his product had kept him busy with orders from all over the world. He had been a craftsman, reaching for a high bar with the quality and power of his designs. Now, he was the last of his breed.
“Let me think about what I want,” I hesitated.

The Invisible Ink Man replied that would be fine. When I asked if there was a bathroom I could use before I left, he pointed to one of the long tables. It was a small room with a pull illuminated a veined marble sink and a vintage toilet wooden thunder box. Tucked behind the pipe leading poster with the Day-Glo figure of a man half-way into a on the pull chord of a chain such as I held, spoke through “Goodbye cruel world.” I pulled my chain to the thunder water from the tank above the toilet. The Day-Glo fig wondered if he expressed something unseen in the Invisible Ink Man walked me to the stairs. He assure
back to him in time, he would make me a stamp for the ages and provide me with a generous supply of ink in the invisible color of

3. Collapsing time

Walking on 23rd towards 5th Avenue, I stopped at an empty parking lot. On another mission, a few years earlier, I had seen Blackburn standing in that lot, head tilted, looking at something that had caught his eye.

“There was a building in front of this one.” Paul said when I joined him.

“Sarah and I lived in it.”

“And now it’s gone.”

“I can still see the room where we made love, the view from the window.”
He stared intently, as though what he described was still space, time out of mind. There were few poets more alive to the sights, sounds and feelings rising from an unseen source, images under the ultraviolet glow of his imagination. Paul moved between visible and invisible worlds, like Hermes, but wearing a cowboy hat instead of a winged helmet. Through him I became aware of poetry not only as art but as physics—or in the words of Ervin Laszlo, a place where field precedes from. His poems formed themselves on the page like the incarnate nervous system of the experience he brought to light.
design specific to it, but inevitable. Paul’s fields are synchronistic, spooky action at a distance, while cleaving to the physical details. As he wrote in his poem “The Net of Place,” Th

\[
\text{The act defines me} \\
\text{even if it is not my act} / \text{The hawk circles over the sea} / \text{My act}
\]

When I encountered Paul in the parking lot gazing at the space which once contained the apartment where he and his second wife, Sarah, had made love, I was reminded of the mystery that sustained him and his work, to which I aspired in mine: to capture in that net of place the patterns that are so immediately present to the senses, but also of time as well. The net of place contains both visible and invisible worlds. Or, as Paul put it at the conclusion of his poem:

\[
\text{when mind dies} \\
\text{of its time / It is not the place goes away.}
\]
Clearly, Paul, who died in 1971, had also been my Invisible Ink Man.

My desire to realize the forms inherent in the field of my own experience, moved me to ask him if he would write an introduction to my first collection, *Onion*, forthcoming from Mulch Press. I’d already encountered resistance from the literary gatekeepers. They would not stamp my hand. I felt so much rode on Paul’s blessing.

He wrote three introductions, which I rejected. Each one fell short of what I had hoped for, something worthy of what I reached for. I had counted on a certain gravitas that was not there. One of them described me as a small man walking a large dog down Second Avenue, reveling in his world. It was full of an affection I didn’t glimpse as much, but couldn’t bear it.

*Onion* came out the year Paul died, 1971, with no introduction.

Twenty years later, preparing to read at a tribute to Paul in St. Mark’s Church, I searched his *Collected Poems* for a poem I loved, “Cabras,” about goats in the next field hobbled because they are otherwise difficult to catch, but remain “so quick, stubborn / and full of fun.” It reminded me of Mallorca, where we had both lived at different times. And about ourselves, in the respective fields of our callings. As I leafed through the thick volume of Paul’s collected works I stumbled on lines from his *Journals* that sent a shock through my system, and then left me in shaken. They had been sent silently years earlier, but heard first in that instant. Paul’s final message to me once again collapsed time.

How can we offer it all, Paul? How ignore the earth movers. will take it all down?

4. On the threshold
I never saw the Invisible Ink Man again. I did manage invisible ink pad and a black light stationed at the entrance to my Bowery jazz club. There was nothing designed to order, and the process became too slow and unreliable. But I did come away from my journey to 23rd street that day with a greater appreciation for the mystery I felt on the threshold of that door separating Tin Palace from the world outside of it, what I thought of as my Camelot, a moment of light in the dark. The fact that that my light burned brightly for the decade, then went out, gave me a deeper understanding of the field from which such forms arise and dissolve.

Invisible Ink is a metaphor for a narrative already written that in the heat of time will emerge to be read as destiny, history, or memory. I track this

Outside the Tin Palace, 1976 (courtesy Patricia Spears Jones)

Stanley Crouch, Alice Norris, David Murray, Carlos Figueroa, Patricia Spears Jones, Phillip Wilson, Victor Rosa and Charles “Boo” Shaw

Invisible Ink is a metaphor for a narrative already written...
in my own experience to the Invisible Ink Man and his thunder box toilet,
Paul Blackburn reliving his intimacy with Sarah in the empty parking lot,
and my moment beside him wondering at the invisibility of it all.

The Greeks thought of their underworld as a place where hidden treasures were stored, and it is easy to conflate those with memories that are eternal and continuous.

What I contemplate still at the entrance to my own underworld.

All thresholds are essentially boundaries between the known and the unknown. One enters a jazz club from the street to call forth invisibles not available elsewhere to the eye and ear, the audible changes that disclose hidden places. Often these are places known and now known again in a way that changes everything.
I am certain that there is a connection between the moments in my life when someone stamped my hand with invisible ink that can be seen under a black light, and the initiation into a mystery as the veils of Persephone, and Isis. I consider what took place at the Tin Palace, beyond the big oak doors on the Bowery, Blackburn haunted The Five Spot, followed the improvisations and reproduced them on the page. I remain fascinated if I wanted to possess Captain Midnight’s decoder, the latent, undisclosed landscape of potentials, things in their nascent state on the way to being realized. In this pursuit, earlier guides like Toth, Telesphoros, now have names like Monk, Mingus, and Coltrane. Blackburn died before I opened the doors to my club, but he would have been at home there. We shared a desire to hold the heat of our attention to the page of a given moment and watch what had been written there unseen, emerge into plain sight. It draws me still. And Paul, as I imagine him, tuned to what emerges from the implicate order on the other side of that threshold. He was, after all, no stranger to the kiss of invisible ink.

**Paul Pines** grew up in Brooklyn around the corner from Ebbet’s Field and passed the early ’60s on the Lower East Side of New York. He shipped out as a Merchant Seaman, spending August ’65 to February ’66 in Vietnam, after which he drove a cab until opening his Bowery jazz club, which became the setting for his novel, *The Tin Angel* (Morrow, 1983). *Redemption* (Editions du Rocher, 1997), a second novel, is set against the genocide of Guatemalan Mayans. His memoir, *Brother’s Madness*, (Curbstone Press, 2007) explores the unfolding of intertwined lives and the nature of delusion. Pines has published eleven books of poetry: *Onion, Hotel Madden Poems, Pines Songs, Breath, Adrift or Light, Taxidancing, Last Call at the Tin Palace, Reflections in a Smooth Divine Madness, New Orleans Variations & Paris Ouroboros* and *Fishing on the Pole Star*. The last collection won the Adirondack Center for Writing Award as the best book of poetry in 2013. Poems set by composer Daniel Asia a
Summit label. He is the editor of the Juan Gelman’s selected poems translated by Hardie St. Martin, *Dark Times/Filled with Light* (Open Letters Press, 2012). Pines lives with his wife, Carol, in Glens Falls, NY, where he practices as a psychotherapist and hosts the Lake George Jazz Weekend.
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The Abiding Desire for No Place

The Thirteenth Hour

The future will be old. It may be bright and shiny and wonderful but, if we are to be certain of anything, it will be old. It will be built from the reconstructed wreckage of the past and the present and the just-about possible. ‘The future is already here’, according to William Gibson, ‘it’s just not very evenly distributed.’ You sit amongst fragments of it now.

All prophecies are intrinsically about the now. When George Orwell, slowly coughing himself to death on the wind-scoured island of Jura, wrote 1984 (under the original title ‘The Last Man in Europe’), it was a reversal and critique of the year in which he wrote it, 1948. This was the cracked mirror of the present. When he wrote of doublespeak, he was writing not just of the future and the Soviet Union but of traits he identified and deplored in his fellow journalists, imperial bureaucrats (carving the earth up at Versailles and contemporaneously at Tehran) and the politicians of Britain, the proto-Airstrip One. So perceptive was his take, influenced heavily by Zamyatin’s exceptional We, that it rendered the vast jumpsuit-wearing dystopian literature to follow as somehow naïve. One edge he had was an awareness that things will not entirely work in the future. The architecture of his future London is a transposed version of his contemporary city, yet to recover from the Blitz and mired in widespread poverty; ‘Were there always these vistas of rotting nineteenth-century houses... their crazy garden walls sagging in all directions? And the bombed sites where the plaster dust swirled in the air?’

In the future, there will be not only flux but pointlessness, frivolity, inefficiencies, all these things that make us human by accident and which we rail against daily.
There are exceptions:

The Ministry of Truth – Minitrue, in Newspeak – was startlingly different from any other object in sight. It was an enormous pyramidal structure of glittering white concrete, soaring up, terrace after terrace, three hundred meters into the air . . . Scattered about London there were just three other buildings of similar appearance and size. So completely did they dwarf the surrounding architecture that from the roof of Victory Mansions you could see all four of them simultaneously.

They gazed at everything and were blank in response. Cynicism, totalitarianism would obliterate not just satire but the very meaning from words. Objective truth was illegal if not unknowable. Black was white. The daily torrent of lies was provided and monitored by the Ministry of Truth. Continual war was waged by the Ministry of Peace. Austerity was provided by the Ministry for Plenty; ‘The Ministry of Love was the really frightening one. There were no windows in it at all.’

It would be a mistake to see Orwell’s vision as an extreme case of the world’s obvious tyrannical regimes. Orwell knew that the instincts and interests behind the world of 1984 were evident everywhere. Ideology is faith; irrespective of whether that’s in god, dialectical materialism or the invisible hand of the markets. It is faith and in this there is absolution and condemnation. It is this that proves Orwell’s warnings so perpetually apposite. The powerful of every political and corporate variation will employ faith. Questioning and a fidelity to the objective is the only bulwark against it. And yet if and when the worst comes, life will go on, due to Humanity’s resilience, often when it seems like it shouldn’t. We would do well, as Orwell counselled, to see the traces of the dystopian around us, to find the ends of those threads and how far along we are; the most accurate prophecy being that people, and the allure of domination, never really change. We can Copenhagenise our future cities, make them as green as we can, but provided we are still embedded in systems that reward cronyism, exploitation and short-term profiteering, that
and degradation, it will be mere camouflage. Dystopias will have cycle lanes and host World Cups. What may save us is, in Orwell’s words, a dedication to ‘common decency’, and the perpetual knowledge that it need not be like this.

Cockaigne

The future may well fail but the urge for the utopian is a valid one. It emerges from the failures and unsatisfied wants of the present. Inventors identify problems of the present, vacuums to fill and preferable end-results to backcast from. The shadow and dynamo of aspiration is present misery and the utopian impetus contains often-untold real-life stories. It’s no accident that Hansel and Gretel find the cottage made of sweets and gingerbread when they are at the point of starvation or that Harry McClintock sang of arcadian joys during the Great Depression. For all its jaunty wide-eyed delinquency ‘Big Rock Candy Mountain’ is a song of shadows and implications. Nursery rhymes do, of pestilence and regicides, of starvation, drought and exposure to the elements. Utopia here is simply an escape into a parallel world of fairness, justice and comfort. In medieval times, the popular myth of the land or city of Cockaigne gave vent to these same notes of protest and yearning.

Work was forbidden, for one thing, and food and drink appeared spontaneously . . . One could even reside in meat, fish, game, fowl and pastry, for another feature of Cockaigne was its edible architecture. The weather was stable and mild—it was always spring—and there was the added bonus of a whole range of amenities: communal possessions, free sex with ever-willing partners, a fountain of youth, beautiful clothes for everyone and the possibility of earning money while one slept.

In a version inscribed in an Irish monk’s manuscript (circa 1350), Cockaigne was linked to biblical promises of rivers of honey for the
Though paradise be merry and bright,
Cokaygne is yet a fairer sight . . .
There is no thunder, no hail,
There is no vile worm nor snail,
And no storm, rain nor wind.
There no man nor woman is blind . . .
There are rivers great and fine
Of oil, milk, honey and wine.

The verse then spins off into a ribald account of amorous monks and nuns, as well as a desire to escape the darkness of the time:

When the monks go to Mass
All the windows which are of glass
Turn into bright crystal
To give the monks more light.

Here is the vacuum speaking; the need for technological solutions (electric light, mass-manufactured glass etc.) to rescue the hours, amounting to years, of darkness spent in stone cells huddled next to reeking candles of animal fat. The absence of this once-common state is an indication that we exist without realising it in what once would have been sought after as an improbable utopia. This is to say nothing of how we can now communicate instantly across the globe, live vastly longer lives, see worlds from the microscopic to the cosmic that we scarcely knew existed, listen to and watch performances by the dead. Despite this, we doubt the existence of progress, partly because we have the luxury of doing so.

The Brothers Grimm speak of Cockaigne with the insightful absurdism of the nursery rhyme: ‘There I saw a plough ploughing without horse or cow . . . and I saw two gnats building a bridge . . . ’ with the proviso, ‘have I not told enough lies?’
Look beyond the nonsense and you can see it is a future they are willing. This is most evident in Pieter Bruegel the Elder's *Het Luilekkerland* where men condemned as lazy and nevertheless allowed time to sleep or simply stare at the sky, as automated creatures scurry around serving them; an egg with legs, a suicidal roasted pigeon, a suckling pig running around peeling itself. This is a future life of leisure and farmyard robots, granted by the freeing of hours from rudimentary tasks. It is a utopia of time; the ability to waste time as we choose by being freed from the wasted time of obligations.

Today, we have never had more labour-saving devices of convenience and yet the blissful life is suspiciously fleeting and elusive. ‘A joke is an epigram on the death of a feeling.’ Nietzsche wrote in *Human, All Too Human*. Perhaps Cockaigne momentarily eased the pressure of a life lived in struggle and penury. It became, as popular jokes of its kind do, a competitive sport with each teller outdoing the last. In its extravagance, Cockaigne exposed the comparative meanness of reality, where farce and tragedy are intrinsically wedded always the outside possibility, even in the wildest of renditions, that this was a physical place of some description on the face of the earth escape to it (the realm of the idle rich) might be possible, however remote. The urge for the utopian is strong in the desperately poor meaning that missionary forces promising better worlds in this life or the next tend to find a ready ear and a base to exploit. It is also proof that utopias were not the sole preserve of indulgent philosophers. By denying the utopian as some kind of failed parlour game, we exclude ourselves from understanding its appeal and the power it still grants those who can offer it. We know Cockaigne does not exist but that doesn’t mean we don’t believe in it.

—Darran Anderson

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Man Behaving Badly | Henry Miller & Tropic of — Victoria Best
Victoria Best has a theory about creativity and writers in crisis. This essay is one of a series of which she writes: “I really loved writing these essays, every writer I chose, once you got down to it, was a hapless flake, making the most terrific mess of their life and yet stalwartly, patiently, relentlessly processing error, every crisis and turning them all into incredible art. How could you not love these people and their priceless integrity? I felt like I had found my tribe. Didn’t matter in the least that they were pretty much all dead. There was just that precious quality – vital, creative attentiveness to everything wrong – that I cherished.”

By the time 38-year-old Henry Miller left America in February 1930, he had taken to signing himself as ‘the Failure’. In reality, the ratio of irony to truth in this gesture was...
uncomfortably low. America had been the scene of repeated humiliation for him; he left behind a bitterly disappointed mother, an ex-wife still pursuing him for unpaid alimony, a dozen poorly paid jobs for which he hadn’t had the stamina or the will, and now the love of his life, June Mansfield.

June had more or less booted him out of the apartment and across the Atlantic. It was a final attempt at forcing him to achieve the artistic genius he so avidly sought; and besides, his prolonged gloom was cramping her style. As he walked away, he was afraid to look up at the window to wave her goodbye, in case she was already engaged in some sort of activity he would rather not know about.

He took with him the sum total of seven years of writing: two manuscripts of dubious merit that no one wanted to publish. When the editor, Bruce Barton, read some of his early work, he returned it with the comment ‘it is quite evident that writing is not your forte’. Miller was taking that remark with him, too, branded on his heart. In his pocket the one useful leaving gift – a $10 note from his friend, Emil Schnellock – wouldn’t last long, but the friendship would prove key to a dramatic upswing in Miller’s fortunes. Not that he had the least premonition of that. As the ship sailed away from the dock, Henry Miller went down to his cabin, thought back over his life and wept.

When he arrived in Paris, the city destined to save him, he sank to a whole new level of poverty. He had nothing, not even the rudimentary grasp of the French language. The days of the famous ‘lost generation’ of compatriot writers were past, luminaries like Hemingway and Scott Fitzgerald long gone, leaving Miller, as always, out of sync with his own culture. He had no papers that would help him find work, no family or acquaintances, and no money unless June cabled it to the American Express office, a location he now visited up to three times a day. Mostly, he had to beg, steal or starve. When there was money, he was forced to wonder how she had come by it.

But Paris started to provide him with unexpected resources.
beauty and degradation all around him, and he had his curiosity braced by his astute powers of observation. He had the warm welcome of the French people, and in these hungry times café owners willing to extend credit or even feed him for free. In a marked contrast to America, there was compassion for what it was to be a struggling artist. Here, he didn’t have to be making money to call himself a writer. He didn’t even have to be writing something. His ambition and desire were understood. And in this tender absence, Miller began to settle down to work he didn’t even realize he was doing. He took long walks around his city, absorbing the exotic sights and sounds, and wrote down everything he saw in letters to Emil Schnellock that ran to twenty, thirty pages. It was an eccentric strategy for what would gradually morph into an eccentric, unique, disturbing book.

***

Published in 1934, *Tropic of Cancer* was the infamous result of Henry Miller’s prolonged struggles, and there would be people who wished he hadn’t bothered. It remains the most grudgingly admired literary bestseller of the twentieth century; a paradigm shifting sort of *Ulysses* for the common man. Most of all, it pushed against ingrained puritanism, casually invoking the kind ofgraphic sexuality that is taken for granted nowadays.

Henry knew he had produced something that was both challenging and insulting. From the moment the book was a finished first draft until its eventual release onto the American market, it was one of his most cherished paranoid fantasies that he would have to go to prison for what he had written. Punishment enough, perhaps, that it was banned beyond the boundaries of France for the next thirty years, and when fame finally arrived, Miller would be too old and too wary to enjoy it.
The crimes of *Tropic of Cancer* alleged over the next eighty years are various, notably formlessness, and the rash of four-letter words that pit the surface of the otherwise eloquent text like a kind of punctuation. Its characters are unashamedly self-absorbed and hopeless, living the lives of scroungers and scoundrels. But the major assault continues on the dignity of sexual relations, reduced to sordid and one-sided tussles between horny men and ‘fuckable cunts’.
That Miller’s narrator utters such insults in a tone of amused indifference rather than hostility or aggression seemed only to rile the feminists further. Kate Millett in the early 1960s decried the image of women in the book as worthless objects, used and abused for the man’s pleasure and too stupid even to know it. Miller, she said, articulated ‘the disgust, the contempt, the hostility, the violence and the sense of filth with which our culture, or more specifically, its masculine sensibility, surrounds sexuality.’ And this criticism of the book has riled or been satisfactorily answered. ‘Why do men revel in the degradation of women?’ Jeanette Winterson asked, writing about the book in the York Times Sunday Review in 2012. Why indeed? But when a man makes unprovoked attacks on the image of womanhood, it’s always worth taking a good look at his mother.

‘It’s as though my mother fed me a poison, and though I was weaned young the poison never left my system,’ Miller wrote in Capricorn. Louise Miller was a loveless woman, a strict disciplinarian and a tyrant when crossed or thwarted. She came from a puritanical family with a strong work ethic, but this had not meant security. When she was twelve, her mother had been taken away to the asylum, leaving Louise to bring up her sisters (who would also have breakdowns in time). The authority she wielded was still composed of childish strategies – prolonged rages, violence, a complicated system of irrational rules whose smallest infringement she could not tolerate. Having had to grow up too quickly, she had never grown up at all. She would consult Henry over matters he was far too young to understand. Once she asked him what to do about a wart on her hand and he suggested cutting it off with the kitchen scissors. This she did and subsequently contracted blood poisoning. ‘And you told me to do this?’ she raged at Henry, slapping him repeatedly. He was four years old.

When Henry’s sister, Lauretta, was born, it gradually became apparent that there was something wrong with her. She was a sweet, gentle child but her intelligence never developed beyond that of a nine-year-old. This was something Louise could not accept, and Henry grew to loathe the lessons his mother attempted to give her, which are
frustration and lengthy beatings. In his early years, Henry overcompensated for Lauretta, showing off his ability to recite dates and tables to entertain and distract his mother, and defuse her wrath. But the effort soon began to seem greater than the reward; whatever he did it was not enough to save his sister. So he rebelled. He acted up in school and fought against all kinds of discipline. And at home, he discovered a way of hypnotising himself that helped him escape from the ugly scenes. It would prove useful in other problematic relationships, though it looked from the outside like callousness. In time it would become coldness, hardness, the chip of ice in the heart that Graham Greene said all authors needed to keep their minds free from emotion. Henry Miller would come to provide a perfect example of both a life and an oeuvre in which that icy chip...
Young Henry was attracted to anarchy, but he was sensitive and afraid of fights, qualities he would seek to overcome or hide for the rest of his life. He was growing up in an age that celebrated virile masculinity as hard as possible, with Teddy Roosevelt as the romanticised poster boy. Henry had a tendency to idolise any man involved in an aggressively aggressive profession – boxers, soldiers and con men were all high on his list.

Was this because his own father was the embodiment of weakness? Heinrich Miller was a tailor and an alcoholic, of the sodden sort rather than the violent. He avoided home as much as possible, often fleeing
he had with Louise over the dinner table still gave Henry a nervous reaction that made him gag on his food. Henry was packed off to the Sunday-school sponsored Boys’ Brigade, which promised all sorts of soldierly activities. He was delighted with the exercises and the mock battles, but dreaded the moment when members ‘reported for duty’, which involved being taken by the Major into his office and sat on his lap to be fondled. Eventually boys complained and the Major was ousted in disgrace.

This was the crazily gendered world that Henry grew up in, a world in which his mother was the strongest, fiercest and scariest person he knew. It was a world that impressed on men the importance of virility, but the men held up as real role models for Henry were a sad old soak and a paedophile. Being manly was the American imperative and Henry longed to be it, but what did it mean? It couldn’t be about hard graft – that took him too close to his mother. And pattern emerged that for Henry, manliness was about freedom from conventional morality. It was about absolute autonomy. It was about surrounding himself with other hapless male souls and accepting their flaws unconditionally.

But what was he to do about his own gentle, sensitive side? The conflict in his personality would prove deeply problematic when it came to sexual relationships. The writer who would be hailed as the Grand Old Man Of Sex fell in love with his first serious passion at sixteen, a pretty young woman called Cora Seward. Every night for four years he would excuse himself after dinner to walk past her house, never pausing to call at the door. That was the extent of his respectful adoration, and also the extent of his fear. Unable to approach his ‘angel’ he went to the whorehouse instead and got himself a dose of the clap. Henry’s attitude to sex was mired in the 19th century, in that torrid hothouse atmosphere of right and wrong, good and bad. When the cool, sweeping winds of 20th-century freedom rushed up to meet it, something tempestuous was bound to result.

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It was late summer in 1923 when Henry walked into Wilson's dance hall near to Times Square. He was 31. He had come for the taxi-dance, a soft form of prostitution where ten cents could buy a man a dance with the girl of his choice, and his own powers of persuasion with the rest. Miller had a wife and a small child, but the relationship was in the final stages of collapse. ‘From the day we hitched up it was a running battle,’ Henry would later write. He had married because he wanted to avoid conscription but his new wife, Beatrice, brought the battle to the domestic front, nagging Henry to get a job and keep it and do the things a husband should. If there was one thing Henry dealt with badly, it was being told what to do. The man he had become in that relationship was no one to be proud of; he was cruel and insulting to Beatrice, self-centred and reckless. He badly wanted an escape route but his congenital passivity prevented him from finding one.

He noticed a woman walking towards him across the dance hall.
woman with a full figure, blue-black hair framing her pale face and brilliant eyes. ‘The whole being was concentrated in the face,’ Henry later wrote. ‘I could have taken just the head and walked home with it; I could have put it beside me at night, on a pillow, and made love to it.’ She was ‘America on foot, winged and sexed.’ She was, in fact, Juliet Edith Smerth from Austria-Hungary, an emotionally unbalanced fantasist, earning what living she could with her body and funding a drug habit. She undoubtedly had tremendous allure, but the gap between what she was and what Henry wrote about her shows the extent of the myth-making, the psychodrama and the sheer power he would invest her.

June Mansfield (she made the name up for Henry on the spot) longed to be immortalised in art, and Henry longed for a muse to validate his unproven literary talents. This was what they would ultimately get from each other, although it would cost Henry an acrimonious divorce from Beatrice, and seven years of suffering in this new marriage. ‘She put him through the tortures of hell,’ said Alfred Perlès, one of Henry’s closest friends, ‘but he was masochistic enough to enjoy it.’

From the beginning, June offered Henry the sort of adrenaline- and sex-fuelled excitement he’d thirsted for in his empty life. On their first date in the taxi home, June insisted they were being followed by gangsters, and this set the tone for the drama and the elaborate ruses she believed in Henry’s ability to write and insisted he stop work to devote himself to art. Henry was keen and June determined, but there was the slight problem of no funds. There followed a long period of odd, short-lived and demeaning jobs, including a speakeasy that eventually foundered. That they were incapable of making money during Prohibition says a lot about their business acumen.

What June really liked but Henry didn’t, was what she called ‘golddigging’. This involved June hustling men who were willing to pay cash for any sort of cover scheme that meant they could spend time with her. June often tried to assure Henry that sex was not part of the deal and Henry did his best to believe this. But biographer Mary Dearborn
argued that ‘Jealousy was the glue of their relationship and June made sure to give him ample cause for it. [...] She surrounded chaos, and Miller thrived on it. And she kept the relationship, always, at a fevered pitch.’

Inevitably things soured. There was so little money, Henry's writing was going nowhere and ratcheting up tension caused its own problems. One day June brought home a disturbing puppet with violet hair and a black sombrero. He was called Count Bruga and symbolised trouble. Not long afterwards the woman who had made the puppet arrived too. Jean Kronski was a real genius, June said, with clear implications. She had been admitted to Bellevue for observation, but the doctors had agreed to release her if June would stand as guardian; cheerir
about an impending houseguest.

Other men might have fled the camp, or refused to play along, but Henry was too emotionally entangled and too passive. So he became an unwilling witness to his wife’s infatuation with another woman, and June and Jean were able to crank up the madness in their folie à trois. They lived in squalor, washing dishes in the bath, using dirty clothes for towels, the floor strewn with plaster of Paris and rubbish. June airily discarded all suggestions she was a lesbian, but Henry had been ousted from her bed and Jean was now in it. He made scenes. He made a half-hearted suicide attempt. He took to his bed for ten days (though he was reading Proust). The more uptight he became, the more bohemian and cruel June acted.

There was a protective split opening up in Henry’s character over this time. He was bitterly humiliated by his wife’s behaviour, not least because her relationship with Jean attacked him right where it hurt, in his tentative sexuality. The lack of money and the failure were desperate blows to his self-esteem and he was beginning to loathe America and all it stood for – the work ethic, the commercialism, the disinterest in art. And yet, that chip of ice in his heart was doing its job. When he wrote begging letters to his friends signed ‘the Failure’, he carefully stored the carbon copies, optimistically hoping that posterity would need them. In Nexus, the autobiographical novel he later wrote of this period in his life, ‘Mona’ (June) tells the narrator:

‘You look for trouble. Now don’t be offended. Maybe you need to suffer. Suffering will never kill you, that I can tell you. No matter what happens you’ll come through, always. You’re like a cork. Push you to the bottom and you’ll rise again. Sometimes it frightens me, the depths to which you can sink. I’m not that way. My buoyancy is physical, yours is… I was going to say spiritual but that isn’t quite it. It’s animalistic.’

He may have been lost in emotional chaos, but Henry was following his lodestar. ‘It knows that all the errors, all the detours, all frustrations will be turned to account,’ Miller wrote in
born a writer one must learn to like privation, suffering. Above all, one must learn to live apart.’ He got to do just that when he returned home one day and found a note on the kitchen table, telling him that June and Jean had sailed for France. Not only had his place in June’s heart, she’d hijacked his cherished dream of escape, too. June would return in a couple of months with determined Henry should see Paris, but he could not foresee this. Instead, he broke every piece of furniture in the apartment and alarmed the landlady with his howling. When the initial despair passed, Henry realised that this was something he could write about; he describes sitting down and taking notes. He had been following his instincts, but now illumination came to him: the brutality, the humiliation, the intense misery and the deprivation was the best one that had ever been given to him. It would take many years to put that story into words, but the revelation was important. From now on, Henry knew that his own life would become his art.

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The transformation that Paris effected on Henry’s writing style was little short of miraculous. In America he’d been trying to shoehorn his anarchic outlook into the sort of 19th-century fictional models favoured by his literary heroes, Knut Hamsun, Theodore Dreiser and Dostoyevsky, and the contrast was awkward and false. Just as his passive personality did not fit the go-getting attitude popular in America, neither did his coarse and chaotic style. ‘There was a retirement about the idea of literature, a sort of salon atmosphere, which Miller feared would never be able to accommodate a rude voice like his,’ writes biographer, Robert Ferguson. Once he left it all behind, Henry realised how suffocated he had been.

In Paris, he was able to give in to his instincts, which Ferguson describes as ‘those of a film producer whose consciousness was actually a machine for assembling a cast, picking the locations and taking notes for the script of a major production.’ Eye-catching Paris offered him visual riches; grubby, valiant, warm-hearted Paris, full of losers and eccentrics,
where there was even a place for a prostitute with a wooden leg, as Miller would memorably describe. The literature of France had already embraced the poor, sordid aspects of existence: Zola had described his whores with intense pity, and now Henry could come about them with an ex-pat’s pride, as the kind of landmark that would be extraordinary back home, but which he now took in his stride.

Freed from the mesmerising chaos of June, Henry woke up; he looked and listened carefully. ‘Hearing another language daily sharpens your own language for you, makes you aware of shades and nuances you never expected,’ he would later tell an interviewer for the Paris cafe, 1930s

He had fallen by chance into exactly the right practice exercises. Writing to Emil Schnellock he enthused that ‘In a letter I can breeze along and not bother to be too careful about grammar, etc. I can say Jesus when I like and string the adjective out by the yard.’ His new friend, Michael Fraenkel, read one of the manuscripts he’d brought from America and advised him to tear it up. He told Miller to write as he spoke and as he lived.

Henry then found a way to convey the hallucinatory vividness of the life
he was living. He had gone to the movies and seen the avant-garde film of the moment, *Un Chien Andalou* by Luis Bunuel and Salvadore Dali. The film made ‘a lasting impression on him’, according to Frederick Turner, author of a study on the genesis of *Tropic of Cancer*. Turner was intrigued by its formlessness, its sudden, jolting scenes of cruelty, which felt as if the artists were mysteriously inflicting these on audiences conditioned to regard movies as a passive form of entertainment. Paris was high on crazy artworks where there were no limits, where cruelty was all the rage, and suddenly, Henry fit right in; he loved forcing readers to accept unpalatable truths. He began to conceive of a new kind of book, one based on his experiences in France, and he wrote excitedly to Schnellock ‘I start tomorrow on the Paris book: First person, uncensored, formless – fuck everything!’

Paris even helped him find the right mindset to deal with the failures of the past and the uncertainties of the future. It was here that he discovered the *Tao Te Ching*, whose philosophy of going with the flow and accepting all the confusion and sorrow as essential aspects of existence offered him exactly the even-tempered fatalism that chimed with his heart. That chip of ice was beginning to look like wisdom. For the first time he was given permission not to wallow in failure but to look at it squarely as necessary, unavoidable, and beyond judgement. When he came to write about it in *Tropic of Cancer*, he took it a twist further, producing a book that was a tenderly satirical celebration of the very worst in humanity.

There was of course one more thing Henry would need to write his book, and that was money. One of his survival tactics in the early days was to exchange a bed for the night for housekeeping services, and this he did with Richard Osborn, an American lawyer working for the National City Bank by day and fancying himself a bohemian writer at night. Osborn introduced Henry to his boss’s wife, Anaïs Nin, and the two quickly became infatuated with each other’s minds, bonding over a shared interest in D. H. Lawrence.

Miller knew he was punching above his social weight. Anaïs was...
properly exotic and genuinely cultured, having been born in Paris and lived in New York and Cuba. She also wanted to write, of a dominantly erotic nature, one fuelled by desire and curiosity, not like June’s, in order to pay the rent. Instead, she started giving Henry books, then paying his train tickets and slipping him 100 francs in an envelope. June, visiting Henry in Paris, wanted to see this magical mentor, and there was an instant attraction between these two women who both liked to play the alpha female. Anaïs was alert to all that was alluringly perverse in June’s nature, and once again Henry was shunted to one side while two women circled each other.
This time, though, June could not be tempted into a relationship with Nin. ‘Anaïs was just bored with her life, so she took us up,’ she would later claim, and Nin would call it ‘the only ugly thing I have ever heard her say.’ June became, instead, a catalyst between Anaïs and Henry, as they endlessly discussed her and dissected her mystique. The balance of the relationship with June was changing, though, for Henry was falling hard for Nin. He blamed this latest humiliation on June, whilst Anaïs, who had in fact attempted all the seducing, could do no wrong.

Henry wrote breathlessly to Schnellock, ‘Can’t you picture what it is to me to love a woman who is my equal in every way, who nourishes and sustains me? If we ever tie up there will be a comet let loose in the world.’ This time June fought and made the scenes to no avail. She returned, defeated, to America in a split that would be definitive, and Henry and Anaïs became lovers. Passion was the last alchemical element Henry needed, and once with Nin he found he was writing swiftly and well, producing a bold, innovative, painfully honest, surprisingly funny book.

Miller took all that he’d been through in Paris and transformed it into something coherent and artistically shapely. Later in life he would call himself the ‘most sincere liar’, which is a fine description of any fiction writer. He took the people he’d been living with and gave them fictional names whilst enhancing the worst parts of their personalities; he took the real places that he’d been and described them through the vocabulary of decay and disease. But most of all he used that chip of ice to take an emotional step backwards and infuse his narrator’s voice with tender and amused acceptance of everything he saw. This happy absence of judgement upon a life of squalor lived without dignity made the novel endearing to readers who had suffered intolerable humiliations of their own. *Tropic of Cancer* offers a powerful affirmation of the strength of the human spirit, even in the most depressing and hopeless of conditions.

But this was in some ways incidental to Henry’s preoccupation with writing an entirely new kind of manliness, which involved
himself with hapless males and regarding their faults with indulgence. ‘I just want to be read by the ordinary guys and liked by them,’ Miller wrote to Schnellock. One of the flaws he portrays in his ordinary guys is the way they have sex on the brain but lack the emotional intelligence, the class and the courage to have anything like a real relationship. Take for example his friend, Carl, pondering the ethics of becoming involved with a rich older woman he’s not attracted to:

‘But supposing you married her and then you couldn’t get a hard on any more – that happens sometimes – what would you do then? You’d have to eat out of her hand like a little poodle dog. You’d like that, would you? Or maybe you don’t think of everything… No the best thing would be to marry her and then get a disease right away. Only not syphilis. Cholera, let’s say, or yellow fever. So that if a miracle did happen and your life was spared you’d be a cripple for the rest of your days. Then you wouldn’t have to worry about fucking her any more… She’d probably buy you a fine wheelchair with rubber tires and all sorts of levers and whatnot.’

Or the dastardly Van Norden, a man who defiles everything he touches, terrified at being so continually abandoned in the trenches:

‘For a few seconds afterwards I have a fine spiritual glow… and maybe it would continue that way indefinitely – how can you tell? – if it weren’t for the fact that there’s a woman beside you and then the douche bag and the water running… and all those little details that make you desperately selfconscious, desperately lonely. And for that one moment of freedom you have to listen to all that love crap… it drives me nuts sometimes…’

Erica Jong, writing in fierce defence of the book, argues that Cancer works with the same principles as feminist literature, ‘the same need to destroy romantic illusions and see the violence at the heart of heterosexual love.’ And it’s true that the characters in the book are rigorously stripped of pretension and the dishonest flourishes of ego, vanity and pride. The point of plumbing the depths
condition is at least in part to clear away all illusion and delusion, for Miller believed that idealism had damaged the world far more than any acceptance of our base physicality might, and that this idealism affected far more than mere sexuality.

In one of the defining anecdotes of *Tropic of Cancer*, the narrator escorts a young and inexperienced Hindu man to the local brothel. In nervous confusion he uses the bidet as a toilet, horrifying the Madame and her girls and embarrassing himself. But the narrator, unfazed as ever, sees universal significance in the incident of an uncommon kind. The basic problem of life, he says, is that 'Everything is endured – disgrace, humiliation, poverty, war, crime, ennui – in the belief that overnight something will occur, a miracle, which will render life tolerable'. Such a belief flies in the face of reality and demands an arresting rebuttal.

'I think what a miracle it would be if this miracle which man attends eternally should turn out to be nothing more than these turds which the faithful disciple dropped in the bidet. What if at the last moment, when the banquet table is set and the cymbals clash, there should appear suddenly and wholly without warning, a silver platter on which even the blind could see that there is nothing more, nothing less, than two enormous lumps of shit.'

The very structure of the joke – the enormous disparity between transcendental miracles and shit – gives away the subtle, underlying structure of the book. It's the gap between the outspoken dreadfulness of Miller's characters and our desire to identify with noble, sympathetic figures that is at once so awful and so funny, just as the expletives jar the beauty of the language, and the insulting attitude the male characters assume towards women is a lame stab at covering up their obsessive need for them, a need which rings out in the narrator's lament for the woman he adored and who has returned to America without him:

'I couldn't allow myself to think about her very long; if I had I would have jumped off the bridge. [...] When I realize that she is gone forever, a great void opens up and I feel I am falling, falling, falling into...
deep, black space. And this is worse than tears, deeper than pain or sorrow; it is the abyss into which Satan was plunged; there is no climbing back, no ray of light, no sound of human voice or hand.’

It was this familiar existential crisis – the pain of the mismatch between human aspirations and desires and the wholly insufficient reality that has to be accepted in their place – that finally formed the mainspring of Miller’s creativity.

The literary insight of the novel didn’t stop *Tropic of Cancer* smuggled out of France by tourists for the next thirty years as the ultimate dirty book; sex sells but it also blinds. The book’s reputation rode far in advance of any reading that took place, and its tendency to stir strong emotions and ridicule with keen precision the most sensitive issues precluded much in the way of critical appraisal. It was a book that readers loved or hated, with their guts.

Nowadays the history of its suppression and the crude portrayal of women win all the headlines, but the real story of the book concerns the dominance of the women who provoked and created it: Henry’s fearsome mother, his sweet, crazy sister, his troublesome muse, June, and the book’s midwife, Anaïs Nin, who put up the money needed for publication. The book is an act of self-assertion that couldn’t help but reveal both the depths of his dependency on women, and the force of his resistance.
Notes on Sources

I am indebted in this essay to three masterly accounts of Miller's life: Mary Dearborn’s *The Happiest Man Alive* (HarperCollins, 1991), Robert Ferguson’s *Henry Miller: A Life* (Hutchinson, 1991) and Frederick Turner’s brilliant and detailed account of Miller’s creativity, *Renegade: Henry Miller and the Making of Tropic of Cancer* (Yale University Press, 2012). Also unmissable on Henry Miller’s life is Henry Miller. *Tropic of Capricorn* (1939), *Nexus* (1960) and contributed to my understanding and remain extraordinary writings on the borderline of fiction and autobiography. Finally, Kate Millett’s essay on Miller in *Sexual Politics* (Virago, 1977) and Erica Jong’s *The Devil at Large* are, respectively, a fine critique and a fine tribute from the other side of the gender divide.
Victoria Best taught at St John's College, Cambridge for 13 years. Her books include: Critical Subjectivities; Identity and Narrative in the work of Colette and Marguerite Duras (2000), An Introduction to Twentieth Century French Literature (2002) and, with Martin Crowley, The New Pornographies: Explicit Sex in Recent French Fiction and Film (2007). A freelance writer since 2012, she has published essays in Cerise Press and Open Letters Monthly and is currently writing a book on crisis and creativity. She is also co-editor of the quarterly review magazine Shiny New Books. http://shinynewbooks.co.uk

A Conversation with Grant Maierhofer | Interview — Germán Sierra
In a recent article published in 3AM Magazine, Grant Maierhofer explains his personal experience of reading Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake*. “Reading FW,” he explains, “is a bodily thing, and strangely so. I tend to find I’ll begin with resistance, misunderstanding every letter until suddenly a dreamy rhythm overtakes me and I’m able to stomach paragraphs in breaths. I’ll often slow to crawls in turn and view the pages as discrete, concrete passages rendered as micro- and macrocosms of poring and slackjawed stupor alike. The text seems to work on these levels because Joyce had thought the bulk of his life about what printed text might venture to do.” “I read Finnegans Wake,” he continues, “as an ode to forms, forms explored by Joyce referenced throughout the text; forms shattered and useless to traditional interpretive means by intuitive, experimental—almost spiritually so—pages of linguistic fire simultaneously enacting and subverting their own interpretation; and forms Joyce still saw as viable means of depicting, defining, and recording human experience in a language at once the stuff of dreams, Esperanto, and music to which, I’ll agree, all art aspires.”

Reading and writing are, in fact, bodily things, although not many writers are fully aware of that. I would say that the great experimental and underground literary traditions—what Ronald Sukenick touted “the rival tradition”—are, at least in part, an attempt to re-embody the literary practice. Kathy Acker and Dennis Cooper—two of the authors often mentioned by Grant Maierhofer—are recent wonderful examples of this kind of stylistic exploration.
“This work will be a nightmare. You are no detective”—says an anonymous patient in *Flamingos*. It comes as no surprise that the most accurate words I’ve read about *Flamingos* thus far were by the Swedish-American poet and translator Johannes Goransson, theorizing about the new “rhetorical punk” styles (using Porta’s term) he names “atrocity kitsch.” “This is a noir without the proper detective to piece back together the crime and its narrative”—writes Goransson—“This is self-surveillance under the influence of drugs, art, poetry. Without the narrative cure, the sick.” *Flamingos’s* characters embrace the impossibility celebrate the sudden joy of recognizing this impossibility into art. Art starts when you accept that, as Joyelle Mc “nothing can be undone, but everything can be done “the Artist cannot remove him or herself from the econc Vulnerability to Art is Vulnerability to Violence; that’s wh means: the ability to be wounded, to bear the mark o suffer malignancy, and to issue malignant substances.” [1]

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**Germán Sierra (GS):** One of the first things that called *Flamingos*—maybe because I have been recently doing the topic—was its performative structure. Later, I read interesting research notes on *Flamingos* in *Necessary Fiction* want “an art a bit like life and stripped of tendencies toward understanding, the body and head rendered in text — a performative thing.” I of performance is very important in your work, and it evident in *Flamingos*. In my view, *Flamingos* could be pe as a play—there’s even a *Dramatis Personae* list at which the characters project themselves on a group background. This creates a flexible environment (much l environments) where fragments might work as monologues but they might also contain dialogues wit You said that the book started with disparate elements how did you came up with its final structure?
Grant Maierhofer (GM): This book took very different forms during its editing, and even really composition. I was working with smaller pieces in part because I’ve had an ongoing fascination with the fragment as a potent literary form, especially these days. As a result of this, the larger form would change depending on which fragments in which voice or register were working well. The two big influences early on were Ronald Sukenick and Kathy Acker, with Acker’s *Empire of the Senseless Florida* offering an ideal reference point for these shifting, therapy-tinged voices. It wasn’t until I solidified a publisher version, though, that the bigger structure became apparent. My publisher, Christopher Stoddard, offered to have me work with Travis Jeppessen on bringing these disparate parts together for coherence, a finished book. What I had were pages of documents, the Flamingo sections written on neon index cards, others written on my phone or saved as separate chunks in Word, of how it fit to me but little desire to give it what seems a more traditional structural spine, removing this cast of voices and their relationship to one another—something about the final about, did not want to remove. So Travis, over the course of having conversations, would argue from a reader’s desire for some coherence to these voices. The result, then, is my attempt to respond to him and any potential reader while hopefully holding onto the performative energy not only of composing, but of the relationships these voices—their passing referenced, syntactic disruption, etc.—have within the text. I think of Samuel Fuller’s *Shock Corridor*, or Lynne Tillman’s *American Genius*, or Firestone’s *Airless Spaces*. These are compelling to me because they’re overwhelming, and in many ways they’re overwhelming because you have disparate, perhaps opposed, voices or perspectives or even sentences clawing at and over one another for an audience’s time. To me, these seem like somewhat performative concerns. A writer generates something, hopefully to some degree indicative of the hell of being alive these days and making sense of the sea of information. A reader takes this in, and hopefully in that transmission perspective is gained, a quiet amid screams, or even a context for screaming. My favorite writers enact something on this order, I think.
musicians, painters, filmmakers. The final form, if something like a chorus of escapees from modern life smear themselves and carving diagnoses on walls. How close is impossible to know, but this was my hope.

GS: Yes, I understand your process very well, as I usually work with originally separate fragments too. In my last novel, *Standards* more time on trying to find the “right order” for the fragments—which, from the beginning I knew it wasn’t the chronological one—than on writing them. The initial references you mention, Ron Sukenick and Kathy Acker, have been also very important to me. I’m especially happy to see Sukenick in this context, as I believe that, unlike Acker, he’s kind of in oblivion now. In my opinion, he deserves more attention. Some of his work is available online, but I’d like to see his books republished. Getting back to *Flamingos*, I like very much your image of a “context for screaming”—I believe this is a quite good definition of what experimental fiction has been pursuing for a while now, it’s harder to develop such a context in literature than in arts, where experimentation and risk have been historically appreciated. But I agree with you on the idea that we’re in a very special moment for literature, much like it happened from the late 70s to the early 90s when postmodernism mutated into avant-pop. Literary use of language is becoming “counter-spectacular” as a way to provide alternatives to the “reality-as-show” we’re living through queerness, radical weirdness, particularly in *Flamingos*, madness. In my view *Flamingos* recovery of the de-territorializing power of madness which had been recently re-territorialized by neuropharmacology and neuroscience: the therapy-gone-wrong framework works as a performative representation of our current society as spectacle-gone-wrong. This brings us back to Foucault and Deleuze, of course, but also to Beckett, Ionesco and Jarry. And it seems of particular importance in a moment when “reason” is often presented as “software for the show,” as something quantifiable that could be “traded.”

GM: Absolutely. Your initial comment, too, feeds this large
attempting to represent what’s been used as a limiting category, madness, in a (hopefully) more fluid way. I would feel awful if characters, or voices, or moments in Flamingos were easily quantifiable by diagnoses, and I think this is where literature presents unique opportunities that don’t exist as readily in other art forms. For example, Bowie, for example, queered our sense of what the rockstar could be, but it required the extra performative dimension for this to fully resonate—he had to appear. The book is dedicated to Nick Blinko because Rudimentary Peni is one of the best musical iterations of the madness of living I can think of, and yet the feeling of listening to something, is far different from reading the mania encased in The Primal Screamer, and it’s that difference I hope to pay attention to. I think of pure theoreticians working against heteronormativity versus the experience of reading The Letters of Mina Harker, in one sense a novel that chronicles a marriage between a male and female, queers the institution of marriage far better than pure theorizing—leaving in the mess of days, of lived experience. Somewhere, it might be included in James Miller’s biography, Foucault talked about seeing the work he did as closer to fictive, creative work. Sitting in archives and sifting through documents much like Kathy Acker did reams to counter the force of history. That slippage, that pure theorizing and enacting experience, performative language and experimentation therein, is why I increasingly important in our time. It simultaneously off reading notoriously dense theorists who worked against institutions, and new applications for reading more akin performed art—relentless concerts that tear into the head, witnessing live artworks that ruin the artist like the early Throbbing Gristle/COUM Transmission stuff.

There’s been a long tendency of merely aping those before. Duchamp talked about this somewhere, that artists might be better off pulling from random eras and movements—Brion Gysin’s idea of writing being about fifty years behind painting, etc.—and I find that very important. Not all writers or readers are engaging in the established traditions of literature as defined by institutions.
dominated by heterosexual white men, and I’m of the view that the work is being done against this. Read whatever you like, of course, but I think it highly important that at least some work attempts to bury any sense of an established canon. For me, that has meant seeking inspiration elsewhere, and the experience has proven the more fulfilling.

I think that what Sukenick did, and those aligned with him who followed at FC2, in turn, is probably the most interesting wave in American literature to yet occur, and all of it seems bound up in what I’ve just (poorly) attempting to state. I don’t know or care whether people will read those rather niche texts for fifty, one hundred years, because to me they’ve already reframed my sense of a culture and shaped my worldview. In some sense, that makes them even more compelling. We can read about the Black Mountain College for instance, and feel completely lost in what seems an important academic/arts experiment in the 20th century, while other students and teachers existed at other colleges and movements never knowing about or at least acknowledging its existence. We’ll always have documentation of this sort of thing, and I believe it’ll always find some audience, but it seems quite plausible they be avid devotees and small movements like punk weaned to arena rock or something in its heyday. Nostalgia will always magnify it in turn, but nostalgia’s a toxic thing. I dunno, I veered off a bit there. These are the things I find compelling and why, maybe.

GS: Yes, I agree with you on the toxicity of nostalgia, this also points to the need to find different ways to think the past, more in the “archaeological” or “genealogical” mode like Foucault did. I find that many contemporary novelists are approaching the past probably also because we’re living in very “aesthetically undefined” times, and we need to borrow aesthetical references from the past—avant-garde, modernity, post-modernity… Returning to in Flamingos (and your previous books), one thing I like about them is that they’re allowed—they allow themselves—to be wrong. I believe this is a very important feature in our days—when most people with dichotomies such as truth/post-truth or facts/a
Actually, I find that the power of punk (and madness) resides in accepting the likeliness to be wrong but going ahead anyway—the “you-don’t-need-to-know-how-to play” thing, just jump on stage and do your best. In *Flamingos* everybody seems to admit being wrong—even Simon, the therapist, seems aware of being playing a role: “And I taught them. And I did not.” This is significant because, in my view, the most important thing for keeping a “sustainable” community is not truth, but trust. It’s possible to trust someone even thinking they might be wrong, and this is the essence of community and also the cognitive basis for a healthy skepticism. As Fernando Colina—a Spanish psychiatrist—wrote: “Reason is never there, reason is always about to come.” So maybe the punk gesture means that now: allowing yourself to be wrong to be able to catch reason as it arrives.

**GM:** I’m very interested in all of this, in part because my approach when writing anything has usually been one of immersion. I want to immerse myself in a voice, a worldview, a location, whatever. I don’t necessarily hope to find something close to Truth. I hope to enact something, to offer something, and I think community is a closer notion to it than artistic truth or even coherence. Possibility among individuals. Trust in that possibility. All of this is making me think of Vito Acconci. He started as a writer. Went to the best-known U.S. MFA program and wound up leaving to create situations and performance art, and thereafter to create very community-centric works of architecture and sculpture. He’s indicated that he did this because a growing dissatisfaction with the page as an art space. For me, for all of my dissatisfaction, the page is still my favorite space and words and other materials therein to transmit meaning still pull me more than anything else.

I think characters or even works remaining open to wrongness is fundamental. If I didn’t feel this way I might engage in language through poetry alone, or nonfiction alone, but the assumed relationship to readers is precarious from the beginning, skeptical from the beginning, so there’s a good deal that can be done in terms of empathy, identification, or even anger or outright rejection of characters. I was very interested in this early on, I t
started writing while in rehab, and continued as a sort of breather from AA and NA and the like. In there I’d find myself telling stories depending on mood, or circumstance. Say I’m in a room with working-class older alcoholics in rural Minnesota, and I know I need to talk about anxiety. I might talk about the same situation as I’d discuss for addicts under 25, but it’ll be adjusted due to circumstance, and to speak to my anxiety where possible. I’m performing, then. Not dishonest really but calibrated so that I might get the most from a meeting. Emphasize relationships and trust in therapy if that’s pressing on me. Emphasize relapse if I’m losing my footing and can’t identify and offer insight. It wasn’t as conscious as it sounds in retrospect, but it was all unquestionably bound up in how I started writing and came to need literature and art.

I started based on feeling, and need. Elias Tezapsidis talked about *Persistence of Crows* and how it didn’t seem written for readers. I think that’s probably true, as most of my early writing was based on an urge to just occupy a mindset for X amount of time and see it transmitted to a measurable form, be it a book, or the early stories from whatever. These characters could be wrong, then, or just buried in flaws and even total ignorance. They weren’t created as tools, or at least not pawns, but responses to a loneliness, a desire to open my head up.

After this I discovered writers like Christine Schutt, Brian Evenson, Maggie Nelson and more, so my concerns became more formal and structural. The object became the ideal, I guess, rather than the process and the feelings therein. Being wrong or being flawed is still a priority, as I am a human animal in 2017, but I’m also highly interested in the possibilities offered by fiction, by books, by words offered by other media.

GS: Your new book *GAG* is coming out in April from Inside the Castle. Is it possible to know a little about it?

GM: *GAG* began after my story collection *Marcel* went out of print. I wanted to destroy that, so I took the very first draft of that book and
began cutting it apart. I got rid of huge amounts of that text, filling in the gaps with a narrative that’s sort of a nod to Iain Sinclair’s work, among others. *Marcel* proper is being reissued by Dostoyevsky Wannabe, so making *GAG* into an entirely new animal grew highly important. My process was similar in this to the composition of the PX138 3100-2686 User’s Manual, as indicated in the excerpt “Clog” on Queen Mob’s Teahouse. I would, say, isolate one small section of 100 words or so, inject it with new material, then automatically translate it through Korean translation software or something. Then I’d piece, I’d translate it back so it would be slightly ruined, then put it into a new document. Then I was making collages and warping it through that. Then the publisher would work with me on visual/typographical elements, and over time this new thing was born to do with suburban violence, ruined language, and distributions of power in America’s very problematic state.
It’s been a long time in the making, but I feel very good about *GAG* and the *Manual* that’s coming out on Solar Luxuriance. They’re sister texts, so having them released in the same year is a great
I’ve thought a lot about Dennis Cooper’s work since first discovering it, how he’s basically reshaped the potential of fiction with his GIF novels, and prior to that how *The Marbled Swarm* reworked how language can manipulate and fuck with readers. I wanted to honor his work and incorporate aspects I’ve loved from all of it in one print book. The GIF stuff, his blog, *The Sluts* and *The Marbled Swarm*, many things, an attempt to honor that body of work.

**GS:** It sounds amazing! I just went through the first 20 pages or so in the PDF, and I think I got its feeling very well. I am very interested in this kind of composition processes—I experimented myself with the electronic re-translation of texts in some parts of my 2009 novel “Try Using Other Words.” What I’ve read thus far reminds me the “dismembered” prose of other contemporary writers—besides Dennis Cooper—I now we both admire, like Leslie Scalapino, Blake Butler, Sean Kilpatrick, or the cyberpunk novels by the japanese artist Kenji Siratori. Cooper, of course, deserves special attention. He’s such a extraordinary figure in contemporary American writing, not just for his own work but also because of his continuous support of the underground, punk, or whatever literary scene! We all (not just American writers, but also people like myself who partic kind of writing) should be very grateful for his blog implication with fringe books no matter where they come from. It would be difficult to understand the American literary environ sixty years without the generosity of writers such as him Gordon Lish, Bob Coover…

So you have a lot of books coming out soon! GAG, *P User’s Manual*, and *Drain Songs*, and I’ve read another madness cycle are on the making: *Girnt, Drome and U* looking forward to all of them!

**GM:** I think I began writing as a means of leveling out a certain degree of misery I felt at being alive. Going forward, and because of worldly miseries and the struggles facing everyone, it’s been an odd mixture of wanting solely to champion th
who’ve said and done it better than I ever could, and devoting things myself to attempt to process being alive in terms of what I recognize in the works of others—many you’ve not heard of before, seemed, at least sometimes, to call for responses or corrections I’ve come to appreciate. Jan Ramjerdi’s *Re.La.Vir* and suddenly *GAG*, a manuscript about fucked-up people in basements and assholes in suits controlling them, had a formal sibling. Sometimes it’s tempting to simply review books and point to Cooper, or Ramjerdi, or Delany, or Vollmann, as brilliant examples of what literature can do, can be in response to hellish situations and experiences. Sometimes, though, that temptation is odder, more deeply felt and sometimes even terrifying, and then my own writing seems to happen. I don’t know. If I’ve been productive it’s been the result of this and a good deal of self-hatred, disgust, and hopelessness. As defined earlier, though, I’m more interested in the extreme fringe-punk approaches of groups like Throbbing Gristle, or artists like Tehching Hsieh, who allow the work to ruin them and eat them and harm them in the process, so that the end product looks less like a piece of protest art than *Lucifer Rising*. My writing started more straightforwardly, and I tend to detest my early stuff because of that, but now I’m preoccupied with experience, abstraction, and a kind of deep internal violence that hopefully comes across in these more recent projects.

I was very, very obsessed with Cooper’s George Miles Cycle a few years ago, and even thinking about it now I get caught up in how transformative it was to read those books. As a dreamt of writing a cycle. It wasn’t until *Flamingos* was in a second draft that it became fully clear it could be done, so long as it wasn’t just a bad ripoff of Cooper. Madness, or mental illness, and many of the possible and horrific iterations therein, these are ideas I’m more comfortable engaging with as I’ve spent my life on the often ugly side of these things. Fiction, in turn, seemed like a reasonable way of not speaking as an authority to anyone else’s experiences of these things, so the project has persisted.

I think about Elizabeth Young’s close to her introduction of
Handbag, which, paraphrased, goes something like: I guess if nobody's writing the books I want to read then I'll have to write them. Damn it. That pretty perfectly articulates my state most of the time. I read the work of others I love as much as I can. Sometimes personal or impossible or an idea’s too particular and write as well. That’s more or less how it goes.

**GS:** Your previous book *Marcel* is now being re-issued by Dostoyevsky Wannabe, which also published your poetry collection *C* Flamingos was published by ITNA press, and *GAG* by Inside The Castle. I love your publisher choices, all of them are small and i very well curated, very personal projects. How do you choose your publishers?

**GM:** In a weird way, although many conversations about publishing are despairing, I feel as if we’re living in one of the most plentiful stretches of time for small presses, for publishers and writers interested in the work and the book as object, as performance, things are pretty good and compelling. I’ve found presses willing to embrace uncertainty and experimentation, and really I’ve found them based on seeking writers and artists publishing through them. Inside the Castle reissued *Hour of the Wolf* alongside *Slow Slidings* and *Throw Yourself Out and See If It Makes Me Come*, is one of my absolute favorite things M. Kitchell has yet written. John Trefry’s work as well, and the aesthetic prompts of the press, were as inspiring as synopses for artworks themselves, and I guess that fed into things in turn. Ditto for Dostoyevsky Wannabe, their approach seemed in line with what my favorite writers do. They’ve published heroes of mine like Sean Kilpatrick, Gary Shipley and others, so when I wanted to find a press who’d really be on board for something experimental and fucked like *Grobbing Thistle*, they seemed perfect. Although much of *Marcel* is more straightforward, I feel it fits well with the cassettes DW puts out, and with the additional stories and whatnot it seemed worth reissuing. Another thing is, I have zero interest in what a lot of—especially U.S.—writers seem interested in as far as fame, or even a massive audience for the work. Presses have inspired me just as much
as writers in this regard, with outfits like Cal A Mari Arch
crating incredibly risky, innovative material, doing it touch that furthers the efforts of its writers, but not larger culture of publishing at all, except to push back a you a bit now and again. That interest has led me to write to write, I think, and it’s also led me to the wonderful, outsider publishers I’ve been lucky enough to share with presses, in turn, are usually run by writers, which mi model, I’m not sure. Sometimes it can lead to an excess of dreaming that can’t quite materialize, but often it means that the entire experience is performative, engaged, and shot through with the same desire that inspired the writing in the first place.

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Germán Sierra is a neuroscientist and fiction writer from Spain. He has published five novels—El Espacio Aparentemente Perdido, La Felicidad no da el dinero, Efectos Secundarios, Intente usar otras palabras, and Standards—and a book of short stories, Alto Voltaje. His essays and stories have appeared in Numéro Cinq, Asymptote, The Quarterly Conversation, Queen Mob’s Teahouse, Casper Review, The Scofield, and in more than twenty collective books.

Footnotes  ( returns to text)

My name is Lyle. I’ll leave it at that so far as ID. I’ll go on however to say that, if you’re feeling generous, I may contain multitudes. I may be dense with potential. I’m a failure in so many words. I’m tired of feeling this way and so I’m trying to contain those words myself, to write them out. I want my feelings to be expressed so I might move on from them. I want to put some distance between myself and this place wherein I find myself. Other night I went to the gas station only to find half of my face still caked with black makeup. I live in sorrow. My days are full of thorns, people and bosses. I tend toward the sad, the weary. I’m an avid person though, romantic. I want to contain the world but I would like a womb to contain the world. I should be so lucky.
I think I’ve slept for most of my life. I don’t mean it literally. As I graduated high school, as I saw my youth pass, I had glazed eyes and didn’t care to open them beyond mere ability to see. Sometimes this can happen. Sometimes people aren’t meant to express themselves in any recognizable way. My father was, by and large, this way. He had nasty tendencies, though. He’d hurt my mother loudly. I think this is what happened, anyway. I was sleeping.

Lately I’ve returned. I work now at the high school where I used to hide away. When you’re young everybody’s terrible. When you grow up everything’s terrible. Something changes between these in that things get worse, darker. Mostly, however, they are the same.

Each day I put on gray coveralls that you have seen. I was given to me by an old man. This old man, my predecessor, had lost his wife. His kids were away, succeeding. This old man had lived a full life before this work. Then, losing his wife, his children, he found himself wanting. This old man sought work and found the position he’d occupied for seven years before I took it on. He trained me for a few weeks and then supervised, then left entirely. I think he might be dead.

The cart holds a garbage can that I’ll fill three or four times each day, depending. Kitchen staff attend to their cans and I’m grateful for it. Some days, events or come what may, I might focus primarily on trash. The school isn’t large. It would take an event or more to fill my can beyond three or four times each day, I’m saying. I remember when I was younger, going here, and we’d attempt to fill the can from distances with paper cartridges of milk. These were shaped like ships or small homes. We called them cartridges, and lofted them into the janitor’s can as he’d walk by. Looking back he’d never register this, even once maintaining composure when my cartridge of chocolate milk pelted his chest and landed. I’m now more understanding of his intimacy with death and suffering.
So anyway, I don't live in my father's basement. So anyway, I've got my own place. I'm fairly certain the person who lived here before me was a criminal, a felon. He left quickly and so far as I can tell the rent plummeted. My neighbors pay dearly. I pay a pittance because some crook likely opened his scalp where I eat my dinners. Give and take, sure. I spend my days when not working walking around to grab a pizza, maybe, or Chinese, and sit with it staring off. I'd like to say I appear as some kind of threat. I hate this town, is that's what happens, though. Sometimes people recognize me and laugh. The worst is the high school kids. They'll get pizza themselves, sure. Chinese, whatever. They'll be out to eat and talking, building their lives together. They'll look over and see me, it's often tough to stomach.

Then, after this, then, I'll often try to make for the city. You hope. This town where I work is small but aware enough. They'll see. They'll talk, each and all of them. I'm not a fan of talkers. I'm a fan of light. So what do I do?

In my room I go to the closet. There I've hung them, and others. Most nights I've got these leather pants, sure. I've got my T-shirts. I've got my boots, they shine a bit. I'll put these on and sort of air my hair. Somewhere when I was younger I loved KISS. Now they're just O.K., mostly morons. I think maybe that's where it started, though. So I'll put on black lipstick. I'll put on eye makeup and smear it down. I'll light some Salems and put on my music. I'll put on Pentagram. I'll put on Venom. I'll put on Saint Vitus and sort of air out. I'm tall, you see. My outfit's black. My pants are leather. Living when I live, then, it can be tough to feel free. So where to go? I've found some places. I like the leather bars on karaoke nights. Mostly people there will want a pickup. It's fine, sure. I've made it with men and women. I've dated a bit. I don't go for this, though. I like the sounds. I like to feel a speaker press my
body. Sometimes a burlesque, maybe, but often I’ll worry about teachers on a whim. Bored depressives with throbbers. Have at it, I mean. I’m O.K. with all types. I just want noise.

My favorite kind of blurs the whole bit. These barflies from the ‘70s and ‘80s had taken it upon themselves to give strange metal bands and such their due. Having no patience, however, for meatheads and fascism, they catered to groups of outsiders who’d play pool and come together, take drugs or write their names. A performance endeavor rumored to have been Prince’s tenure at First Avenue, proved too tame, and these life-longers took it upon themselves to keep his assless chaps seat warm. Good citizens, all.

I’d like to state, however, a pressing thing: it took me fucking years to find my way. Where I worked, forget it. You find all sorts of lonely gentlemen after handjobs in parking lots. I partook as I was lonely too, but something always missed. I sat in audiences at drag shows and queer karaoke nights in otherwise square bars with no sense of welcome. I wore out my eyes on the internet until having eventually to masturbate myself to stupor. It took me fucking years.

I used to read a lot about New York and want to go there, before AIDS and before David Wojnarowicz had to sew his lips shut and before the murder and definition and language seeped through everything. I wanted bodies in rooms and their voices muffled against what? A shoulder or bathroom divider. It was my way home of seeking peace I think. I was always performing. I don’t know that this is a bad way to live. We have jobs, right? We have accounts and ways of being sought and keys to apartments and homes. We have children and responsibilities and worlds. I feel that we earn performance through brief stints of fucking in cars, bodies blurring. The more I worked the more I drenched myself in black.
One day in question I had found myself hiding frequently at work. This happened often. I became tired of the same faces staring at me as I pulled their stuffed plastic bottles of trash from drinking fountains and whatever else. I’d clean the bathrooms thoroughly the way from floor to ceiling with bleach and whatever materials I had in decent supply as all of this was fairly unnecessary. Students were superficially disgusting. Teenagers were superficially disgusting. They’d cake layers of themselves onto the tiles but this was easily removed. What I was doing didn’t matter, but looked appropriate enough. I had let life reach me and get to me and all I wanted to do was curl up institutional and weep. I couldn’t weep, though, so I put things off as long as I could to get my work done. I smiled at my boss and I made sure every bathroom looked excessively clean and jotted somewhere that I’d done something of necessity.

At night, however, I might be free. I went to the gas station near me on walking home and purchased a tall can of cheap booze. I don’t often drink before arriving in the city but I was feeling rotten. On arriving home I removed all of my clothes from work. I paced a room smoking and cursing the day before opening my booze. My bathroom is small and dimly lit. My body looks alright in dim light, I’ve hoped. I looked at myself. I pulled my hair back and made lips at myself there in the dingy mirror. I ran my hands up the sides of my frame and felt my ribs, warmed a bit with pleasure or sex. I put liner on my eyes and smeared it down, kissing the mirror and leaving the day’s worker grease. I put black lipstick on and stood briefly on the tub’s ledge pulling on my leathers and a too-small shirt from when I played baseball as a boy. The shirt rose up just above my navel and as I hunched over to pull on boots I felt it stick first then rise above my spine, my lower back. The feeling of new fabric against me that smelled like smoke and perfume was enlivening. I wanted more.
I think about stories I could tell. My father could tell stories, could lie. I wonder about this. What creates a tendency toward fabrication? Is my split a fabrication? Would I be better off in therapy than writing out my thoughts? Where do I start and end of my need for writing is purely selfish? I do not have answers, but in the car I listened to Whitney Houston. I find what I think of as her transmitted vulnerability empowering. I left town and drove to the city amid lights and my can of booze. I’d ease my arm out the window and let it sway on wind. I’d smoke with the other as the can cooled feral. I felt set free. I felt my body boiling up with all the days and the stares of the students and I ran it out my hair, staring at myself in the sundown mirror and the running makeup, performing. I wanted to quiet my head further so on arrival I drank several vodka tonics and sat sneering from the bar. I felt the booze warm my gut and my mood began to lift, yipping maybe toward a nice oblivion as the room filled up with nary clothed bodies kissing and sucking at each other. Men running hands over one another or women twirling hair to rhythms. Everyone reaching some fluidity and pushing to the edges of abject fucking on leather and neon fabrics only to be pulled back. I sat and watched until the pulse of it warmed me over.

I went into the bathroom after writhing against some fleshy bits and denim and found two gentlemen fucking. They were taller, like myself, so it wasn’t much to see them in the stall pressed to the wall and howling. The music in there was slightly quieter and thus I heard their groans as I stared into the mirror and ran the sink to wet my hands. Eventually I noticed someone crouched in the corner and turned to see.
I haven't made a point of meeting many people where I work. I don't care for them nor they I. This is as it is. I am O.K. under these circumstances. This person I'd seen perhaps helping around the office, perhaps guiding buses toward the end of day. I can't and but I knew her and knew her from work. I walked to her, horror peeling the skin of her face back at being alive. I felt out. The swelter of the room became heavy and miserable then. The gentlemen the stall over persisted in their fucking. She didn't seem to register a likeness, a fellowship in being human. I walked to the sink for water and wetted a paper towel, returning a her forehead. Her skin was pale. She was sweating incessantly. She smelled medical. I tried to touch my hand to her cheek to check the temperature there, encourage some level of identification. I stood and she grabbed my wrist and began pulling me toward her. I stood and she came with me. We stood together and she seemed barely to note the gentlemen in the stall near us. I don't know or care much for drugs. I drink and have partaken, little more. This was something horrific. This was all the world pressing at my chest. I felt my fingers. They were dried up. They were shriveled. I couldn't make sense of it. I'd run them under water awhile. I'd been sweating. I felt my chest heave and wanted to collapse. The girl wanted to leave. I could see it. She wouldn't vocalize. She grabbed my wrist again. We walked together through the swelter, the light and drink, until the cold night air shocked something into us. I felt myself coming together. I felt myself falling there, or somewhere, walking toward my car. I vomited there, or somewhere, walking toward my car. I vomited and it hit the knee of my leathers and I only know it in retrospect. She Next day, maybe, I noticed redness there. She was quiet. Her hair was short, brown but slicked in spots against her skull. Her shirt was white and not ripped but mangled against her chest, small gut and arms. She wore a coat and dressed in pants and shoes as if she'd only just left the school to come here. Her hands were shriveled and I felt them abrade my wrist and slither. I suppose she had a car as mine was only caked with my debris.
I don’t remember fucking then. I remember laying back prone on her backseat, our legs however they needed to be there. I remember staring up at the back window and through its fog, its slightly frozen coat and her hands against my ribs. I do not think that she and I in fact fucked. Both of her cold hands, these pressed against the sides of me and held me there, no recognizable sounds. She made groans, sure. She perhaps whispered things against me and sweated through her clothes and mine. I felt the sickness of bile at the back of my throat and through to the next day. I can still feel the cold of her seat against my head. I remember something. I remember the sounds of those gentlemen and wishing life could be that simple. I recognized her and felt pulled to her. I don’t know what my sense of responsibility was that night. I might’ve called 911, though I found no evidence the next day. We might’ve have experienced memory loss. I have missed days of my life, asleep, not caring. I can piece together fragments only. Fragments of her wrists, say. Fragments of her hair and its slickness against my cheek, my mouth. The whispering and grunting at my chest, the howling even. These are my memories. This was an anomalous moment, a night that doesn’t fit. I found myself in complete lack of control and things seemed to spiral out in front of me. Perhaps she wanted to die. Perhaps she’d found that room to hear people fucking nearby so she might die near them. This makes sense to me. I can appreciate this impulse. Perhaps someone drugged her and she barely escaped. I trust the people there but I have a male body and there are differences, bars and clubs vary in degree of insidiousness or threat, perhaps. I’m uncertain how to piece anything together in retrospect. I only remember the window. I only remember the gloss of night and the armor of our coats around us as we held there against whatever death.

I woke with her stomach’s skin against mine, cold but for the small strip where we touched. I worried she was dead, then my head felt like it was being crushed beneath the sea, then a drunken bubble rose and I smelled vomit. I must have spoken with her but all I remember is her mumbling. I must have sat up and tried to figure things out but all that stands out are the lights on driving home. I think I spoke to her. I think I
sat her up and made sure she could function well enough. I would’ve looked for something to straighten her out, a bottle of water or a bit of food. I would’ve tried to do these things. I’m not sure which things I did and didn’t do. I hoped that I did everything. I woke that I did everything.

I don’t know how to advocate or speak for another. I couldn’t have made her situation better or worse. She looked like me: her hair was matted in memory, her clothing a messy sprawl of unkempt materials, all of it looking like escape, the both of us seemingly wanting to flee. I don’t remember what we said or whether we touched more on waking. I don’t remember if she was O.K. that night or what. I can’t remember feeling any relief or vomiting in my walk to my car. I only remember the lights as I began to surface driving across a bridge. I remember sitting at a McDonald’s terribly early and drinking cup after cup of water and coffee, slowly putting myself back together enough to return to my small home and fall asleep caked in sweat and ugly smells until the afternoon.

Later on that week when I saw her outside of school as I walked my can toward the large dumpster I felt nauseous. I doubt if she recognized me. When I woke up from that night and looked in the mirror I might’ve been any anonymous body soaked in strobe and the mud of people. It didn’t matter if she recognized me. I walked by and felt myself return to my youth in that hell and was calm and glazed over by the notion; asleep and it started at the eyes. Bells rang and children abounded. Groups assembled themselves at the doors of classrooms wherein they’d make minor messes throughout the afternoon. That evening two shows were being put on and I was asked to keep things orderly afterward. I’d accepted gratefully as things had felt amiss since waking in that car. I was always fairly close to death, I figure. I had never seen someone OD and this was something to process. I was feeling my whole world curl in on itself and become ruinous. I tended to ruin. I was a ruiner. I moved the can across the sidewalk having left a
numbered door and made my way past the lot of them—filled with people. That night I might dress myself and lie naked to feel my limbs sprawl out. That night I might drink myself stupid and feel aligned with planets. I wasn’t sure. I walked by and felt the identifying touch of stomach as I passed her. Everything seemed O.K. Everything would be O.K. for me in turn. This has always been my problem. These have always been my problems. I am always gnashing my teeth against the low guts of life only to rise again to mediocrity. I await the weekend when I’ll flee.

—Grant Maierhofer

Grant Maierhofer is the author of Postures, GAG, Flamingos and others. His work has appeared in LIT, Berfrois, The Fanzine and elsewhere. He lives and works in Idaho.
Everything is expressed through relationship. only through other colours, dimensi
dimensions, position through other positions ti
That is why I regard relationship as the

Artist Adam Daily works in photography, digital collage, printmaking and painting. You would not look at his works, however, as much of the
creation goes on behind the scenes. Adam defies tradition with computer techniques that are painterly, playful and painting techniques that hide the human hand via perfection. This lends a great deal of mystery and intrigue to the finished works. His methodology is rigorous, his exacting.

—Mary Kathryn Jablonski

Mary Kathryn Jablonski (MKJ): There is a series of your works that I just can’t get out of my head. I am in love with these black and white invented “landscapes” that I consider monotypes, which may in fact not be prints at all, since I recall the surfaces as so mysterious, I couldn’t pin them down at the time. And what I’m really interested to know is how these works relate to your current boldly colored large-scale paintings, which seem quite different.
Adam Daily (AD): I think first of all that the relationship between this body of work that I'm making now and my older body of work is about organized systems. My current work begins as a drawing of a library of shapes, and it all happens digitally. Everything happens in Adobe Illustrator. I will build, say, 10 different shapes, and every one in the same isometric perspective and structure, and every one on the same grid. I then take each shape and produce it in four to eight different colors. So that gives me a grid of shapes to work with. I have say, five different shapes in five different colors. That grid I then use to begin finding both spatial and color relationships between individual forms.

Some of the shapes I use are simple; some are complex. Because they generally all follow the same structure, what I do, through layering and height and location on the x/y axis, is explore the possibilities of these individual units, linking them to create larger units, and I find that space occasionally flattens or opens depending upon the way colors or shapes relate to one another.
I’ve made a system for developing an image, so for my current paintings, it can be an intense process of drawing, editing, revising and producing different versions of these works. That process is very similar to the process of the black and white images I was making earlier. With them, I was building a library of photographs. So instead of an abstract shape, I would take my original photographs of many objects and manipulate them; sometimes to the point where the object turned completely different and unrecognizable; sometimes adjust the contrast or scale. I would then take these photographic pieces, cut them up and reassemble them – also digitally – to create a composite image out of the original images. Through that process, I was trying to think of a place I hadn’t been, and I didn’t have a reference image of that place. So I was trying to build, to imagine, an unknown place from images sourced from my actual surroundings. In
processes utilize this idea of building a library, then ma:
images to form a composition.

**MKJ:** Clearly in both cases it’s a collage process and a dig:
it’s also painterly and printmakerly in some ways as w:
black and white works are treated eventually like monot:
paintings, you’re transferring your image onto the paint:
then you almost approach silkscreen or multi-
techniques, with the application of one color at a time, tr:

**AD:** Right. So after I’ve digitally produced the drawing fo:
work on a sheet of Sintra® PVC Foam Board, which is bri:
that has a very consistent smooth finish. It doesn’t ne:
and it’s a very bright white. I then transfer my drawing
simply using a ruler and very sharp pencil to define the form, and then I do work applying one color at a time. What I do is say, “Okay, let me find all of the areas that will be magenta,” and map those out. One of the most interesting ways that these paintings work, for me, is when there’s a really high degree of precision, so that you get an interesting color interaction where colors are coming together.

I tape off the areas to be painted, and then I use a small automotive spray gun with translucent or transparent acrylic paints. In order to get the color to be as brilliant as possible, I have to apply a thickness across the painting, so that it appears to be a pure color, when in reality it’s just a consistent film over a sheet of white. What this means is that the light will travel through the paint, bounce off the white, come back and be intensely luminous.

In this way, it’s not like a traditional painting process at all. There’s no brush involved, no mixing of paint colors on the surface of the painting. I specifically avoid overlapping any color with another color, to prevent interference. The colors can touch each other, but not overlap, so there’s no color mixing, which would reduce the brilliance of the pigments.

Each shape, as I design it, will have three or more tonalities on it. This idea of isometric perspective and the light falling on the shape gives me these three different tones, and those are generally tints of the original pigment.
One of the things I discovered over time is that for me, making compositional decisions during the painting process hinders my outcome, and making all my compositional decisions beforehand in the digital space allows me to then focus on the manufacturing process so that the image comes out the way I want it to.

**MKJ:** What if there’s an error during the manufacture of an 8 x 8 painting? Are there any changes during the painting process, or would this be cause to discard a piece and start over?

**AD:** Sometimes, obviously, when you make something, you make a mistake, and I have ways of fixing things. When I make a mistake, it doesn’t change the course of the image. I am not making spur-of-the-moment decisions. Decisions made during the painting process are...
entirely color decisions, not compositional. When I make the drawing there are general ideas about color; what color is going to go where. Generally. But specific color is not decided until I mix the pigment. I have systems that I use in order to make this work. An order has to be followed.

MKJ: You’ve called it “methodical, intentional, mechanical.”

AD: And frequently when people see the paintings, they think that the paint is actually pieces of vinyl (or some other material) that have been cut out with a knife and put down. Although taping off a shape and painting it a color is not a new idea and in many ways is not a very interesting idea, these particular materials and this particular way of applying it does leave some doubt as to the manufacturing process.

MKJ: Yes, doubt… or intrigue!

AD: Right. And in all of my works, in the black and white works as well, I’m interested in a piece that is ambiguous as to its manufacture. This is not a painting process. I’ve found that one of the hardest things as a painter, and one of the things that painters do most is make decisions during the painting process. I find that having to make technical, material, compositional and color decisions all at the same time is problematic for me. And that I always inevitably end up building systems for myself.

MKJ: It’s almost mathematical or musical in its devices.

AD: Yes, right. It is. And the compositional process, because the computer, is so fluid, playful and free, there’s no consequence for a mistake. You don’t have to wipe anything off, you don’t have to clean your hands or anything. You can just play for hours upon hours with shapes, and start to find harmonies in shapes and little interactions between forms that spark your imagination, and that gets very exciting. That ability to separate composition from production allows for more complex compositions and a much more refined production process.
MKJ: Let’s go back to the black and white work in compositional process and production process. I have manipulation after the printing, just as with a monotype.

AD: Exactly. This is one of the major differences between the black and white and the color work. Those pieces begin, as I said, with photographs that I manipulate, and I build a composition in this case. And with these, the digital version is very crude; the intersection between objects and the lighting is crude. It looks as though I’m building a seamless imaginary land. It’s not make a print on synthetic paper, basically a sheet of plastic ink jet printer. The paper is very smooth, and again bright white. The print comes out wet. The image can be washed off. It can be scraped, blotted, added to with more ink. And I use a variety of tools — eraser, Q-tip, makeup sponges — to manipulate an image that was crude in the digital and refine it in the physical.

One of the other things that happens is that when an ink jet printer puts down droplets, they typically absorb into the paper with a bit of dot-gain, which means the dots get bigger. In the case of the
because the ink doesn’t absorb, if you get the dots too close together, they form a puddle that’s very, very dark. So what is 80 percent black in the digital version is 100 percent black in the physical version. This results in a higher contrast image, because you’re darkening them. But then, additionally, you get interesting photographic effects in the lighter gray tonalities. You can see subtle tonal changes, something that an ink jet printer can produce effectively, again, without evidence of a human interaction.

So the same questions arise: What would happen if you made this in graphite? If you made it as a litho, what would happen? How do those different processes reveal themselves in the finished product? What is the effect of seeing that process on your interpretation of the image? I like to build a process that is elusive in a way to allow the work to be about the image.

October – *ink on synthetic paper, 44×60 inches*

The black and white images and the large colorful paintings are not only similar in process; they are both about landscape. In the paintings, you are not looking *into* the landscape. In the:
don’t give the illusion of depth, because of the isometric perspective. They actually tilt inward into the space of the viewer. Larger paintings, where the scale of the objects can be bigger than you are, so they interject themselves into the smaller pictures become almost their own internal space. They are smaller than you, but also because of the layering of the shapes you can travel in the picture – not to a horizon line, not to a vanishing point, but sort of in and out of the forms in the picture. So they become “landscape.” They become a place, but that place somehow less recognizable than the place could be in the black and white works. The black and white work is “our” world; the place in the geometric works is a mathematical world, an imagined color space.

Adam Daily is a New York-based artist, designer, and printmaker. He combines digital and handmade processes to create a variety of work. His current body of work explores systems and organizational structures through geometric spatial interactions and dynamic color relationships. His paintings have been exhibited widely in both group and solo exhibitions. In 2011, he was awarded a New York Foundation for the Arts (NYFA) Fellowship in Digital/Electronic Arts. He has had solo exhibitions at Salem Art Works in Salem, NY; Schafer Landing in Williamsburg, Brooklyn; and The Foundry for Art and Design in Cohoes, NY. He recently designed and installed a new large-scale mural for the City of New Rochelle, NY. www.adam-daily.com
A gallerist in Saratoga Springs for over 15 years, visual artist Kathryn Jablonski is now an administrative director in holistic healthcare. She is author of the chapbook *To the Husband I Have Not Yet Met*, and her poems have appeared in numerous literary journals including *Journal, Blueline, Home Planet News, Salmagundi*, and *Slipstream*. Her artwork has been widely exhibited throughout the Northeast and is held in private and public collections.

**Only & the Beast | Poems — Kate Hall**
A figure is contained by the shape of only one. Only is the extremity. For example a beast. And if only is added to a beast then it stands small and unbefri And if only is subtracted from a beast then its shadow may lo terrify. Other things being equal, in both ways, a beast suffers.

I is a figure contained by the shape of only one. Only is the extremity. And if only a beast is added to I then I will be forgotten. And if only a beast is subtracted from I then, truthfully, somet overlooked. Hence, I am contained in the beast or the beast is contained in Other things being equal, both ways, I suffers.
AND THEN THE GENERALIZATION ERROR WAS CALCULATED

(1) I am learning to suffer in your language and (2) it ends differently depending on who does it. Also, (3) I’ve learned how suffering can be minimized with elastics. (4) The necessity of error. (5) The dog came home with a snout full of porcupine quills. Here, (6) I’ve calculated the distance between the ideal arrangement and the tangible crystal to bear its irregularities. Even though, (7) I am the one explaining the meaning of heading down the wrong track and despite the fact that weighing and balancing of certain limits is hard to understand, (1) I am learning to suffer in your language and (2) it ends differently depending on who does it.

LET US FIRST CONSIDER THE ROLE OF ERROR

Captured in journeys through water.

In aquariums.

In jars of tap water.

As in, a little pond water has been added.

And of course there is blame.

Which no one can answer.

That the light passes through.
That widespread devastation.

That in great abundance.

A single red eye.

Then many.

That colored the sea for miles.

Ephemeral puddles.

As habitat.

Transparency.

As in, a fact not found.

Despite *The Field Book of Natural History*.

Predators.

To sink into deeper water by day.

To feed by night.

For being the less common.
For being fresh-run from the sea.

A container for the impossible.

That fell 9 days from heaven.

That and then 9 more.
Moments of communion had consequences; each one made a baby. And the world was forced down the throat of this tiny I which caused it indigestion. It’s true that the baby is only the idea of a baby but still it cried for a long time, until the words blocked off the place where the world was lodged like the body creates the abscess and thus, the I grew and became enormous and parentless.

This is a story of creation. Our separate same stories we construct and reconstruct in a dark, enclosed as the I is in its dark room, adrift in its systems— organs, tissues and cells— so full of world lodged somewhere unlocatable within or without. Our words surround the world; when we find them, we cling to them. Yet, we never understand what each other is saying; our languages are so different.

And in the end what actually saved us was not the names of things but the capsule of words that held the world back, it was the gesture.

The elegant arc of these fragile manipulative hands as they coaxed each O into existence, each I into existence. And this was the moment of communion, the moment of creation, the slow tango, the pounding of the fists against the wall of the self: the gesture of my O and yours so separate and sudden and strange. How two Is can bump into one another:
one I rub against the boundary of the other I,
so that eventually one I was taken into the other
and the other I was taken into the other.

And in the end we were not for what we thought.
We were for the gesture,
as the night for the lift of the moon and not the morning,
as the plant for the breaking of the soil and not the flower,
as the grapes for the feet and not the wine.

The words are just practice;
they are misunderstandings.
And the misunderstandings are practice
for the inevitable loss of one I or the other
and the world sequestered there.
The loss that comes when we stop,
when the sun streams through the window
and morning breaks in.

The view

A man with a chainsaw climbs through the branches of a giant cedar tree in 12-foot sections so your husband can split rails to match the old fence. The thump from the log ripples through your house in Ryder Lake, a hamlet of cows in a hanging valley a few kilometres above the Bible Belt city of Chilliwack. After he’s done, piles of debris lay in the lower part of the yard. The neighbour’s dog crawls into the hollow of the stump and sniffs around. An artist friend drops by and dreams of slicing the rounds. She wants to make tables, resin the tops, sell them on Kijiji.
With the tree down, the sun crackles through the large east face of your 1970s-built cabin home. You gaze through a gap cradled by conifers, birches and big leaf maple, toward Elk, Thornton and Cheam. You get the binoculars and look for hikers along the ridges. You might get there too, but not until you’ve cleaned up the yard.
Stick after stick goes into the flames. You remember the first time you drove around Ryder Lake, before the real estate agent was even involved, and discovered the lake was just a slough on somebody’s farm. You learned that the Women’s Institute, which has been around for 80 years, manages the community hall. Although you moved from an island in northern BC that only got cell coverage five years ago, you discovered that service is even worse here.
You call your house mid-century modern and think of Frank Lloyd Wright. It has a low-sloping roof with beams that run across the uninsulated ceiling to the outside. In the winter it gets cold, in the summer cooking hot. The outside is painted conifer green and knotty red cedar covers the interior walls. Painted bricks line the platform for the old wood stove. You had to pull the dead weight of it out the side sliding door when you first arrived, because the insurance company said so. You haven’t replaced it, even though the furnace is 40 years old and rumbles like an earthquake when it comes on.

A thick column of smoke rises from the burn pile and you worry about carbon, but the sapling-thin logger tells you he’d release more greenhouse gases with his truck if he’d had to drag his chipper up the hill. “Besides,” he adds, “it’s your God-given right to burn.”

Getting to know the neighbours

In the mornings, a jazz band of birds call through the fog.
You can’t see the monster at the first corner, but he runs crashing through brush along the fence line. You say “dog” and hope there’s no break in the chainlink. You wave at the pussy willows above the deep water ditches. You nod at the red and black cows farther up the road. Just past them, the goats bounce in their pen. You saw that one baby went missing on the community Facebook page. No one mentioned finding her. The border collies used to run and snap, but you’ve learned to yell back and the dogs they bit somebody’s housesitter. Now when you pass, y
yapping as if they’ve been locked into a shelter underground. You keep running to Extrom and then up Forester where fresh eggs in a cooler at the end of a driveway along with a can for the coins. The yellow school bus goes by.

You come through the short trail that links back to Briteside and peer at the big snag in the ravine at the top of the street. You had wondered about the grey in the hollow: it looked like an old sweatshirt. With binoculars, you see that an owl is spread sideways on her nest, like a chicken. Who cooks for you, she calls. Later you see her fuzzy chicks.

Gunshots sound from miles away — way down the forest service road that runs along the flank of the mountains. The track eventually leads down the south side of the slopes to the hurtling white water of the Chilliwack River. You drive past the clear cuts left after dozens of years of logging shows and find men wearing neon shorts and camouflage shirts. They are stocked with coolers of beer and boxes of bulk ammonium nitrate in the old landings and gravel pits. They set up targets and leave their colourful spent shells two inches deep on the ground.
Back channels into town

Within eight minutes of winding down steep road on the north side of the hills, you reach the green back-lit Save-On Foods sign of the mermaid at Starbucks. The Shoppers Drug Mart stays open until midnight.

Down on these flats, towards the wide, mud-coloured Fraser River, modern houses have sprung up on what was once farmland. Long before the dykes and the corn maze, forests and lakes sustained 10,000 years of Sto:lo lives. Now, strata-run gated communities all peaked the same way multiply. Quickly built condos pop up like peony stalks on old hop-growing ground. Shopping malls and chain restaurants choke out the hay fields. There are 46 churches and 83,000 people. It’s lovely and sunny down there, but it is prone t
Historic downtown Chilliwack is 15 minutes farther along another meandering road. You prefer these back channels. The ones that bypass the bustle of condos and cul-de-sacs. You learn that the winding road, where the black cherry trees snapped in the last winter’s big wind storm, was named after a section of the Chilliwack River that no longer flows.

You find a website lauding the pioneers who first came to this valley. Some farmers got sick of the spring melt that flooded their fields and one felled several large trees to block the riverbed. Later others got together and drained an entire lake.

This winding road passes through two Stó:lō villages. One is called Tzeachten, which means fish weir in Halq’eméylem, but the weirs are no longer there either. Next is Skowkale, “going around a turn.” You went to an event in their log cabin hall to celebrate a recording of ancient Sto:lo songs. You learn that a chief in the 1920s, thought it would be hard to pass these stories since disease, residential schools and the assault on his language had come. He wanted them all written down but the transcription, translation and printing of the book took more than 40 years. With this new CD you realize it took another 40 for it all to become oral again. You meet members of the Sepass family and eat the smoked salmon, bannock and other food they prepared. As you drive away the...
clouds darken over the broad valley and you listen to the songs of Xa:ls, the creator, who made Earth grow out of the mists.

Downtown Chilliwack

You continue into the town which incorporated less than 150 years ago — one of the first white settlements in this part of BC. On Wellington, the main street, you can buy used books, new shoes and shrink-wrapped vinyl in the high fidelity record shop. You had no idea that records sell for $40 now. You look at the vintage Kenwoods but do not ask if they have Chilliwack, the 1980s rock band that sang “My Girl (Gone, Gone, Gone).”
You find the town museum housed in the old city hall. The Roman column look was conceived by Thomas Hooper and designed the Coqualeezta Indian Residential School, built upon the same land where newcomers plowed up adze blades and carved stone bowls. The best coffee is at Harvest Cafe, and the best doughnuts too. There’s a place to buy crusty Swiss bread and restaurants where you can slurp Vietnamese bone broth pho. You hear that the butcher on Yale moved to the suburbs of Sardis, citing a better retail space, but most...
people think he was tired of the drug addicts at the door. The city is growing, but the homeless population is too.

You had thought of living downtown, but the real estate agent warned of crime. Really you didn’t like the highway noise and the constant stream of trains. You head back towards the suburbs and get stuck behind a tractor going 20 km/hour on Evans Road. You pull off to a roadside stall for local blueberries and then up to a drive-thru for corn.
Golden Jubilee, not Peaches and Cream, and get 13 cobs. They hand a paper sack through the window and you hand them your frequent buyer card. After ten dozen, you get another dozen for free.

**Summer heat**

When it gets really hot, like 30 degrees, you join the hundreds of others at Cultus Lake. They crowd together at sand beaches and grassy picnic grounds but you find a small pebble beach in the shade. You dive into jewel-like blue water. It would be perfect if there weren’t water skiers around. You try to ignore them, but you leave when the partiers pull up and idle offshore.

![Cultus Lake, seen from Ryder Lake](image)

Not far from the lake, you find a spot on the river where the ice water pools in a rock wall tub. It is deep and no one else has discovered it yet. You dog paddle against the current and find that you are swimming in place. A guy in an inflatable armchair floats by and raises his frosted can to you.
When you get back to Ryder Lake, a giant black truck with oversized tires and a broken muffler roars up the road. You hear a crack and a black blob falls out of the yellow plum tree. The startled mama bear runs across the road, but her three cubs stay and scramble up a nearby fir. The neighbour’s dog barks and the cubs clamber higher up the tree. You telephone the neighbours and ask them to put their dog inside so the cubs can get away. Later you try to pick the plums, but most are too high, so your husband gets out the chainsaw and cuts the unreachable part of the tree down. You make pint after pint of ginger and vanilla plum jam.

In fall, the osiers will turn red and the rusty old tin can on the top of the fence post will pop in the low seasonal light. In winter, you take a picture of your reflection in the super-sized glass bulbs hanging in a roadside Christmas tree.

**The warning**

You force your bike up the winding hill from the flatlands, standing up from the seat with each crank. A big white pick-up comes down the hill...
road slows. The driver sticks her elbow out the window and tells you to be careful.

You are panting as you pull your shoes out of their clips and try not to topple. “Pardon me?”

“There’s a cougar running around up here,” she says. Her truck chugs fumes into the air. “I’m just saying. You might not want to ride your bike here.”

You say thanks for the warning, but what can you do? You live up here. So you continue on up the hill, past the llamas and the trailer homes right beside the road. Past the churn of a waterfall that makes you wonder where the water comes from. There is no lake in Ryder Lake.

You think about the guy down your street who told you that his dog once put a cougar up a tree. Another neighbour said he found a dead deer in the forested part of his 10-acre yard. Its belly had been torn out by a giant cat. You want to see one of these creatures, but hopefully it won’t be while you are slowly churning your bicycle up the road.

Back at home, a boom echoes through your walls and you picture airplanes coming down. You’ve heard people jokingly call the back road Little Beirut. You think of the jail out there by the Chilliwack River. There’s an army artillery training centre too and some kind of drug rehab place. After a deep blast and then a rumble, you check the Facebook page. “What the hell was that?” said a woman you don’t know. Her house might be far across the rolling hills or it might be two doors down. “It shook the magnets off my fridge,” said another. “Bruce dynamiting his stumps again?”

You look out the window and see the stump on the lower part of your property, the one that allowed you the view. The only way for developers to go is up the sides of the mountains. You think of the Sto:lo elder shake his head about that the other day. He pointed towards the hills that you occupy. “If it continues in this way, where will the animals live?” he said.
Heather Ramsay has lived in many places. Born in Edmonton, raised in Calgary. One idyllic year in the south of France, Vancouver at 18, Whitehorse, Australia (on the prowl). But it wasn’t until she moved to Smithers, BC that she really let a location take hold of her. She wrote for there and told a lot of stories. Then on to Haida Gwaii (more magazines, books) and now Ryder Lake. She is an M.F.A. candidate in Creative Writing at UBC and is attempting to write a novel for her thesis. Her non-fiction has appeared in Maisonneuve, Room, subterrain, Raspberry Magazine, Geographic, Canada’s History, The Tyee, Northword and more.

I am the big heart | Poems — S. E. Venart
Epiphany

The tenth month an unlikely location
for it, or this morning or this afternoon when
you are a mother who used to be a poet.
You sit at the desk and have one hour to find it.

It’s here somewhere in the mind’s tiny grey flags
in the millions of scraps piling up.
Or maybe you left it in the dark bleeding gums of the dog you love, watching her clench another rock from the tide twelve years ago. What was she looking for? What if she stopped looking?

Metaphors were easy then, not only the sky, but migrating everywhere. And now everyone is arrow, arrows. Everyone harpoons. And I am the big heart, aren’t I?

When the black dog is being put down, in her last second I whisper, *Squirrel*.

**Attenborough**

First month of kindergarten, out of the blue slabs appear at the bottom of her artwork. *Ocean*, she says to inform you. A second wedge appears, light blue, crowning her paper with a sky in which a two-inch Kea soars downward for his lunch: red stripe of fish on a box with wheels and windows. *I am the smartest animal on earth*, she chants. *I am the smartest animal*. Okay, you concede. And not to debate the thesis so much as to develop divergent thought you press play on YouTube. On the screen birds of paradise do the work of pop-up pomp firework faces appearing on the black stage of their wings. *They're puppets*, she bluffs.
But! The strongest muscle in my body is my tongue!

Just like that, she flutters off to the mirror down the hall where she watches her reflection flip a glittering headband back and forth between its palms.

It’s best if you stay hidden, quiet behind the laundry basket. *Bower bird!* she’s singing with a hunch in her shoulders— *Giraffes can clean their ears with their tongue,* this infant human says to her reflection before she shapes her fingers into a heart using twenty-nine hand bones.

*The Standstill*

We fought in the folded hours after the children were in bed. We fought while scraping plates gathering glasses after the guests had gone. Sometimes the fight was vapour, vanishing in the living room air when we came down for breakfast. Like you, I believed there was a series of words, or a single word that would solve things. We searched for it. I walked the football field, the dog straining against its lead. You walked the dog where you walked it. Before bedtime we cleaned our children’s bodies carefully. We brushed their teeth quickly, leaving the rest up to fate. I wanted to find that word, but sometimes I come into the kitchen
as you leave it and just like that, fault fills
every jar in the fridge. On these nights I wait in bed
and breathe in the dark. Maybe tonight a child
will come in here and out of her oblivious
spread-eagle sleep will seep into this space
where we sometimes meet
a simple explanation, a pure reason.

Origami / Cat's-Cradle Digression

Sometimes at night I don’t try to get up
and get it down, one poem folds into
the crease of another connection, they
point their corners into other
corners: the word daughter almost certainly
contains the word duty when you fold it so—

There is a Kenyan tribe, they take dust in their mouths, make paper from it
send it to Japan where eleven-year-old Siberian
girls wait in tiny pleated apartments
to be models. Is it not true that watching
a thing become another thing— watching string for that
turn into the Eiffel tower with only three fingers
and a mouth pulling at its peak— is also art?
I don’t always write them down. I watch
this girl on YouTube demonstrate
Jacob’s Ladder, witch’s broom, cradle for a tiny cat,
with hands so small the connections are effortless
Albert County Breeder

It was years before I could walk back to that doorway, figuratively hold the post of your fallen porch with its thousand green Mason jars staring out towards the weathered barn. On each window your dust held the shapes of the cobwebs underneath. Your father comes out the kicked door.

Inside I’ve seen the hard-packed dirt on your kitchen floor, ketchup caked to the spoons, the bucket in the corner for the winter toilet. Outside we have more in common: bus shelter for the wait at the end of the lane, a broken look to our crab apple too, blue spruce, red pines, rows of crows on the electric wires and the same wild square eyes in our animal we brought to be breed with your animal.

When Life Widens Wider
In I suppose a pinprick of hope, I look out his windshield wanting it to be true: northern lights or meteor showers or something to be there above the valley so his hand on my thigh has an explanation, a need to point out exhilaration instead of the trope of furniture-maker/rig driver driving his babysitter home and stopping the car in the ditch. At two in the morning there’s so much I think has answers— the black map of pinpoints above can be joined to form bears and containers of milk, archers with arrows pointing to North, to Hercules. But this all dissolves where his hand casually on my thigh, same hand that I think leaves porn magazine for me between the couch cushions, leaves cereal and sour milk the nails of his children dirty and grasping for their one shared tooth brush. I squint into the distance above the hills to clear the chatter inside myself. If I want someone to be grateful for me, I don’t know it yet. If I want a man’s hand on my jeans, I don’t know it yet. He decides to point to a series of dots above us. And among the voices in me I hear him saying, See? This is a kind of map. And I don’t hate for showing me that because yes, I see it too, it’s a mess.

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S. E. Venart’s writing has been published in New Quarterly, Malahat Review, Fiddlehead, Maisonneuve, This Magazine, Prism International, and CBC Radio. She is the author of a chapbook, Neither Apple Nor Pear, Weder Apfel Noch Birne (Junction Books 2003) and Woodshedding (Brick 2007). She lives and teaches at John Abbott College.
Singles Bar for Zombies

Sure, the blonde sitting there at the bar
is hot in a conventional way: coffin-ready
curve to her dress, the way she cups her wine
like a chalice of blood. But tell me this:
Does she have brains?
You could talk to her till you’re green in the face.
She’ll just look through you with a deadened gaze.
Down here’s still better than up there
where the cars all burn till the sky is smoke.
This bar’s subterranean.
A waitress with no eyes asks: “Wanna
see a food menu?” With your worm-brown mouth,
you answer, “No thanks. I’ve already eaten.”
My name means nothing. Mark my words. I will smite you with my thunderbolts just as easily as heal your blindness or turn water into wine.

What is it with you, storyteller, that you insist our names speak to some higher or more subtle calling? What chance did Joyce’s Dedalus have? What are we to make of Margaret Atwood’s all-seeing narrator named Iris? And explain to me how the one morbidly obese star pilot in the squad that confronted the Death Star just happened to be named Porkins?

We may be fictional characters but we still have rights!

Some very unwise men brought gifts to my birthday—a party moved from Mount Olympus to some shit-soaked barn about a two-hour drive from Tel Aviv—and
told everyone that I was the son of God, the sun that shone out their asses.

I can’t handle this kind of pressure.

To spite my mother (raped by an angel, but that’s a whole other story) and her exorbitant expectations of me, I enrolled in a carpentry class at the local community college. Forget it, boys! I said. Pay no attention to the deitous (yes, it’s a word!) reference in my name. This particle-board cabinet isn’t going to assemble itself.

Surely I’m allowed to pick and play the life I want. Surely I can choose which cross to bear. Fate’s not everything. I’ve a real lock on this tabula rasa. Doesn’t everyone?

Lou Gehrig died of Lou Gehrig’s Disease. Go figure.
A dented smile on the sidewalk, a gap-toothed tab-pulled Titan of sticky sybaritic joy. I knew the can was half full when I took a kick at it. I mean, you've really got to believe in optimism if you're going to leave a partially drunk Coke on the ground. Whoever she was, and she was, at least to my mind, a she – the indifference of lip gloss smeared across the can’s silvery rooftop, indentation along its side the result of a woman’s thin, thoughtful finger (I mean, a dude would’ve just drained it dry and then crushed that sucker flat) – she must have had faith in the wealth of the world, dreamt of the fecund pampas, farm fields that promise an abundance of sugar cane; a princess asleep in the certainty that our polar ice caps are going nowhere. Here’s the thing about a positive attitude: You’re still here whether you have one or not. If you spend too long thinking just how filthy these sidewalks are, you’ll stroll yourself straight into madness. You’ll miss the open ground Coke taunting us with its air of waste. It’s a harbinger of something, though I’ll be damned if—
The salesman said, You’ll probably get eight good years out of this baby.

With that, a future as soft and firm as flesh flourished before our eyes, a spell cast deep in the unstained wellsprings of fabric. This was a bed for aging on, flopping cruciform on, tired, a bit overweight on, at the end of our days.

Where will we be in eight years? A raft of arguments, no doubt. Sweaty summer sheets that need washing. A breast cancer scare? The Sunday mornings ruined by unconscionable cats screaming for their breakfast? More grey hair found in the thatches of my chest.

Yet, what I murmured under my breath was: That’s a lot of sex – a thousand and forty (at our present rate) steamy acts of coupling. The wife laughed. Yeah, right!

But I held my ground. Could this bed, this marathon sack, this *Let’s grow old together* mattress handle all that?

The salesman blanched when I asked him. He was no prophet of variable lust. He was merely selling a place to lay our burdens down.
Mark Sampson has published three novels – Off Book (Norwood Publishing, 2007), Sad Peninsula (Dundurn Press, 2014), and The Slip (Dundurn Publishing, 2017) – and a short story collection, called The Secrets Men Keep (Now or Never Publishing, 2015). He also has a book of poetry, Weathervan (Palimpsest Press in 2016. His stories, poems, essays and book reviews have appeared widely in journals in Canada and the United States. He holds a journalism degree from the University of King’s College in Halifax and a master’s degree in English from the University of Manitoba in Winnipeg. Originally from Prince Edward Island, he now lives and writes in Toronto.

The Grand Design: Paintings of John Hampshire
Text — Mary Kathryn Jablonski
John Hampshire employs and embodies labyrinths, mathematician inside an introvert, inside a college professor. He is best known for elaborate portrait drawings that disintegrate upon close inspection into paths of abstract lines that never overlap.

Part of the joy of looking at art is getting in sync in some ways with the decision-making process that the artist used and the record that's embedded in the work.
It could be argued that some writers, too, internalize with a complex spirit, inquisitive and process-driven, constantly in motion, and their journals become great art, even when they feel they are not creating.” Biographer Diane Middlebrook reveals this phenomenon in the work of Sylvia Plath and refers to Plath's journals as “the hand drawing the hand” (think M.C. Escher), claiming that, “Her writing itself enacts the process by which writing comes to be.”

So it is in the work of John Hampshire: the drawing enacts the process by which drawing comes to be. His drawings and paintings would seem random mark-making, only to evolve and congeal into recognizable imagery. We are left with the entire record of Hampshire’s work gels at a distance, but dissolves when viewed up close. I’ve asked him a series of questions that led to these writings. We chose to remove the text of the questions, so that in the manner of his labyrinthine work, in the grand design, the hand alone could draw the hand.

— Mary Kathryn Jablonski

In the mid-1990s I started drawing self-portraits, looking in the mirror, using pen and a language of mark-making and symbols to construct the images. These consisted of things like teardrops, arrows, molecular structures, etc. I wanted these things to remain legible in the finished drawing, and so the idea of not crossing any lines developed out of this concern. Over time, as the drawings became more detailed, the interest in the symbols fell by the wayside but the structure of not crossing any lines became integral to the drawing process; creating impediments to slow down the process and keep me engaged, a circuitous route to making something. While this process formally started in my work in the mid 90s it is an activity that occurred in my notebooks and doodles in high school.
It’s natural for me to paint the people around me. Most tend to be people I know, some more casually, some than others. I do occasionally work from images of people but this is rare. My consciousness or awareness of the natures, or my relationship to them may or may not influence the work. I can’t help but think that it does, but it is not something I think about when I am working. Formal issues of color and mark and representation are the things that I tend to think m
about when I’m working. That’s not to say that the rest of the paintings

qualities beyond these concerns.

Gina, acrylic on panel, 11 x 14, 2014

The labyrinth drawings typically are in black and white, and the introduction of color makes them much more complex. The paintings vacillate between full bombastic colors or a subdued palette of colors, or are completely restricted to grays. I usually a
with the portrait paintings, but after doing several of those and needing relief, I resort to black and white.

Lauren, acrylic on panel, 11 x 14, 2015

I started the paintings around the same time as the drawings in the mid-90s, and the sensibilities that directed the drawings related very much to the sensibilities that directed the paintings. Painting is very much about physicality and layering and those are not things I was very successful at...
denying, hence the continuing of layering marks of another. The paint marks themselves are more or less responsive to information derived from the subject matter that I’m looking at, whether a person in front of me, my reflection in the mirror, or a photograph. In all cases I am pulling vague and then subsequently more specific information from my interaction with the subject matter. My aim, in the drawings and paintings, is that the language of mark or line remain present and visible and that the process of the making of the painting is readily apparent or accessible to the viewer. The tension between both mark and image simultaneously asserting themselves is something I like to have in the work. I’m an abstract painter unwilling to let go of the primal desire for representation.
The painting itself (or in some cases drawing) usually determines the degree of resolution that occurs in the work. I find that the recognizability of the human face allows for an immense amount of abstraction to occur while retaining the visual implicatic degree of resolution that the painted image brings is determined by the painting and whether it’s working or not. I keep painting until I feel the work is resolved; sometimes this requires more and
The paintings more recently have also incorporated clear medium between layers of paint, physically separating the paint strokes from each other, and playing up the three-dimensional quality of painting. In some cases I’ve even incorporated string or other objects in the clear medium. This goes along with the nature of the way I handle paint in these works; less like manipulated liquid material. The marks themselves and their individual identities more like the tesserae used to make mosaics.

![Image of Labyrinth 308, ink on door, 32 x 80, 2014](image)

Although I have made some very large portraits, most are somewhat conservative in scale, and it is the landscapes that tend to be more monumental. My interest is in the sublime power of nature, tangibly, I am interested in the dichotomy between the ephemeral qualities of weather or fire or clouds and the tangible language of mark-making or lines that are used to build these images. While the portraits are typically of people I know based on photos I take, the landscape references are an amalgam of my own photos, appropriated imagery and imagined passages. The complexity of landscapes and weather, the deeper sense of space between the surface of the drawing and the greater compositional possibilities are all attractive traits for me with the landscapes.
Lately, particularly with the landscapes, I’ll start with some long lines that will break up the picture plane, which tends to be hollow core doors these days, and I’ll have very little, if any, anticipation of what particular image will develop. As I go along I start to select an image and start to build that, and then I’ll add other imagery to the drawing, working from both the photo references as well as imagination to put these disjointed images together. Intuition plays a major role in decision-making, and most thinking is retrospective rather than anticipatory with the work.

I have always had an interest in math and physics, an interest that made me consider a math minor in undergraduate school. I see a relationship between these pursuits and interests and those of my current working methods. There are simultaneous dichotomies in my work: abstraction versus representation; solid tangible marks describing transitions of light in an atmosphere or form; abstract expressionist versus Renaissance ideas about pictorial space or depicting form; surface versus image. These dichotomies make me think...
juxtapositions or seeming incongruities in physics, such as those between the harmonious Einsteinian relativity and anti-intuition of quantum mechanics; or the duality of light, having qualities of both waves and particles.

The mystery of painting seems more alive than ever with its growing history, and physics is no different. The more we know, the more perplexing the universe seems: the simultaneity of Schrödinger's cat in a box, being both alive and dead until you open the box. Transferring these ideas to a philosophical level seems easily transferred to image-making, color theory and optics. With painting, I'm not exactly sure when the box is open, or if it ever is. Things really remain undefined until the viewer experiences the work; even then ambiguities persist.

—John Hampshire

John Hampshire is an Associate Professor of Studio Art at SUNY Adirondack and has had numerous solo and group exhibitions nationally. He is the recipient of many honors and awards, including a SUNY Chancellor's Award for Excellence in Scholarship and Creativity, a NYFA fellowship grant, and a Purchase Award from the Hyde Museum. [http://johnhampshire.weebly.com](http://johnhampshire.weebly.com)

John’s 2015 video interview with AHA! A House for the Arts can be seen on YouTube.
A gallerist in Saratoga Springs for over 15 years, visual artist Kathryn Jablonski is now an administrative director in holistic health. She is author of the chapbook *To the Husband I Have Not Yet Met*, and her poems have appeared in numerous literary journals including the *Beloit Poetry Journal*, *Blueline*, *Home Planet News*, *Salmagundi*, and *Slipstream*, among others. Her artwork has been widely exhibited throughout the Northeast and is held in private and public collections.

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Uimhir a Cúig | Dunamon: Poems — Jane Clark
After the talk with the palliative nurse over cups of tea in the kitchen, my mother tells me she’s already asked my father to promise he’ll make it through the winter—*it’ll be sixty years in April, Charlie.*

Sixty years since she walked down the aisle in her dress of pristine lace, beaded bodice and tiny satin-covered buttons at the nape, a full skirt of tulle falling from her waist to red and black tiles. Ballymoe Church is tumbling now, stone by stone,
beneath the weight of brambles, ivy, ash.

I was eager and silly as a suck calf, she laughs, as she readies his tablets, a whiff of silage rising from the coats drying by the stove.

When he falls asleep

at the kitchen table and drops another cup, my mother bends without a word, sweeps up the broken pieces in her hands, looking out for shards in case he wanders bare foot in the night.

Planting Trees

Dad taught us that paper comes from trees and the word for book comes from beech. He showed us the olive-grey bark, smooth as river rocks, how to tell the light hues of young wood from the gloom of the old and how to count the rings – starting at the centre, working out towards the edge.

He’s unable to move from his bed, but when we ask about the row of beech
beside the bridge, he’s clear as a bell,
my father's father's father planted them,

_a shelter-belt for a nursery, when the British were giving grants for planting trees._

_Tomorrow, I'll get dressed,
we'll go down to see them again._

_I've got you_

Through days of morphine,
tidbits to tempt his appetite,
there’s nowhere else to be,

I hold his teacup to his lips,
wash his face and the hands
I rarely touched.

During the night old hurts
and worries surface
like stones in a well-tilled field.

_What time is it now?_ he asks
on the hour. He sings to himself
and murmurs lines he learned

as a child, ‘All we, like sheep
have gone astray, we have turned
everyone to his own way’.

When he asks to get up,
I hold his wrists,
brace my weight against his.
For a moment he’s confused –
*it’s ok Janey, I’ve got you,*
go on now, you can stand.

**Respects**

From Roosky, Creemully, Louglyn, Kiltoom, Kilbegnet, Moyliss, Brideswell, Lecarrow, Creggs, Athleague, Ballinleg, Carrowkeel, they came to pay their respects.

They shook hands with us, stood by his body and bowed their heads. Cattle men, sheep men, carpenters, teachers, foresters, nurses,

mart managers, vets;
they said prayers, laid their hands on his chest and blessed themselves, then filled the kitchen with the man they knew,

*a grand man altogether,*
*a good judge of a bullock,*
fierce man to work, a man of his word,
he had woeful hands.

I slipped out for a while to see the flawless orange globe hung low over the Common and a flock of whooper swans feasting on the last of the winter grass.
Dunamon

i.m. Charlie Clarke

They dig slower as they go deeper,
taking turns to heave shovels of clay,
throwing bigger stones and rocks
up into the tractor box.

Son, grandson, nephew, neighbours,
they’ve already gone down five feet,
when they lay their tools aside,
drink tea, light up for a smoke
and agree they couldn’t have
a better day for digging a grave –
not a cloud to be seen,
sunshine melting last night’s frost,
and, from the woods behind them,
a chaffinch singing his heart out.

Jane Clarke’s first collection, The River, was published by Bloodaxe Books in 2015. Originally from a farm in Roscommon, Jane now lives near Glenmalure, County Wicklow. In 2016 she won the inaugural Listowel Writers Week Poem of the Year Award and the Hennessy Literary Award for Poetry. She was shortlisted for the Royal Society of Literature 2016 Ondaatje Prize.

www.janeclarkepoetry.ie
As an artist I have been focusing on painting trees and their cast-off limbs, i.e. sticks, for many years.
Trees are completely individual. They are adapters and survivors; each one is unique, and I believe that is something most people don’t think about. We are taught to look at trees based on a stereotype; the image of a perfectly pruned tree is the one most people have in their heads, balanced and symmetrical. But in nature those rarely exist. Trees grow to survive, they adapt to their environment, growing into strange shapes, producing oddly shaped limbs, becoming contortionists to get to sunlight, and bowing to the will of other larger trees. They grow in context to each other and their neighbors, adapting as best they can to the situation they find themselves in.
Dowser – watercolor on paper, 24 x 18, 2015
While my artwork has always been based on a traditional observation process, the final appearance of the objects in my paintings is grounded in contemporary ideas and concerns and by my own quirky interpretation of the objects’ personalities. These objects allow me to explore my interests in surrealism (especially the Chicago artists collective The Hairy Who) and abstraction.
with pursuing the pure physical pleasure of painting.

La De Da – watercolor on paper, 50 x 40, 2016
My current pieces have developed from my compulsive observation in my “neighborhood” in upstate New York. I am always looking for my subjects by the side of the road or on hiking trails in nature preserves. Often I will ask for permission to cut down a tree on someone’s property.
lusting after it for some time.
Menage A Trois – watercolor on paper, 7 x 4, 2016
The last few trees (7 long) that I have brought back to my studio have reminded me of Las Vegas show girls, adorned with cascading mushrooms and vines. They stand out in all their finery, in juxtaposition to the other plainer trees. Of course the irony is that these beautiful trees are dead and dying, and their finery is the work of decomposers set on reducing them to a rich addition to the earth beneath them.
Showtime – watercolor on paper, 7 x 3 1/2, 2017

Showtime II – watercolor on paper, 5 x 3 1/2, 2017
My paintings honor my subjects’ singular elegance and imagined personality, and I hope they can remind viewers to celebrate beauty in unexpected places.

Artist **Katie DeGroot** was born in Kandahar, Afghanistan and grew up in the arcadian suburbs of Boston, MA. As a teenager she moved to Chicago, IL during the famous Democratic National Convention riots of 1968. She attended New York University and Illinois State University before spending nearly 20 years in New York City. Katie now resides on her great-grandparents’ farm next to the Hudson River in Fort Edward, NY, where she raises beef cows and is also currently the director of Skidmore College Summer Studio.
I shall find the dark grow luminous, the void fruitful, understand that I have nothing; that the ringers in the tower appointed for the hymen of the soul a passing bell.

—Yeats, *Per Amica Silentia Lunae*

The Soul. *Seek out reality, leave things that seem.*

The Heart. *What, be a singer born and lack a theme.*
Her favorite reading as a child was Huxley and Tyndall, Virginia Woolf tells us of Clarissa Dalloway. As Yeats was fond of saying, “We Irish think otherwise.” He was quoting George Berkeley, reinforcing his favorite philosopher’s Lockean empiricism with his own defense of visionary powers. In the section of *The Trembling of the Veil* covering the period 1887-91, Yeats says he was “unlike others of my generation in one thing only.”

I am very religious, and deprived by Huxley and Tyndall, whom I detested, of the simple-minded religion of my childhood, I had made a new religion, almost an infallible Church of poetic tradition, of a fardel of stories, and of personal emotions... passed on from generation to generation by poets and painters with some help from philosophers.\[1\]

Though Yeats was never “religious” in the normative sense, he knew he inhabited a world, as he says later in this passage, that reflected the “deepest instinct of man,” and would be “steeped in the supernatural.” That was his own instinct. It was his conscious intention, as well, to offset the scientific naturalism of John Tyndall and T. H. Huxley, “Darwin’s bulldog,” and to buttress his rebellion against his skeptical father’s Comptean positivism. In making up his own religion, Yeats relied essentially on art (“poetic tradition,” “poets and painters”) and included in his “fardel” strands from interrelated traditions—Western and Eastern. Seeing them all as a single perennial philosophy, “one history and that the soul’s,” he gathered together elements...
mythology and Irish folklore, British Romanticism (especially Shelley and Blake, whose Los tells us that he “must create or be enslaved by another man’s”); Platonism and Rosicrucianism and Theosophy, Cabbalism, Hinduism, along with other varieties of spiritualist and esoteric thought, including Gnosticism. Though Yeats was not a scholar of Gnosticism, nor a Carl Jung nor an Eric Voegelin, let alone a Hans Jonas, there are persistent themes and emphases in his thought that Gnostics, ancient and modern, would find both familiar and congenial. Others, not so much.
After this preamble, I will, in discussing the spiritual dimension in Yeats's work, focus more often than not on Gnostic elements. But this is an essay on Yeats rather than Gnosticism. Having mentioned Gnostics “ancient and modern,” I should make it clear that, for the most part, I bring in historical Gnosticism and the tenets of certain Gnostic sects only where they illuminate particular poems; for example, “A Dialogue of Self and Soul” and “Crazy Jane and Jack the Journeyman.” Otherwise, I will have little to say of the religious movement drawing on, but competing with, Judaism and Christianity in the Eastern Mediterranean in the first and second centuries, CE. Instead, I will emphasize differentiated from historical Gnosticism, precisely the distinction made at the 1966 international conference, the Colloquium of Messina, convened to examine the origins of Gnosticism. In the Colloquium’s final “Proposal,” the emphasis was on the attainment of gnosis “knowledge of the divine mysteries reserved for an elite.”

Such knowledge was individual: one’s “intuition” of revealed truth. For most Gnostics, this intuitive esoteric “knowledge” had nothing to do with either Western philosophic reasoning or with the theological knowledge of God to be found in orthodox Judaism and Christianity. For spiritual adepts, such intuition derived from knowledge of the divine One. For poets like Yeats, it was identified with that “intuitive Reason” which, for the Romantics—notably, Wordsworth, Coleridge, and their American disciple, Ralph Waldo Emerson—was virtually indistinguishable from the creative Imagination, which, for Yeats, was most powerfully exemplified in the prophetic poetry of Blake and Shelley.

At the same time, there is no denying the centrality of spiritual quest, of esoteric knowledge, of mysticism and “magic,” in Yeats’s life and work. In July 1892, preparing to be initiated into the Second Order of the Golden Dawn, he wrote to one of his heroes, the old Irish nationalist John O’Leary, in response to a “somewhat testy postcard” the kindly old Fenian had sent him. The “probable explanation,” Yeats wrote, “the Colloquium of Messina convened to examine the origins of Gnosticism. In the Colloquium’s final “Proposal,” the emphasis was on the attainment of gnosis “knowledge of the divine mysteries reserved for an elite.”

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that O’Leary had been listening to the poet’s skeptical father, holding
forth on his son’s “magical pursuits out of the immense depths of his
ignorance as to everything that I am doing and thinking.” Yeats realizes
that the word “magic,” however familiar to his own ears, “has a very
outlandish sound to other ears.” But “as to Magic”:

It is surely absurd to hold me ‘weak’...because I
in a study which I decided deliberately four or five
make, next to my poetry, the most important
life....If I had not made magic my constant st
have written a single word of my Blake book
*Countess Kathleen* have ever come to exist. The
centre of all that I do and all that I thin
write....I have always considered myself a voice of what I
believe to be a greater renaissance—the revolt
against the intellect—now beginning in the wor

Just as he had emphasized art and a “Church of poetic
creation of his own “new religion,” even here, in his
defense of his mystical and magical pursuits, Yeats in
that they were paramount, “next to my poetry.” But I
dismiss the passionate intensity of Yeats’s esoteric
pursuits. What seemed to W. H. Auden, even in his
Memory of W. B. Yeats,” to be “silly” or, worse, to Ez
“very very very bughouse” (it takes one to know one), or
be dreadfully misguided, was taken, not with complete
very very very seriously, by Yeats himself. His esoteric
p
heterodox guises, remained an energizing stimulus, if not
throughout his life. In his elegy for Yeats, written just days after
poet’s death in January 1939, Auden says, “You were silly like us; your
gift survived it all.” But it was more than that. What Auden
Pound *dismissed* actually *enhanced* Yeats’s artistic gift.[4]

§

I just mentioned the Golden Dawn, which makes it time
Yeats’s esoteric resume, some of which will be familiar to many readers. He was, along with his friend George Russell (AE), a founding member, in 1885, of the Dublin Hermetic Society. It quickly evolved into the Dublin Theosophical Society. Though, as he tells us in an unpublished memoir, he “was much among the Theosophists, having drifted there from the Dublin Hermetic Society,” Yeats declined to join, believing that “Hermetic” better described his own wider interests as a devotee of what he called the study of “magic.” He joined the Theosophical Society of London, in which, eager to push mystical boundaries, he became a member of the “Esoteric Section.” In 1891, he resigned; he was not, as rumor sometimes had it, “expelled,” let alone “excommunicated.”

Yeats was, of course, for more than thirty years a member of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, which he joined in March 1890; he stayed with the Golden Dawn until it splintered, then joined one of its offshoot Orders, the Stella Matutina. During its heyday in the 1890s, the G.D and its Inner Order of the Rose of the Cross of Gold (R.R. & A.C.) was “the crowning glory of the occult revival in the nineteenth century,” having succeeded in synthesizing a vast body of disparate material and welding it into an effective “system.”

Yeats took as his Golden Dawn motto and pseudonym Demon Est Deus Inversus (D.E.D.I.). That sobriquet’s recognition of the interdependence of opposites is a nod to both William Blake and Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, the 11th chapter of whose seminal text, The Secret Doctrine (1888), bears this title.
The most extraordinary of the many exotic figures to gather in societies and cults, making Victorian London ground zero against reductive materialism, Madame Blavatsky (HPB to her acolytes) was, of course, the co-founder and presiding genius of the Theosophical Society. In a letter to a New England newspaper, Yeats referred to her with wary fascination as “the Pythoness of the Movement.”

accept her own tracing of Theosophy to ancient Tibetan roots, the movement was born in 1875, in part in Blavatsky’s New York City apartment, where she kept a stuffed baboon, sporting a copy of Darwin’s *Origin of Species* to represent the creeping tide of scientific materialism she was determined to push back—though it
should be mentioned that *The Secret Doctrine* was an audacious attempt to synthesize science, religion, and philosophy.

While he never shared the requisite belief in the Tibetan Masters who supposedly dictated her theosophical revelations, Yeats, anti-Darwinian, did share her determination to resist an encroaching materialist tide. And he was personally fascinated by herself, whom he first met in the considerable flesh (she then weighed well over 200 lbs.) in 1887 when he visited her at a house in Norwood, a suburb of London. She was just 56 at the time, older (she would live only four more years). Young Yeats was kept waiting while she attended to some earlier visitors. Finally admitted, he “found an old woman in a plain loose dark dress: a sort of old Irish peasant, with an air of humor and audacious power.” Their first conversation was a whimsical exchange on the vagaries of her cuckoo clock, which Yeats thought had “hooted” at him. On subsequent visits he found her “almost always full of gaiety…kindly and accessible—except on those occasions, once a week, when she ‘answered questions upon her system, and as I look back after thirty tears I often ask myself, ‘Was her speech automatic? Was she a trance medium, or in some similar state, one night in every week?’”

Her alternating states were adumbrated in the phases, active and passive, HPB called, in *Isis Unveiled* (1877), “the days and nights of Brahma.” Yeats had read that book and Blavatsky’s alternating phases tally with, and may have influenced, his lifelong emphasis on the antinomies: the tension between quotidian reality and Romantic allure of the Otherworld, in forms ranging from *Faeryland* to that city of art and spirit, Byzantium; and between things that merely “seem” (Platonic “appears” *maya*) and the spiritual reality perceived by Western and Hindu hermits contemplating on Asian mountains. After reading *Unveiled*, Yeats had delved into a book given him by AE. This was *Esoteric Buddhism* (1883) by Madame Blavatsky’s fellow Theosophist and sometime disciple, A. P. Sinnett, whose earlier book, *World* (1881), had already had an impact on Yeats. “Ser
“occult sense,” Sinnett declared, “has nothing to do with feeling devout: it has to do with the capacity of the mind for assimilating knowledge at the fountainhead of knowledge itself.” And he asserted an antithesis crucial to Yeats: that to become an “adept,” a rare status “beyond the reach of the general public,” one must “obey the inward impulse of [one’s] soul, irrespective of the prudential considerations of worldly science or sagacity” (101). That Eastern impulse is evident in Yeats’s three “hermit” poems in *Responsibilities* (1914).

A quarter century earlier, three poems in *Crossways*, his first collection of lyrics—“The Indian upon God,” “The Indian to his Love,” and the lengthy (91-line) “Anashuya and Vijaya”[8]—were written under a direct and visceral influence. For the lure of the East had also related to Madame Blavatsky. Yeats had been deeply impressed with the roving ambassador of Theosophy she had sent to Dublin in April 1886, to instruct the members of the Dublin Hermetic Society in the nuances of Theosophy. The envoy was the charismatic Swami, Mohini Chatterjee, described by Madame Blavatsky, perhaps more gaiety than tolerance, as “a nutmeg Hindoo with buck eyes,” for whom several of his English disciples “burned with a scandalous, ferocious passion,” that “craving of old unnatural food.”[9] Despite his inability to resist the sexual temptations presented to him (he was eventually dispatched back to India), Chatterjee preached the need to realize one’s individual soul by contemplation, penetrating the illusory nature of the material world, and abjuring worldly ambition. His book, published several months later, described reincarnational stages, and ascending states of consciousness. The fourth and final state, which “may be called transcendental consciousness,” is ineffable, though “glimpses” of it “may be obtained in the abnormal condition of extasis.”[10]
Yeats later said that he learned more from Chattterjee than "from any book." Hyperbole; but there is no doubt that he was permanently affected by the concept of ancient and secret wisdom being passed on orally from generation to generation, fragmentary glimpses of an ineffable truth. There are distinctions between East and...
Gnosticism and Neoplatonism, the Theosophy of Madame Blavatsky and Mohini Chatterjee presents an unknown Absolute, from which souls emanate as fragments, or “sparks,” separated from the divine substance, and longing to return to the One from which principal Eastern variation is that, to achieve that ultimate goal, they have to “make a long pilgrimage through many in lives, both in this world and the next.”[11]

Many years later, in 1929, Yeats wrote an eponymous Chatterjee.” Its final words, “Men dance on deathless feet” (though attributed to various “great sages”), by Yeats commentary” on Chatterjee’s own “words” on reincarnation, no reference to a personal God, and we are to “pray for nothing,” just repeat every night in bed, that one has been a king, rascal, knave. “Nor is there anything/ …That I have not upon my breast/ A myriad heads have lain.” Such words Mohini Chatterjee to “set at rest/ A boy’s turbulent days.” When that boy, almost forty years later, published “Mohini Ch Winding Stair and Other Poems (1933), he placed preceding what is certainly his most “turbulent” poem of spiritual purgation and reincarnation: “Byzantium,” in which “complexities of mire and blood,” are presented “dying into a dance,/ An agony of trance,/ An agony of flame that cannot singe a sleeve.” Yet, like most of the other poems we will examine, “Byzantium,” though in this case with unique fury and surging energy, Yeatsian agon between Time and Eternity, flesh and spirit.

§

As we’ve seen, Yeats wondered if, on heightened occasions, HPB’s speech might not be “automatic,” and herself a “trance medium.” But, since he never gave full credence to the “astral” dictations of Blavatsky’s Tibetan Masters, it is ironic that his own major esoteric text had a related genesis. His book A Vision, first published in 1925 and revised in 1937, is based on the “automatic writing” for which Mrs. Yeats of when, in the early days of their marriage in 1917, she
husband’s thoughts were drifting back to the love of his life and his Muse, the unattainable Maud Gonne, and to her lush daughter, Iseult, to whom Yeats had also proposed before marrying his wife. Whatever their origin, psychological or occult, the wisdom conveyed to George by her “Communicators,” and then passed on to her husband, preoccupied the poet for years. Alternately insightful and idiosyncratic, beautiful and a bit bananas, *A Vision* may not be required reading for lovers of the poetry, even for serious students. As one Yeatsian wittily put many, “a little seems too much, his business none of our

But Yeats’s purpose was serious, and, as always, a balancing attempt to exercise individual creative freedom within a rich tradition. In dedicating the first edition of *A Vision* to “Vestigia” (Moina MacGregor Mathers, head of the Order of the Golden Dawn), Yeats noted that while some in the Order were “looking for spiritual happiness or for some form of unknown power,” clearly Hermetic or historically Gnostic goals, he had a more practical and poetry-centered object, though that, too, reflects the intuitive Gnosticism of creative artists seeking their own personal visions. Even back then, in the 1890s, he claims, he anticipated what would finally emerge as *A Vision* [1925], xi). A few years earlier, T. S. Eliot, though he had no more patience than did W.H. Auden with Yeats’s esoteric pursuits, had memorably described creative freedom operating within a larger and necessary historical discipline as the interaction between "Tradition and the Individual Talent."

If it is not mandatory that those drawn to the poetry read it, absolutely necessary that Yeats write it. It illuminates and even provides the skeletal structure for some of his the single best known of which, “The Second Coming, accompanied by a long note, reproducing the double-gyre, its central symbol of *A Vision*. Yeats tells us, in the “Introduction
edition of *A Vision*, that, back in 1917, he struggled for
decipher the “almost illegible script,” which he neverth-
eless found “so exciting, sometimes so profound,” that he not only perse-
vered, but offered to give up poetry to devote what
own life to “explaining and piecing together those scatt
which he believed contained mysterious wisdom. The
one of the unknown writers was welcome news for him a
was the answer, ‘we have come to give you metaphors fc

THE GYRE & ITS IMAGI

The cases are traced by the revolving spindle which carri
threads As the gyre disintegrates a new cone starts to a revome dirc
The spiral is associated with the whirling sta

"Things fall apart, the centre cannot hold."
"Turning & turning in the
The f’sion cannot hear

"The loosed pern."
"Hades’ bobbin."
"Perse in a gyre."
"Though I had long perned in a gyre."
"Here the loves erecte to:
The flaming circle of our days,
Gyning springing to and fro
In these great ignorant leafy ways."

References: Plato. Republic VII
Dante. Inferno XVII & Dore’s Illustrations.
Swedenborg. Principia & Spiritual Diary.

Yeats’s Gyre
Yeats was a man at once credulous and skeptical. His lifelong quest for esoteric knowledge was countered by the circumspection of an intelligent, self-divided man and a notably dialectical poet. But he had no doubt that there was a spiritual realm. He strove to acquire knowledge of that world through any and all means at hand: studying the "perennial philosophy," but not excluding the occasional resort to hashish and mescal to induce occult visions, and belief in astrology, of which he attended many. A séance is at the center of one of his most dramatic plays, *Words upon the Window-pane* (1932), which helps explain the emphasis on "a medium’s mouth" in his cryptic poem "Fragments," written at the same time, and which I will discuss at some length.

Though it is difficult to track and disentangle intertwined strands of thought and influence, let alone make conclusive pronouncements, two significant Yeats scholars, Allan Grossman (in his 1969 study of *Among the Reeds*, titled *Poetic Knowledge in Early Yeats*) and Harold Bloom, in his sweeping 1970 study, grandly titled *Conclusion that their man was essentially a Gnostic. The same assertion governs an impressive though unpublished 1992 Ph.D dissertation by Steven J. Kelley and titled *Yeats, Bloom, and the Dialectics of Theory, Criticism and Poetry*. My own conclusion is close, but less certain.

§

There is no question that Yeats was a lifelong Seeker of "knowledge" he was seeking, whether poetic or Hermetic, often in close alignment, with the quest for internal, intuitive knowledge of spiritual truth believed by Gnostics, ancient and modern, to provide the one path to deliverance from the constraints of material existence, and thus to be essential to salvation.

On the other hand, he wanted, as he told "Vestigia," to participate in a spiritual tradition that "would leave my imagination free to create as it chose." The power and passionate intensity of much of his best poetry derives from Yeats’s commitment to the paradox that the "sacred," unquestionably valid, was to be found through the "profane," and in the
A profound point was made three-quarters of a century ago by a perceptive student of Yeats’s life and work, Peter Allt, later the editor of the indispensable “Variorum Edition” of the poems, persuasively that Yeats’s “mature religious Anschauung—religious belief without any religious faith, notional assent to the reality of the supernatural” combined with “an emotional dissent from its actuality.”[14] In Gnostic terms (which are not Allt’s), Yeats, as a student of secret wisdom, responded, not to the orthodox Christian emphasis on pistis (God’s gift of faith), but to gnosis: the esoteric knowledge derived from individual intuition of divine revelation, often, as in that most formidable of Gnostics, Valentinus, in the guise of myth garmented as philosophy.[15] What Allt refers to as “emotional dissent” illuminates Yeats’s resistance to Christianity, and his occasional need to “mock Plotinus’ thought/ And cry in Plato’s teeth,” as he does in the final section of “The Tower” in the very act of preparing his “peace” and making his “soul.” But emotional dissent and the making of one’s own soul in an act of self-redemption are hardly alien to the individual gnosis.

Paramount to understanding Yeats as man and poet is the tension between the two worlds, between what he called the Soul and the antithetical, the never fully resolved debate between the Soul and the Self (or Heart). As we will see, that tension plays out from his earliest poems to the masterpieces of his maturity. The theme begins with his first published major work, The Wanderings of Oisin, a lengthy quest-poem centering on the debate between paganism and Christianity, between the Celtic warrior Oisin and St. Patrick. The theme continues with his pivotal Rosicrucian poem, “To the Rose upon the Rood of Time” (1893), and culminates in the great debate-poems of his maturity: “A Dialogue of Self and Soul” (1927) and career-synopsizing debate between “The Soul” and section VII of the poetic sequence revealingly titled “Vacillation,” which appeared forty years after “To the Rose upon the Rood o
The final section of “Vacillation” ends with the poet blessing, yet—gently and gaily, if somewhat patronizingly—rejecting the Saint, here represented by the Catholic theologian Baron von Hügel, who had, in his book *The Mystical Element of Religion*, stressed “the costingness of regeneration.” In the last and best of his *Four Quartets*, T. S. Eliot aligns himself with von Hügel by endorsing, in the conclusion of “Little Gidding” (lines 293-94), “A condition of complete simplicity/ (Costing not less than everything).” In section 2, in the Dantesque ghost-encounter (seventy of the finest lines he ever wrote and, by his own admission, the ones that had “cost him the most effort”), Eliot respectfully but definitively differentiated himself from the recently deceased Yeats. In that nocturnal encounter with a largely Yeatsian “compound familiar ghost,” Eliot echoes in order to alter “Vacillation,” and the refusal of “The Heart” to be “struck dumb in the simplicity of fire!”[16] In the context of the theme of contrast between Eliot and Yeats is illuminating; and Eliot is right to perceive as his mighty opposite in spiritual terms, W. B. Yeats, whom he pronounced in his 1940 memorial address, the great century, “certainly in English and, and, as far as I can tell, in any language,” but who was also, from Eliot’s Christian perspective, an occultist and a pagan.

The charges were hardly far-fetched. The final section begins with the poet wondering if he really must “part” since both “Accept the miracles of the saints and honor sanctity,” yet he *must*, for although his heart “might find relief/ Christian man and choose for my belief/ What seems n the tomb,” he must

play a predestined part.

Homer is my example and his unchristened heart.

The lion and the honeycomb, what has Scripture said?

So get you gone, von Hugel, though with blessings on your head.

In sending the poem to Olivia Shakespear, his first lover and later most intimate lifetime correspondent, Yeats, having just re-
poetry, cited that line, and observed: “The swordsman repudiates the saint, but not without vacillation. Is that the theme—Usheen and Patrick—“so get you gone Von Hugel though with blessings on your head’?” (Letters, 790)

§

In referring throughout to Yeats as a Seeker, I am alluding to a very early, little-known “dramatic poem in two scenes” with that title. Though Yeats later struck The Seeker from his canon, its theme—the perennial quest for secret knowledge, usually celebrated but always with an acute awareness of the attendant dangers of estrangement from “mere” human life—initiates what might be fairly described a archetypal pattern of his life and work.[17] The “Seeker” aged knight who sacrifices the normal comforts of life and shirks social responsibilities in order to follow a mysterious, beckoning voice. In his dying moments, he discovers that the alluring voice he has been pursuing all his life is that of a bearded hag, whose name is “Infamy.” That final turn looks back to Celtic mythology and to Book I, Canto ii of Spenser’s Faery Queen, where the evil witch Duessa, outwardly “faire,” is actually “fowle.” It also anticipates Rebecca du Maurier’s short story, “Don’t Look Now” (later turned by director Nicholas Roeg into a haunting film starring Donald Sutherland and Julie Christie). Of course, Celtic mythology also has instances of reversal. In the most famous modern version (Yeats’s 1902 play Cathleen ni Houlihan starring the poet’s beloved Maud Gonne), the old hag transformed into a beautiful woman: “a young girl with the walk of a queen,” who is Ireland herself, rejuvenated by blood-sac
As in that seminal precursor poem for Yeats, Shelley’s theme, with its tension between the material and spiritual worlds, is at once Gnostic and High Romantic. As such, the Seeker-theme illuminates, along with several of Yeats’s most beautiful early quest-lyrics, two quintessential, explicitly Rosicrucian, poems: “To the Rose upon the Rood of Time” and, a poem I will get to in due course, “The Secret Rose.”

“To the Rose upon the Rood of Time,” the italicized poem opening the 1893 volume *The Rose*, establishes, far more powerfully than this poet’s lifelong pattern of dialectical vacillation, of being “pulled” between the temporal and spiritual worlds. In his 1907 essay “Poetry and Tradition,” Yeats would fuse Romanticism (Blake’s dialectical “Contraries” without which there can be “no progress”) with Rosicrucianism: “The nobleness of the Arts,” Yeats writes, “is in the mingling of contraries, the extremity of sorrow, the extremity of joy, the perfection of personality, the perfection of its surrender. The red rose opens at the meeting of the two beams of the cross, at the trysting place of mortal and immortal, time and eternity.”

In “To the Rose upon the Rood of Time,” the symbolist poet seeks to
“find” the immortal within the mortal; yet there is an inevitability in the mingling, or contrast, between “all poor foolish things that live a day” and “Eternal Beauty wandering on her way.” That mingling, or contrast, concludes the poem’s two 12-line movements. The second part begins with the Rose to “Come near, come near, come near...,” only to suddenly recoil from total absorption in the eternal symbol. He may be recalling Keats, who, at the turning point of the “Ode to a Nightingale,” suddenly realizes that if he were to emulate the nightingale’s “pouring forth thy soul abroad/ In such an ecstasy,” by dying, he would, far from entering into unity with the “immortal Bird,” be divorced from everything else, forever: “Still wouldst thou sing, and I have ears in vain —/ To thy high requiem become a sod.”

Yeats’s recoil in “To the Rose upon the Rood of Time” is no less abrupt, and thematically identical: “Come near, come near, come near—Ah, leave me still/ A little space for the rose-breath to fill!” Yeats recoils, marked by a rare exclamation-point, is a frightened defense against the very Beauty he remains in quest of—like his predecessor, the Shelley of the “Hymn to Intellectual Beauty.” But Yeats hesitates, afraid that he will be totally absorbed, engulfed, in the spiritual realm symbolized by the Rose. Along with Keats at the turning point of the “Ode to a Nightingale,” another parallel may be illuminating.

The Latin Epigraph to The Rose—Sero te amavi, Pulchritudo tam antiqua et tam nova! Sero te amavi—is from The Confessions (“Too late I have loved you, Beauty so old and so new! Too late I have loved you”), a passage (X, 27) in which St. Augustine, addressing God, kindled with a desire that God approach him. Yeats would quote these same Latin lines to illustrate that the religious life and the life of the artist share a common goal. But the plea for “a little space” in “To the Rose upon the Rood of Time” may remind us of a more famous remark by Augustine, also addressed to God, but having to do with profane rather than sacred love. A sinful man, still in love with his mistress, he would, Augustine tells us, pray: “O Lord, give me chastity and continency, but not yet!” For I was afraid, lest you should hear me soon, and soon deliver me from the disease of concupiscence.
desired to have satisfied rather than extinguished” (Conf.

In pleading with his Rose-Muse to “come near,” yet “l
title space for the rose-breath to fill,” Yeats also fears a
deliverance from the temporal world. Augustine is “
[God] should hear me too soon.” Yeats is afraid “Lest com
common things that crave.” Becoming deaf to the tran
its “heavy mortal hopes that toil and pass,” he worries t
alone to hear the strange things said/ By God to…those
thus “learn to chaunt a tongue men do not know.” The
and eternal beauty symbolized by the Rose is much to
this quester is also a poet; and “a poet,” as Wordsworth r
Preface to Lyrical Ballads, is above all, “a man speaking
The “rose-breath” is the crucial “space” between the tw
as elsewhere, self-divided Yeats is pulled in two antith
Hence the debates, implicit and often explicit, that shap
A memorable paragraph in his most beautiful prose work begins, “We make out of the quarrel with others, rhetoric, but out of the quarrel with ourselves, poetry.”[20] Almost forty years after he wrote “To the Rose upon the Rood of Time,” Yeats presented, in section VII of his poetic sequence “Vacillation,” a debate between “The Soul” and “The Heart.” Once again, and more dramatically, the more Yeatsian of the interlocutors resists the option of chanting in “a tongue men do not know.” The Soul offers “Isaiah’s coal,” adding, in an imperious rhetorical question, “what more can man desire?” But the Heart, refuses to be “struck dumb in the simplicity of fire,” his but cauterized by the spiritual fire of that live coal the rather Promethean angel took from God’s altar and brought to the prophet’s lips in Isaiah 6:6-7. Having just refused to “seek out” spiritual “reality,” the Heart goes on, after indignantly rejecting Isaiah’s coal and “the simplicity of fire,” to adamantly spurn Soul’s final promise and threat: “Look on that fire, salvation walks within.” The Heart anachronistically but dramatically responds, “What theme had Homer but original sin?” Though it firmly stands its antithetical ground, the Heart the lot-darkening concept of original sin, and accepts the notional distinction (Platonic, Neoplatonic, Christian) between spiritual “reality” and material “things that [merely] seem.” But since it is things of the world that fuel an artist’s fire and provide Heart emotionally dissents. The tension between contraries, and the titular “vacillation,” persist, as does the desire to merge at some “trysting place,” Yeats’s language characteristically the spiritual and the erotic.

Before turning to “The Secret Rose,” which appeared volume, two other poems from The Rose merit comment: “Who Goes with Fergus?” and, immediately following, “The Man who Dreamed of Faeryland.” Both are beautiful, and both embody the tension between the two worlds. The first suggests that the peace promised
Otherworld is more tumultuous than it appears; the \textit{Seeker} and \textquote{The Stolen Child}, emphasizes the human cost by Otherworldly dreams. I intend to return to \textit{"The Man who Dreamed of Faeryland"} later in this essay, juxtaposing it with \textit{"What Then?"}, a poem written almost a half-century later, and which, I believe, amounts to a point-by-point refutation of the earlier poem—except, crucially, for the refrain.

\textit{"The Man who Dreamed of Faeryland"} is a catalog of might-have-beens. The \textquote{tenderness} of love; the \textquote{prudent years} that might have freed him from \textquote{money cares and fears}; the maintenance of a \textquote{fine angry mood} leading to \textquote{vengeance} upon mockers; and, finally, \textquote{unhaunted sleep} in the grave: all have been lost, spoiled by the repeated \textquote{unnecessary cruel voice} that \textquote{shook the man out of his new ease}, paralyzing him so that he dies without ever having lived. This is a variation on the siren call of the faeries in \textit{"The Stolen Child" ("Come away, O human child!")}, and on the \textquote{voice} that beckons and deceives the victim of \textit{The Seeker}—emanates, of course, from the Otherworld, in this case from a Celtic \textquote{woven world-forgotten isle}, where

\begin{quote}
There dwelt a gay, exulting, gentle race
Under the golden or the silver skies;
That if a dancer stayed his hungry foot
It seemed the sun and moon were in the fruit;
And at that singing he was no more wise.
\end{quote}

The poem ends, \textquote{The man has found no comfort in the grave}. But that closing line is immediately preceded by a rather cryptic couplet: \textquote{Why should those lovers that no lovers miss/Dream, until God burn Nature with a kiss?} Presumably, in Faeryland, where the boughs are \textquote{changeless} and the waves \textquote{dreamless}, all dreams are fulfilled, as are the desires of those perfect lovers, who are together, a not \textquote{miss} one another. Thus, there is no need for further dreaming, \textquote{until} (always a pivotal word in poems, and notably in \textquote{"God burn Nature with a kiss."} Yeats’s early poetry has among the most dramatic the windblown Blakean confl...
Secret Rose.” But the apocalypse in the Faeryland poem, unless one has come across Yeats’s story “The Untiring Ones,” where the faeries dance for many centuries “until God shall burn up the world with a kiss.”[23]

We also have a supposedly perfect world, with the “deep wood’s woven shade” and lovers who “dance upon the level shore,” in “Who Goes with Fergus?” Originally a song in the earliest version (1892) of Yeats’s play The Countess Kathleen, it was a favorite among the early memorized by James Joyce—the song he sang in lieu of the prayer at his mother’s deathbed and whose words haunt his alter ego, Stephen Dedalus, throughout Bloomsday. Fergus, the king of Ulster who put aside his crown to live in peace and “pierce the deep wood’s woven shade,” invites a young man and maid to join him in his forest paradise, where, he promises, they will “brood on hopes and fear no more”;

And no more turn aside and brood
Upon love’s bitter mystery;
For Fergus rules the brazen cars,
And rules the shadows of the wood,
And the white breast of the dim sea
And all disheveled wandering stars.

That enchanting final line has sexual precursors; it fuses the “golden tresses” Eve “wore/ Disheveled” and in “wanton ringlets” (4:305-6) with Pope’s echo in The Rape of the Lock, which ends with Belinda’s shorn tresses consecrated “midst the Stars”: “Not Berenices’s Locks first rose so bright,/ The Heavens bespangling with disheveled Light.” Those sexual undercurrents are present in all three of the concluding lines. Despite the emotional respite promised by Fergus, the poem’s climactic imagery—“shadows of the wood,” the “dim sea,” the “disheveled wandering stars”—embraces earth, sea, and the heavens—extends to this supposedly peaceful erotic tumult of “love’s bitter mystery.”
The quest-theme first established crudely in *The Seeker* “The Stolen Child,” “The Man who Dreamed of Faeryland,” “Goes with Fergus?,” and, perhaps most seminally in “The Rood of Time,” also provides the thematic structure for the two Byzantium poems, featuring, first, a sailing after knowledge and, second, a process of purgation, both of which turn out to be spiritual and erotic. Looking ahead several decades, therefore, I’m compelled to note that something similar happens in poems, whose subject is the opposition of flesh and spirit, natural flux and spiritual form, but whose shared antitheses are polarities—Blakean Contraries ultimately interdependent. The Byzantium poems seem proof of Yeats’s Golden Dawn name, *Demon Est Deus Inversus* proverb, “Eternity is in love with the productions of time.” That proverb is from *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Blake’s affirmation of the polar nature of being, privileging, in the dialectic of necessary Contraries, “Energy” and the active “Prolific” over the “Devouring,” religious.

In “Sailing to Byzantium,” a sixty-year-old and temporarily impotent poet, painfully aware that the world of youth and sexual vitality is “no country for old men,” sets sail for and has finally “come/ To the holy city of Byzantium.” Everything, yet nothing, has changed. The opening stanza’s “young/ In one another’s arms, birds in the trees,—Those dying generations at their song—” are reversed yet mirrored in the final stanza. “Once out of nature,” the aging speaker, his heart “sick with desire/ And fastened to a dying animal,” imagines that heart consumed away and himself (with what Denis Donoghue once wittily characterized as “the desperate certainty of a recent convert”) transformed into a bird of “hammered gold and gold enameling,” set “upon a golden bough to sing/ To lords and ladies of Byzantium/ Of what is past, or passing, or to come.”
In a 1937 BBC broadcast, Yeats glossed the golden bird and golden bough as symbolic “of the intellectual joy of eternity, contrasted to the instinctual joy of human life.” But these artifacts are still, however changed, recognizable “birds in the trees,” so that, whatever the ostensible thrust of the poem, the imagery recreates—as in the “white breast” and “disheveled” stars of the supposedly tumult-free final stanza of “Who Goes with Fergus?”—the very world that has been rejected. Further, the now-avian poet is singing to “lords and ladies” of Byzantium, the sexual principle surviving even in that “holy city”; and his theme, “What is past, or coming,” repeats—in a Keatsian “finer tone,” to be sure—the three-stage cycle of generation presented in the opening stanza: “Whatever is begotten, born, and dies.” “Caught in that sensual music, dying generations....neglect/ Monuments of unageing intellect, seems still partially caught in that sensual music, cycle of time to lords and ladies. Nature is the source of...
I’ve already referred to “Byzantium”—borrowing the “Mohini Chatterjee,” the poem that immediately precedes it—as Yeats’s most “turbulent” engagement in the tension, marked by conflict and continuity, between flesh and spirit, natural and supernatural, Time and Eternity. Though he admired the first Byzantium poem, Sturge Moore expressed a serious reservation: “Your Byzantium, magnificent as the first three stanzas are, lets me down in the fourth, as such a goldsmith’s bird is as much nature as a man’s body, especially if it only sings like Homer and Shakespeare of what is past or passing or to come to Lords and Ladies.” It’s difficult to believe that this was news to Yeats; but, agreeing with Moore to the extent that his friend had shown him that “the idea needed exposition,” he set out to address the issue in a second poem. The result was “Byzantium,” a poem that complicates rather than resolves Sturge Moore’s intelligent if limited quibble. Holy and purgatorial though the city may be, we are told, as the “unpurged images of day recede,” that the Emperor’s soldiery are “drunken” and “abed,” perhaps exhausted from visiting temple prostitutes, since we hear, as night’s resonance recedes, “night-walker’s song/ After great cathedral gong.” Amid considerable occult spookiness, including a walking mummy, more image than shade or man, two images of the Eternal emerge, the works of architect and goldsmith; both transcending and scorn ing the human cycle, sublunary and changeable:

A starlit or a moonlit dome disdains
All that man is,
All mere complexities,
The fury and the mire of human veins.

The second emblem of eternity reprises the first poem’s icon of “hammered gold and gold enameling,” the form the speaker of “Sailing to Byzantium” imagined himself taking once he was “out of nature.”
avian artifact,

   Miracle, bird, or golden handiwork,
   More miracle than bird or handiwork,
   Can, like the cocks of Hades crow,
   Or, by the moon embittered, scorn aloud
   In glory of changeless metal
   Common bird or petal
   And all complexities of mire and blood.

However golden and immutable it may be, that the miraculous bird can be moon-embittered and scornful suggests that it may be “almost as much nature” as the golden bird Moore found insufficiently transcendent in the first Byzantium poem. Even in the overt soul-directed Byzantium poems, the antithetical or life-directed impulse is too passionate to be programmatically subdued. We remember (as with the Byzantium poems’ precursors, Keats’s Nightingale and Grecian Urn odes) the rich vitality of the sexual world being “rejected” in the first poem, and the ambiguity of the famous phrase, “the artifice

And the final tumultuous stanza of “Byzantium,” astonishing last line, evokes a power almost, but no critical analysis:

The multitude of souls (“Spirit after spirit!”) riding into the holy city, each “Astraddle on the dolphin’s mire and blood,” cannot be controlled, even though that surging power is said to be broken by artificers and artifacts. The poem ends with a single extraordinary burst, asserting one thing thematically, but, in its sheer momentum and syntax, suggesting quite another:

   The smithies break the flood,
   The golden smithies of the Emperor!
   Marbles of the dancing floor
   Break bitter furies of complexity,
   Those images that yet
Fresh images beget,  
That dolphin-torn, that gong-tormented sea.

The marbled floor is not only the site for the preceding stanza’s ritual of purgation, where the spirits are envisioned “dying into a dance”; the floor itself seems to be “dancing,” the city almost lifted under the inundation of the prolific sea of generation. Smithies and marbles, we are twice told, “break” (defend against, order, tame) these “furies,” “images,” and the sea itself. All three are the direct objects of that one verb; but, as Helen Vendler has brilliantly observed, “Practically speaking, the governing force of the verb ‘break’ long before the end of the sentence is reached.” The artistic defenses erected to order and transform the flood end up emphasizing instead the turbulent plenitude of nature, and those spawning “images that yet fresh images beget.”

We are left—in one of the most remarkable single lines in all of English literature—with “That dolphin-torn, that gong-tormented sea.” Along with the images that yet fresh images “beget,” that final line recalls but overpowers the teeming fish and flesh—all that is “begotten, born, and dies,” the “salmon-falls, the mackerel-crowded seas” of “Sailing to Byzantium.” The dolphin is at once the mythological savior and transporter of souls to paradise and kin to us, who share of “mire and blood.” Inversely, the “gong,” though emblematic of Time, also, since it recalls the semantron of the opening stanza, the “great cathedral gong,” has to be seen and heard as tormenting the surface of life, yet pulling the sea of generation up, to the spiritual source of life’s transcendence. Once again, though more powerfully than usual, we are caught up in the dialectical conflict between Time and Eternity, sexuality and spirituality, Self and Soul.

§

We will shortly be returning, at long last, to the second of the Rosicrucian poems earlier mentioned. “The Secret Rose” (1896), the last of his explicit Rose poems, appeared in Yeats’s next collection, The Wind Among the Reeds. This fin-de-siècle
volume (his friend Arthur Symons’s influential *The Symbolist Movement in Poetry* appeared the same year), evokes a fallen world, soon to be visited by a longed-for apocalyptic wind. This volume includes Yeats’s most beautiful early poem, the exquisite “Sor Aengus,” which projects ultimate union between the eternal as a “trysting place,” sexual and, in its mingling—of “Faeryland,” where “the sun and moon weep lunar apples of silver and solar apples of gold: a marriage of Deuteronomy. The long-sought immortal, transformed from fish to a woman of the Sidhe, and Aengus, a notably human god, will meet in Eternity, an earthly Paradise where he will

kiss her lips and take her hands;

And walk among long dappled grass,

And pluck till time and times are done

The silver apples of the moon,

The golden apples of the sun.

Less entrancing poems in *The Wind Among the Reeds* feature a world-weary speaker who, to quote the longest-titled poem in a volume of many long titles, “mourns for the Change that has come upon him and his Beloved, and longs for the End of the World.” That devoutly to be wished is far more dramatic in “The Secret Rose.” The poem begins and ends, “Far-off, most secret, and inviolate Rose”: a rondure suggesting that all is now enfolded (the verb “enfold” appears twice in the poem) within the petals of the symbolic flower and Seeker is among those questers who “have sought Sepulchre,/ Or in the wine-vat,” a questing alternatingly Christian or Dionysian. Wandering Aengus sought his elusive beauty (the “apple-blossom in her hair” allying her with Maud Gonne, associated from the day Yeats met her with apple blossoms) “through hollow lands.” The Seeker in “The Secret Rose” also, over many through lands and islands numberless…/ Until unsurprisingly since this poem, too, was written for Maud Gonne—desired consummation suggests another. No sooner is the beautifully-tressed woman of so shining loveliness
loveliness “found” (a state projected in “The Song of Wandering Aengus,” where “I will find out where she has gone…”)

I, too, await
The hour of thy great wind of love and hate.
When shall the stars be blown about the sky,
Like the sparks blown out of a smithy, and die?
Surely thine hour has come, thy great wind blows,
Far-off, most secret, and inviolate Rose?

This apocalypse, with its approaching “hour” and final questions, looks before and after. That “surely” anticipates (“Surely some revelation is at hand,/ Surely the Second Coming is at hand…” Yeats’s terrifying, and yet longed-for apocalypse, in the most-frightening lines of the past hundred years. The “vast image” of the sphinx beast that rises up from “sands of the desert,” coming “out of Spiritus Mundi, Second Coming” had its occult (as opposed to literary) origin in an 1890 symbolic-card experiment conducted with Yeats by MacGregor Mathers, head of the Order of the Golden Dawn. Yeats suddenly saw “a gigantic Negro raising up his head and shoulders among great stones,” changed in its published version to “a desert and a Black Titan.”

Second Coming,” like “The Secret Rose,” also terminates in a mysterious question mingling breathless anticipation with ambiguity, an uncertain certitude. “But now I know,” Yeats began the final movement of “The Second Coming,” but the poem ends with a question, the mark of the terrified but excited reverie that defines the Sublime. Intriguingly, whatever gnosis (‘now I know…” the visionary poet claimed in the final version of “The Second Coming” was reserved, in the drafts, to the apocalyptic “rough beast” itself: “And now at last knowing its hour round/ It has set out for Bethlehem to be born.”

But I said that the apocalyptic “hour” of “The Secret Rose” looks before as well as after; and just as “The Second Coming” had its occult and literary, so too with the apocalypse of “The Secret Rose,” also terminates in breathless anticipation with ambiguity. But now I know,” Yeats began the final movement of “The Second Coming,” but the poem ends with a question, the mark of the terrified but excited reverie that defines the Sublime. Intriguingly, whatever gnosis (‘now I know…” the visionary poet claimed in the final version of “The Second Coming” was reserved, in the drafts, to the apocalyptic “rough beast” itself: “And now at last knowing its hour round/ It has set out for Bethlehem to be born.”

But I said that the apocalyptic “hour” of “The Secret Rose” looks before as well as after; and just as “The Second Coming” had its occult and literary, so too with the apocalypse of “The Secret Rose.” In both cases, the primary literary source is Blake. The slouching rough beast of the later poem fuses (among other creatures)
Tyger with his striking illustration (in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* and elsewhere) of bestial Nebuchadnezzar slouching on all fours. In the earlier poem, the precursor passage is Blake’s description of “The stars consumed like a lamp blown out” (*The Four Zoas*, reappears as Yeats’s “stars...blown about the sky/ Like the sparks blown out of a smithy.” Even Yeats’s substitution of a smithy tribute to Blake’s great creative figure, the blacksmith Los (in *Eternity*, Urthona).

The Blakean echo is hardly accidental. Of the three Rosicrucian short stories Yeats wrote in the 1890s (“Rosa Alchemica,” “The Tables of the Law,” and “The Adoration of the Magi”), “The Secret Rose” is, as the titles alone suggest, most closely related to the first. The hero of “Rosa Alchemica,” the magician Michael Robartes, is a student of comparative literature, especially drawn, as was Yeats, to the prophetic poems of William Blake. Blake’s epic *The Four Zoas* (titled *Vala, and abandoned in manuscript in 1807) was re-published in 1893 by none other than Yeats (and his co-editor, Edwin Ellis). In the finale of *The Four Zoas*, from which Yeats about the “stars” being “blown” about the skies like “sparks...blown out of a smithy.” Even Yeats’s substitution of a smithy...
Man, having finally purged all the evil in himself, can look at infinity unharmed. Los “rose in all his regenerative power”; the hour of transformation arrives:

The sun has left his blackness & found a fresher mor
And the mild moon rejoices in the clear & cloudless night,
And Man walks forth from midst of the fires, the evil is all consumed:

His eyes behold the angelic spheres arising night & day;
The stars consumed like a lamp blown out, & in their stead:
The expanding eyes of Man behold the depths of wondrous worlds.

Here we have the potentially divine Man envisioned by so many Gnostics, Hermeticists, Cabbalists, and Rosicrucians: Valentinus’s “new man…more noble in his glorified state” than he was before “the conflagration”: a Man fully human, liberated from all imprisoning limitations, whether of materialism, the merely bodily (Lockean/empiricist) senses, or political tyranny. In the final lines of Four Zoas, Urthona, the eternal form of Los (and, of the four, the Zoa least in need of redemption) “rises from the ruinous walls/In all his ancient strength.” According to one of Yeats’s (and Joyce’s) favorite phrases of Blake (from an 1800 letter to William Hayley), “The ruins of Time build mansions in Eternity.” In Blake’s anything-but-static Eternity, Urthona, though still ready for combat, is now armed to wage “intellectual war,” the “war of swords” having “departed.” In Blake’s most famous and concise appeal for an imaginative art prophetically inspired and intended to achieve individual and societal redemption, Blake says his “sword” will not “sleep” in his hand. But (“Bow of burning gold,” “Arrows of desire,” Spear, and “Chariot of fire”) is to be employed in ceaseless “Mental Fight.” He has, say, achieved gnosis.[28]

§

Gnosis takes many forms. I have already noted what the visionary poet of “The Second Coming” claims to “know,” and men different assertion in the drafts, where the rough beast
hour come round,” possesses whatever gnosis there is to go round. In “Leda and the Swan” (1925), the sonnet that begins the three-part cycle that ends with “The Second Coming,” we have another announcement of a new historical era, beginning with a birth, and a hint of gnosis. Raped by the swan-god Zeus, “put on his knowledge with his power/Before the indifferent beak could let her drop?” Here is another poem, like “The Secret Rose” and “The Second Coming,” ending in a question, the mystery-marker of the Sublime. There is, of course, about the brutality of the sudden rape, and the indifference following the “shudder in the loins,” which, impregnating Leda, completes Zeus’s mission.

For in fathering Helen of Troy, he also “engenders there” another historical cycle (depicted in imagery at once military and sexual: “The broken wall, the burning roof and tower”) and its sequelae (“And Agamemnon dead, /initiating an historical cycle destined to last until, two thousand years later, another lady, the Virgin Mary, would be visited by another divine bird, his “great wings beating about the room” in Yeats’s “The Mother of God” (1931), a dramatic monologue written by the terrified village girl singled out to bear “The Heavens in my womb.” The question raised at the end of “Leda and the Swan” is not merely rhetorical. Did Leda, “her thighs” rather tenderly “caressed webs,” so intrigue the swan-god that he inadvertently held her just long enough (“Before the indifferent beak could let her drop”) for her to participate momentarily in “his knowledge,” the divine himself?
Gnosis also figures in the cryptic poem, “Fragments,” like its far better-known cousin, “The Second Coming,” and a revelation derived from counter-Enlightenment. Written between 1931 and 1933, this epigrammatic poem is in two short parts. Here is the first:

Locke sank into a swoon;
The Garden died;
God took the spinning-jenny
Out of his side.

In this parody of Genesis, the role of sleeping Adam, from whose side God took Eve, is usurped by a swooning John Locke, whose empiricist epistemology and distinction between primary and secondary qualities seemed to Yeats, as to George Berkeley and Blake before him, to have fractured the organic unity of the living world, and thus
only nature but its archetype, the Edenic “Garden.” The birth, that of the “spinning-jenny,” bears a woman’s name, the irony, and the horror. It was not altogether to the benefit of humanity and a sign of progress, Yeats once mordantly observed, for the home spinning wheel and the distaff to have been replaced by robotic looms and masculinized factories of the Industrial Revolution. Blake’s god of the fallen world, Urizen, presides over an Enlightenment world-machine perceived as “the Loom of Locke” and “Water-wheels of Newton,” all “cruel Works” with moving each other “by compulsion” (Jerusalem 15:15-19).

Yeats is never closer to Blake than in this first part of “Fragments,” where he emulates not only his mentor’s attack on Locke (and Newton), but also his genius for epigram and crystallization, Blake being “perhaps the finest gnomic artist in English literature.” In Yeats’s “Fragments” (I), which has been called “certainly the shortest and perhaps not the least comprehensive history of modern civilization,” the Enlightenment is revealed as a nightmare for the creative imagination; and the monster that rides upon this spirit-sealing sleep of reason is the mechanistic conception of matter, indeed the whole mechanistic rather than organic way of thinking (a crucial contrast Yeats knew from Coleridge, who had borrowed it from A. W. Schlegel), by the invention that epitomizes the Industrial Revolution. It replaces the divinely anesthetized flesh of Adam’s imaginatively inert body (sunk into that fall into division Blake called “Single Vision & Newton’s sleep”), and substitutes for Eve, the beautiful embodiment of Adam’s dream, a mechanical contraption, a patriarchal cog in the dark Satanic mills of which it is proleptic.
But how does Yeats know all this, and know it to be the “truth”? It wasn’t only from absorbing Blake. Or only from reading Whitehead’s *Science and the Modern World* (1925), a chapter of which, “The Romantic Reaction,” Yeats synopsized with a related variation of the Genesis 2 creation-metaphor, jotting in the margin: “The dry rib (Pope) becomes Eve (Nature) with Wordsworth.”

Yeats answers his own question in “Fragments” II:

> Where got I that truth?  
> Out of a medium’s mouth,  
> Out of nothing it came,  
> Out of the forest loam,  
> Out of dark night where lay  
> The crowns of Nineveh.

Is this mere occult mumbo-jumbo, intended to twist the tail of positivists and empiricists? Well, yes and no. But before coming to conclusions, let’s pause to appreciate the wit of the lines, alive with reversals and allusions. Yeats’s ironic reversal of the birth “out of” the side of Locke...
takes the form of a counter-“truth,” born “out of” (repeated four times in succession) a variety of sources. The anaphora is Whitmanian—“Out of the cradle endlessly rocking,/ Out of the mocking bird’s throat, the musical shuttle,/ Out of the Ninth-month midnight.” Birth-images may have suggested Yeats’s equally fertile sources: the female “medium’s mouth,” the “forest loam,” and “dark night,” all in organic and fecund contrast to the mechanical, sterile “birth” of the spinning-jenny.

Yeats deliberately begins with what rationalists would dismiss as among the least reputable sources of “truth”: “Out of a medium’s mouth…” Even Madame Blavatsky, whose own experiments had been discredited, told Yeats, who reported it to John O’Leary in a May 1889 letter, that she “hates spiritualism vehemently—says mediumship and insanity are the same thing” (Letters, 125). In “Fragments” (II) Yeats is having some fun, but it is worth mentioning that the poem was written shortly after the first production of one of Yeats’s most dramatic plays, The Words Upon the Window-pane, which centers on a séance, climaxing with our shocked recognition that the female medium is authentic. The one scholarly skeptic who had attended, a specialist in the life and work of Jonathan Swift, is refuted once the post-séance stage is bare except for the female medium, who is suddenly revealed, not to be faking it as he had been sure all along, but to be channeling the tortured ghost of Swift, and thus speaking the sort of spiritual truth Yeats, half-skeptic himself, sought all his life. “All about us,” he concludes his Introduction to the play, “there seems to start up a precise inexplicable teeming life, and the earth becomes once more, not in rhetorical metaphor, but in reality, sacred.”

The second source is philosophically and theologically scandalous. Subverting the venerable axiom, ex nihilo nihil fit, metaphysicians from Parmenides on and by theologians arguing for the necessary existence of God, Yeats boldly declares that the “truth” revealed to him came “Out of nothing,” only to instantly add details that deepen the mystery and sharpen his thrust against the Enlightenment. Coming “Out of the forest loam,/ Out of dark night…” Yeats deliberately begins with what rationalists would dismiss as among the least reputable sources of “truth”: “Out of a medium’s mouth…” Even Madame Blavatsky, whose own experiments had been discredited, told Yeats, who reported it to John O’Leary in a May 1889 letter, that she “hates spiritualism vehemently—says mediumship and insanity are the same thing” (Letters, 125). In “Fragments” (II) Yeats is having some fun, but it is worth mentioning that the poem was written shortly after the first production of one of Yeats’s most dramatic plays, The Words Upon the Window-pane, which centers on a séance, climaxing with our shocked recognition that the female medium is authentic. The one scholarly skeptic who had attended, a specialist in the life and work of Jonathan Swift, is refuted once the post-séance stage is bare except for the female medium, who is suddenly revealed, not to be faking it as he had been sure all along, but to be channeling the tortured ghost of Swift, and thus speaking the sort of spiritual truth Yeats, half-skeptic himself, sought all his life. “All about us,” he concludes his Introduction to the play, “there seems to start up a precise inexplicable teeming life, and the earth becomes once more, not in rhetorical metaphor, but in reality, sacred.”

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generated from fecund earth, once more become “sacred,” and teeming with inexplicable “life,” replacing or restoring the “Garden” earlier said to have “died.” It also comes, out of a mysterious, or occult, “dark night.”

If the spinning-jenny epitomizes the Industrial Revolution, Alexander Pope’s intended epitaph for Isaac Newton epitomizes the Scientific Revolution and the Enlightenment: “Nature and Nature’s laws lay hid in night,/ God said, Let Newton be! And all was light.” Pope’s couplet, like Yeats’s opening quatrain, plays off Scripture, with assuming God’s role as Creator by verbal fiat: “And God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light” (Genesis 1:3). Pope avoids blasphemy; after all, it was God who said “Let Newton be!” Until the principal scientific genius of the European Enlightenment existed, but “Nature and Nature’s laws lay hid in night darkness, and reversing the “laws” that prior to New night,” Yeats tells us that his Counter-Enlightenment truth came “Out of dark night where lay,” not Nature’s scientific laws, but Nineveh.

Why Nineveh in particular? For one thing, Yeats O’Shaughnessy’s “Ode” celebrating poets as music-makers and prophets. The famous final stanza (and these are the lines Yeats always cited) begins: “We, in the ages lying/ In the buried past of the earth,/ Built Nineveh with our sighing,/ And Babel itself with our mirth.” When,
in “Fragments,” the golden crowns of Nineveh flame up “Out of dark night,” what is evoked is more O’Shaughnessy’s city of the poetic imagination than Ashurbanipal’s capital, majestic as it had been. For Yeats was looking, not merely back to old Nineveh, but cyclically ahead, to the resuscitation of the ancient—a past buried, dark, chthonic, and, here, female. For, as Yeats seems to have known, the Assyrians named their capital city Nin-evah—after “Holy Mother Eve,” the Mother-womb, or Goddess of the Tree of Life in their mythology. Displaced by a machine in the withered Garden of the first part of “Fragments,” Eve, in a return of the repressed, is restored, re-surfacing in the final word of part II, in the disguised but detectable form of the city named for her. Recalling the role of Sophia, often opposed to the male Logos in esoteric tradition, including Gnosticism, I’m reminded as well that gnosis is a Greek female noun.

At his most winning, Yeats reminds us of Hamlet’s skeptical and scholastic friend: “there are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.” But to be wary when Yeats crosses the threshold into the occult. Though concurring in, in fact shaping, Yeats’s cavalier dismissal of Newton as Enlightenment icons, Blake would be appalled by his disciple’s delving into the occult darkness. Though Yeats tended to mystify and occultize him, Blake in fact condemned the heathen “God of this World & the Goddess Nature/ Mystery, Babylon the Great” (Jerusalem 93: 22-25). But what Blake rejects here are the very things his prodigal son celebrates as the matrix of vision: the forest loam and the mysterious dark night where lay the crowns of ancient Nineveh, repository of Assyro-Babylonian mythology.

Of course, Yeats’s recourse to the occult is one measure of the intensity of his need to expedite what he called in that earlier-cited 1892 letter to John O’Leary “the revolt of the soul against the intellect” (That is, somewhat reductively, a description of the Romantic Revolution, the noble attempt to beat back, through restored wonder at a re-enchanted nature and the transformative power of the creative imagination, the passivity of mind and mechanistic materialism...
reigned (Yeats insists in introducing his 1936 anthology of modern poetry) since “the end of the seventeenth century” down to the present. With, he emphasizes—as had Alfred North Whitehead, though his Romantic hero was Wordsworth rather than Blake or Shelley—“the exception of the period beginning at the end of the eighteenth century” and ending “with the death of Byron”: that is to say, the Romantic revolt, a span “wherein imprisoned man beat upon the door.”[32]

That compelling metaphor was repeated the next year in “An Acre of Grass,” Yeats’s late poem (a companion of “What Then?”) in which he prays to be granted the creative “frenzy” and “old man’s eagle mind” he had read of in Nietzsche’s Daybreak. He also specifically invokes “That William Blake/ Who beat upon the wall/ Till truth obeyed his call”—a “truth” related to, but not identical to, the “truth” Yeats claimed in “Fragments” (II) came to him “Out of” Counter-Enlightenment sources both Romantic and, most dubiously, out of a mysterious “dark night” whose counter-Enlightenment frisson will be offset for many readers by resistance to the dangerous irrationality of the occult.

§

Night was not normally privileged over day in Yeats’s thinking. Blake and Nietzsche, his great mentors, were both celebrators of daybreak, of Blake’s “glad day.” In 1902, enthralled by his “excited” reading of “that strong enchanter, Nietzsche,” Yeats drew in the margin of selections from the German philosopher a diagram crucial to understanding much if not all of Yeats’s subsequent thought and work. He grouped under the heading NIGHT: “Socrates, Christ,” and “one god”—“denial of self, the soul turned toward spirit seeking knowledge.” And, under the heading DAY: “Homer” and “many gods”—“affirmation of self, the soul turned from spirit to be its mask & instrument when it seeks life.”[33] Reminiscent of Madame Blavatsky’s alternating “days and nights of Brahma,” that diagrammatical skeleton, anticipated by the pull between eternity and the temporal in such early poems as “To the Rose upon the Rood of Time,” is later fleshed out by Yeats
exemplar in “Vacillation”—“Homer is my example and I heart”—and Self’s choice of Sato’s sword wound in “Heart’s purple”: “all these I set/ For emblems of the tower/ Emblematical of the night.” Ultimately, they are a life-seeking Poet who, without “denial of self,” attempt the antithesis set up a quarter-century earlier in an anthology, usurping Soul’s role by also being oriented seeking knowledge,” or *gnosis*.

“A Dialogue of Self and Soul” is in many ways Yeats’s central poem since its ramifications reach before and after, and it features the greatest of Yeats’s fused symbols: the “ancient blade” (a gift of a Japanese admirer, Junzo Sato) scabbarded and bound in complementary “female” embroidery. That sword and not only “emblems of the day against the tower/ Emblematical of the night.” Fusing the sacred and the profane, war and love, the phallic and the vaginal, the sheathed and silk-wound sword becomes Yeats’s symbol of gyring life, set against the vertical ascent urged by the Neoplatonic Soul. What Gnostics put asunder, body and spirit, Yeats unites. And yet, as we will see, Self’s final act of self-redemption, magnificent but heretical, is as Gnostic as it is Nietzschean.

In the opening movement of the poem, the half in which there is still a semblance of actual dialogue, hectoring Soul repeatedly demands that Self “fix” every thought “upon” the One, “upon” the occult Pole Star, “upon” the spiritual quarter where all thought is done. But the recalcitrant Self remains diverted by earthly multiplicity, by the sword wound in embroidery replicating the windings of mortal nature. In unpublished notes, Yeats describes “Dialogue” as “a variation on Macrobius” (the “learned astrologer” of “Chosen,” the central poem of *A Woman Young and Old*). Yeats had been directed by a friend (F. P. Sturm) to Macrobius’s Neoplatonic *Commentary on Cicero’s Somnium Scipionis*. In Cicero’s admonition of Scipio’s ghostly ancestor, “Why not fix upon the heavens and contemn what is mortal?,” young Scipio admits, “kept turning my eyes back to earth.” According to M
“looked about him everywhere with wonder. His grandfather’s admonitions recalled him to the upper realms.” Though the *agon* between the Yeatsian Self and Soul is identical to that between young Scipio and his grandfather’s spirit, the Soul proves a much less successful spiritual guide than that ghost. Turning a largely deaf ear to Soul’s advocacy of the upward path, Self (revealingly called “Me” in the drafts of the poem) has preferred to focus downward, on life, brooding on the consecrated blade with its tattered but still protective wrapping of “Heart’s purple.” Its “flowering, silken, old embroidery, torn/ From some court-lady’s dress and round/ The wooden scabbard bound and wound” makes the double icon “emblematical” not only of “love and war,” but of the ever-circling gyre: the eternal, and archetypally female, spiral. When Soul’s paradoxically physical tongue is turned to stone with the realization that, according to his own austere doctrine, “only the dead can be forgiven,” Self takes over the poem. He goes on to win his way, despite difficulty, to a *self-redemptive* affirmation of life.
Self begins his peroration defiantly: “A living man is blind and drinks his drop./ What matter if the ditches are impure?” This Neoplatonism, privileging life’s filthy downflow, or “defluction,” over the Plotinian pure fountain of emanation, is followed by a defiant rhetorical question: “What matter if I live it all on that life?” asks Nietzsche’s Zarathustra. “Well then! Once more! Well then! Once more!”

Self’s grandiose and premature gesture is instantly undercut by the litany of grief that Nietzschean Recurrence, the exact repetition of the events of one’s life, would entail—from the “toil of growing up,” the “ignominy of boyhood” and the “distress” of “changing into a man,” to the “pain” of the “unfinished man” having to confront “his own clumsiness,” then the “finished man,” old and “among his enemies.”

Despite the Self’s bravado, it is in danger of being shaped, deformed, by what Hegel and, later, feminist critics have emphasized as the judgmental Gaze of Others. Soul’s tongue may have turned to stone, but malignant, almost Archon-like ocular forces have palpable designs upon the assaulted Self:

How in the name of Heaven can he escape
That defiling and disfigured shape
The mirror of malicious eyes
Casts upon his eyes until at last
He thinks that shape must be his shape?

This would be, as Yeats says in “Ancestral Houses” (1921), to lose the ability to “choose whatever shape [one] wills,” and (echoing arrogant Duke, who “choose[s] never to stoop”) to “never stoop to a mechanical / Or servile shape, at others’ beck and call”: Yeats’s rejection of “slave morality” in favor of Nietzschean “master morality.”

The centrality of “A Dialogue of Self and Soul” is enhanced by its repercussions in Yeats’s own work and its absorption of so many influences outside the Yeatsian canon. Aside from the Body/Soul debate-tradition, from Cicero to Milton and Marvell, and the combat between Nietzsche on the one hand and Neoplatonism on the other, this Yeatsian psychomachia incorporates, among other Romantic tradition, another Browning poem, “Childe Rol...
Tower Came,” which supplies those “malicious eyes” that cast upon Self a distorting lie so powerful that he temporarily falls victim to it, and Blake’s feminist *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*. Self’s victory, like Oothoon’s, is over severe moralism, the reduction of the body to a defiled object. In Yeats’s case, Self’s victory is his own Neoplatonism. Though Gnosticism, too, seeks to redeem the body, the heterodox Gnostic emphasis on self-redemption makes it compatible with Blake, Nietzsche, and Yeats. “Dialogisches Selbstüberwindung,” creative “self-overcoming,” for, as Yeats said, “we make out of the quarrel with others, rhetoric, but of the quarrel with ourselves, poetry.”

§

Since “Dialogue” is a quarrel with himself, the spiritual tradition is not simply dismissed, here any more than in the Crazy Jane or Woman Young and Old sequences. For Yeats, the world of experience, however dark the declivities into which the generated soul may drop, is never utterly divorced from the world of light and grace. The water imagery branching through Self’s peroration subsumes pure fountain and impure ditches. There is a continuum. The Plotinian fountain cascades down from the divine One through mind or intellect (*nous* depths. As long, says Plotinus, as *nous* maintains its gaze on and contemplation of God (the First Cause or “Father”) likeness of its Creator (*Enneads* 5.2.4). But, writes Macrobius (*Commentary* 1.14.4), the soul, “by diverting its attention more and more, though itself incorporeal, degenerates into the fabric of bodies.”

Viewed from Soul’s perspective, Self is a falling off from. When the attention, supposed to be fixed on things above—down to the blade on his knees wound in tattered silk and, further downward, to life’s “impure” ditches—the Self has indeed degenerated into the “fabric,” the tattered embroidery, yet, as usual in later Yeats, that degradation is also a triumph, couched in terms modulating from stoic contentment through fierce embrace to a casting out of remorse, leading to self-forgiveness and redemption.
I am content to live it all again
And yet again, if it be life to pitch
Into the frog-spawn of a blind man’s ditch,
A blind man battering blind men;
Or into that most fecund ditch of all,
The folly that man does
Or must suffer, if he woos
A proud woman not kindred of his soul.

I am content to follow to its source
Every event in action or in thought;
Measure the lot, forgive myself the lot!
When such as I cast out remorse
So great a sweetness flows into the breast
We must laugh and we must sing,
We are blest by everything,
Everything we look upon is blest.

Following everything to the “source” within, Self spurns the numbing Neoplatonic doctrine that “only the dead can be forgiven.” Instead, having pitched with vitalistic relish into life’s filth, Self audaciously (or blasphemously) claims the power to forgive in a similar act of self-determination, Self “casts” reversing the defiling image earlier “cast upon” him by malicious eyes.” The sweetness that “flows into” the self-forgiving breast redeems the frog-spawn of the blind man’s ditch “most fecund ditch of all,” the painful but productive bittersweet fruit of unrequited love.

That sweet flow also displaces the infusion (infundere: “to pour in”) of Christian grace through divine forgiveness. It is a claim once redemptive and heretical, and a masterly fusion of Yeats’s two principal precursors. “Nietzsche completes Blake, and
roots,” Yeats claimed. If, as he also rightly said, Blake’s central doctrine is a Christ-like “forgiveness of sins,” the sweetness that flows into suffering but self-forgiving “breast,” the breast in which “all deities reside,” allies the Romantic poet with Nietzsche. He had been preceded by the German Inner Light theologians, but it was the son of a Protestant minister, to most radically transvalue the Augustinian doctrine that man can only be redeemed by divine power and grace, a foretaste of predestination made uncompromising in the strict Protestant doctrine of the Elect as an unmerited gift of God. One must find one’s countered Nietzsche in _Daybreak_, a book read by Yeats. He who has “definitively conquered himself, henceforth regards it as his own privilege to punish himself, to pardon himself”—in Yeats’s phrase, “forgive myself the lot.” We must cast out remorse and despise ourselves: “Then you will no longer have any need of your god, and the whole drama of Fall and Redemption will be played out to the end in yourselves!”[37]

But, as I earlier suggested, this is as Gnostic as it is Nietzschean. The most formidable of the historical Gnostics, Valentinus, claimed that the person who received _gnosis_ could purge himself of ignorance associated with matter. He describes the process in the “Gospel of Truth,” a Valentinian text unearthed at Naj Hammadi in 1945. In stark contrast with the orthodox Christian doctrine of salvation through the grace of God, Valentinus declared that “It is within Unity that each one will attain himself; within _gnosis_ he will purify himself from multiplicity into Unity, consuming matter within himself like a fire, and darkness by light, death by life.” In the best-known Valentinian formulation, “what liberates us is the _gnosis_ of who we were, what we became; where we were, whereunto we have been thrown; whither we ha we are redeemed; what birth is, and what rebirth.” Here (Theodotus) and elsewhere in Gnostic literature, salvation is defined, as it is in Romanticism (from which Gnosticism often seems less a deviation than a precursor), as an escape into the self, where introspective private vision, we find true knowledge, _gnosis_. The quest is solitary. When Sturge Moore, who was designing...
for the volume containing “Byzantium,” asked if Yeats saw “all humanity riding on the back of a huge dolphin,” Yeats responded, “One dolphin, one man” (Yeats-Moore Correspondence, 165). There is no real need for any Other; the individual who has attained gnosis and sole agent of redemption.[38]

In the now-famous Gospel of Thomas, the most audaciously heterodox of the Naj Hammadi texts, the Gnostic Jesus of Thomas tells us, “Whoever drinks from my mouth will become as I am.” The central teaching, again, is internal salvation, redemption from within: “If you bring forth what is within you, what you bring forth will do not bring forth what is within you, what you do not destroy you.” If Emerson hadn’t been speaking more than a century before the Gospel of Thomas had been rediscovered, he might have been accused of plagiarizing from that long-suppressed text in his Divinity School Address, the bombshell he exploded at Harvard in 1838. Emerson celebrated Jesus not as divine, nor even as Lord, but as the religious thinker who first realized that “God incarnates himself in man.” He informed the shocked ministers and thrilled graduating students in the audience: “That is always best which gives me to myself. That which shows God in me, fortifies me. That which shows God out of me, makes me a wart and a wen.” As heterodox as Thomas’s, Emerson imagined saying, in “a jubilee of sublime emotion, ‘I am me, God acts; through me, speaks. Would you see God, see me; thee, when thou also thinkest as I now think.’”[39]

It is primarily under the twin auspices of Blake and Nietzsche, manipulated by Yeats, that the Self finds the bliss traditionally reserved for those who follow the ascending path. But that heretical self-redemption is also Gnostic. Whatever its various “sources,” Yeats’s alteration of the orthodox spiritual tradition considered cyclicism the ultimate nightmare, with that Nietzsche whose exuberant Zarathustra jumps “with both feet” into the “golden-emerald delight” of self-redemption and Eternal Recurrence, exultantly embraced as the ultimate affirmation of life in the “Yes and Amen Song” that concludes part III:
In laughter all that is evil comes together, but is pronounced holy and absolved by its own bliss; and if this is the omega, that all that is heavy and grave should become light, all that is body, dancer, all that is spirit, bird—and alpha and omega: oh, how should I not lust after the nuptial ring of rings, the ring of recurrence?!

We might say that Zarathustra here also “jumps” into a cluster of images and motifs we would call Yeatsian, remembering, along with Self’s laughing, singing self-absolution, “Among School Children,” where “body is not bruised to please soul,” and we no longer “know/ The dancer from the dance”; the natural and golden birds of the Byzantium poems; and the final transfiguration of Yeats’s central hero, both in Death of Cuchulain and “Cuchulain Comforted,” into a singing bird.

In “A Dialogue of Self and Soul,” the Yeatsian-Nietzschean Self, commandeering the spiritual vocabulary Soul would monopolize, affirms Eternal Recurrence, the labyrinth of human tangled antinomies of joy and suffering. In subverting the debate-tradition, Yeats leaves Soul with a petrified tongue, and a chant that is among the most rhapsodic in that whole tradition of secularized supernaturalism Yeats inherited from the Romantic poets and from Nietzsche. In a related if somewhat lower register, it is the vision of Crazy Jane and the Woman Young and Old.

Of course, Self and Soul are aspects of the one man, and in his 1930 Diary, “Man can only love Unity of Being” “opponent” we debate with “must be shown for a par expression” (Essays and Introductions, 362). This Valentinian Unity “each one will attain himself “multiplicity.” Yeats’s friend, AE (George Russell) to whom he sent a copy of The Winding Stair, said that of the many superb poems in that remarkable volume he liked “best” of all “A Dialogue of Self and Soul.” Acknowledging his friend’s gift, he wrote, “I am on the side of Soul, but know that its companion has its own eternal claim, and when you side with the Self it is only a motion to that fusion of...
Having astutely synopsized the central Yeatsian dialectic, Russell was tentatively noting its reflection in the poem’s impulse, manifest debate of opposites, toward fusion. We seem to find the secular beatitude of Self’s final chant. But Yeats was not AE, the “saint,” as Mrs. Yeats described him, to her husband’s “poet in Yeats, the Self, gives us—in the whole of “A Dialogue of Self and Soul” and particularly in this magnificent final overcoming of Christian and Neoplatonic dualism and defilement of the body by way of a heterodox, “heretical” self-blessing at once Blakean, Nietzschean, and Gnostic.

§

Despite Self’s triumph in this central poem, Yeats remained torn between what he called in “Vacillation” (echoing Kant) “the antinomies” of soul and body, by antithetical longings for the Otherworld most autobiographical level, for Maud Gonne: that extravagantly beautiful but never fully attainable femme fatale, the Muse that haunts the life and work of the twentieth century’s greatest love poet. His occult speculations were always entangled in his emotional life. “His aim,” Graham Hough concludes, “was to redeem passion, not to transcend it, and a beatitude that has passed beyond the bounds of earthly love could not be his ideal goal” (The Mystery Religion of W. B. Yeats).

Unsurprisingly, then, in the alembic of Yeats’s paradoxical imagination, the search for hidden spiritual knowledge is often merged with knowledge. Even then, however, the beloved proves to be ultimately unattainable, even if physical consummation has been as it was, in December 1908, with the elusive Maud. Yeats was both impressed and deeply moved (responding to both human tragedy and Latinate rhetorical majesty) by a resonant phrase he encountered in reading John Dryden’s translation of Lucretius, one of whose arguments in De rerum natura is that sexual union can never provide complete satisfaction.
In a 1931 conversation with John Sparrow, then Fellow of All Souls' College, Oxford, Yeats cited and expanded on Lucretius from the end of the long passage (1030-1237) on sexual Book IV of *De rerum natura*. In glossing Dryden’s translation of the Roman poet, Yeats seems to echo the Gnostics’ doubly radical dualism, a dualism between man and nature, but also between transmundane God who is utterly Other, Alien, and unknowable except through *gnosis*. Yeats’s citation and commentary are worth quoting because he appears to me to be looking back to four of his own poems, three of them written in 1926-27, the fourth in 1931. Two of them, “A Dialogue of Self and Soul” and “Among School Children,” are indisputably major. The other two, lesser lyrics but closely related to those major texts, are “Summer and Spring,” from *Yeats and Old* sequence, and, the most splendid of the *Crazy Jane* poems, poignant yet triumphant “Crazy Jane and Jack the Journeyman” written in 1931, the same year as his conversation with John Sparrow. Finally, is what Yeats told Sparrow:

The finest description of sexual intercourse ever written was in John Dryden’s translation of Lucretius, and it was introduced to illustrate the difficulty of t
unity: “The tragedy of sexual intercourse is
virginity of the soul.” Sexual intercourse is an attempt to solve the eternal antinomy, doomed to failure because it takes place only on one side of the gulf. The gulf is that which separates the one and the many, or if you like, God and man.]

In “Summer and Spring” (poem VIII of the autobiographical sequence in which the poet is masked as an anonymous “Man Young and Old”), two lovers grown old reminisce “under an old thorn tree.” When they talked of growing up, they “Knew that we’d halved a soul/ And fell the one in t’other’s arms/ That we might make it whole.” We recall, as we are meant to, “Among School Children,” written in the same year. In transitioning from the first to the second stanza of this great poem, we shift abruptly from Yeats’s external persona as senator and school inspector, “a sixty-year-old smiling public man,” to the private, inner man, the poet himself reporting an incident Maud Gonne told from her childhood:

I dream of a Ledaean body bent
Above a sinking fire, a tale that she
Told of a harsh reproof, or trivial event
That changed some childish day to tragedy—
Told, and it seemed that our two natures blent
Into a sphere from youthful sympathy,
Or else, to alter Plato’s parable,
Into the yolk and white of the one shell.

In “Summer and Spring” there is gnosis; the lovers “Knew halved a soul.” The tragedy in this stanza of “Among School Children” lies in the qualifying “seemed” and in the need “to alter Plato’s parable”—a “Lucretian” alteration, since the blending here is empathetic and partial (yolk and white remain separated even within the “one shell”) rather than the full sexual union of Aristophanes’ haunting fable in Plato’s Symposium. It is precisely this “whole” union that the old man claims in “His Memories” (poem VI of A Man Young and Old) and in “Summer and Spring,” which conclude...
variation on the Unity of Being symbolized by the dancer and “great-rooted blossomer” of “Among School Children”: “O what a bursting out there was,/ And what a blossoming,/ When we had all the summer-time/ And she had all the spring!”

But even here, despite that “fecund” blossoming, it is heartache. Two decades later, that night in December how fleeting, remains paramount among the “memories” of Yeats’s “Man Old.” In “real life,” however, after their night of lovemaking in that Paris hotel, Maud had quickly put the relationship back on its old basis, a “spiritual marriage,” informing Yeats in a morning-after note that she was praying that he would be able to overcome his “physical desire” for her. In a journal entry the following month (21 January 1909), Yeats referred despairingly but realistically to the “return” of Maud’s “old dread of physical love,” which has “probably spoiled me never more deeply in love, but my desires must go elsewhere if I would escape their poison.”

Maud Gonne
Yeats and his wife Georgie, late 1920s

Hence, those “others,” including Yeats’s wife, destined to become “friends,” or sexual partners, if never a fully satisfactory “that one” (as he refers to her, namelessly and climactically “Friends”). Since Maud was, ultimately, “not kindred of his soul,” Yeats sought complete union, if only in memory, in poetry, as in “A Man Young and Old” or, empathetically switching gender, of Crazy Jane. Partly based on an old, crazed Irish woman, Jane is not merely promiscuous. Yeats’s occult experiences had led to a feminized, often sexualized, spirituality, early embodied in the beautiful, highly-sexed actress Florence Farr, one of the most gifted women visionaries of the Golden Dawn (and, briefly, his lover). Such female adepts, whose powers he admired and envied, were women of “second sight” (his own sister, “Lily,” his uncle George Pollexfen’s servant, Mary Battle); his experiences at séances, where the mediums were almost invariably women: all convinced him of a female and erotic dimension in spirituality. The artistic result was the two powerful poetic sequences, A Woman Young and Old and the Crazy Jane poems. The third poem in the Jane sequence, “Crazy Jane on the Day of Judgment,” begins:

“Love is all
Unsatisfied”
That cannot take the whole
Body and soul”:

And that is what Jane said.

It ends with Jane still holding forth, now emphasizing **gnosis**, but one that would certainly resonate with most mystics. While mystical experience was possible during life, virtually all Gnostics believed that the true ascent, in which (in Jane’s phrase) “all could be known,” took place after death, with the return of the spirit to its divine origins, the spark of life redeemed and reunited with the world. For most of the Crazy Jane sequence, Jane, making the most of her time on earth, will take an unorthodox **Itinerarium mentis ad Deum**. But here we find her, yearning for Time to disappear and **gnosis** to be achieved:

“What can be shown?
What true love be?
All could be known or shown
If Time were but gone.”

Jane’s male interlocutor—responding, “That’s certainly the case”—might be Yeats himself, who thought Lucretius remained “justified” in insisting on the “failure,” in this life, to bridge “the gulf,” “difficulty of two becoming a unity.”

The poem that immediately follows Jane’s thoughts on the Day of Judgment, “Crazy Jane and Jack the Journeyman,” responds more personally, magnificently, and certainly more audaciously to Dryden’s Lucretius- and Epicurus-based assertion that “The tragedy of sexual intercourse is the perpetual virginity of the soul.” Writing in 1875, the Victorian essayist J. M. Symonds qualified what Dryden before him and Yeats after him designated a “tragedy,” though Symonds goes on to emphasize, even more than Yeats, the Lucretian, Epicurean—and, I would add, Gnostic—bleakness and frustration of lovers whose immaterial souls are entrammeled in the flesh: “Thei
almost tragic," writes a sympathetic but austere Symonds, "in these sighs and pantings and pleasure-throes, and the incomplete fruition of souls pent up within their frames of flesh." Symonds seems to reflect, along with the frustration described by Lucretius (and Platonism and Neoplatonism in general), the dualism of the Gnostics, concerned above all with freeing the spirit dwelling within (to quote two passages from Genesis well known to Gnostics) that "coat of flesh" imprisoning "the spark of life" (3:21, 3:78).

In the beginning (in what Shelley would later call "the white radiance of eternity"), we were "in the light," uncreated, fully human, and also divine. What makes us free, in the present and future, the Gnostics insisted, is the *gnosis* of who we were back then, when we were "in the light." Crazy Jane, returning to the One, "Shall leap into the light lost/ In my mother's womb." That Blakean infant joy marks the exuberant climax of her vision. But she had begun by asserting her own *gnosis* shaped by earthly experience:

I know, although when looks meet
I tremble to the bone,
The more I leave the door unlatched
The sooner love is gone,
For love is but a skein unwound
Between the dark and dawn. …

Her knowledge of the transience of sexual love has no abstinence, despite the hectoring of the Bishop (her antagonist in this sequence) that she should "Live in a heavenly mansion,/ Not in some foul sty." In that poem, "Crazy Jane Talks with the Bishop" (sixth in the sequence), Jane tells the Bishop, a "religious" Soul-spokesman nevertheless fixated on "those breasts," where Jehovah nor Jesus, but Eros—has "pitched" (temporarily set up as one would a tent) his mansion. It is not up among the stars as a "heavenly mansion" (Yeats has the Bishop borrow that lofty sty-disdaining phrase from Platonism and Christianity, from Pietro Bembo or John, 14:2). Love's mansion is "pitched" (with, I suspect, a pun on [45])
darkened), not up but down, *inter urinam et faeces*, “excrement.” And her final, definitely punning but serious
Bishop, is that “Nothing can be sole, or whole/ That has
sexual/spiritual variation on the archetypal cycle of
division, and reunification and completion.

Despite the graphic nature of her language here, Jane
insists on is the beauty of both the physical and the ic
“Love” the *tertium quid* mediating between them. Lo
spirit” or “daemon” celebrated by that Sophia-fi
presented in the *Symposium* by Socrates, whose sin
between good and evil, “fair” and “foul,” she correct
Love as “a mean between them,” a yoker of appare
creator of unity out of division. (*Symposium* 202-3).
Whatever its other parallels and sources, Jane’s vision is at least reflective of some aspects of Gnosticism, which is hostile to “law,” especially to Old Testament law and...
puritanical strictures the Bishop wants to impose on Jane. Historical Gnosticism ran the ethical gamut from extreme asceticism to, at its most unconventional, robust promiscuity. The charges, by opponents, of Gnostic orgies were exaggerated (or at least unsupported by evidence). However, two Gnostic sects (the Carpocrations and the Cainites) held that, in order to be freed from the power of the world-creating angels who would “enslave” them, men and women had to “experience everything.” No one, said Carpocrates, “can escape from the power” of the Archons, “but that he must pass from body to body until he has experience of every kind of action practiced in this world, and when nothing is any longer wanting to him then his liberated soul should soar upwards to that God who is above the angels, the makers of the world.” By “fulfilling and accomplishing what is requisite,” the liberated soul will be saved, “no longer imprisoned in the body.”[46] This is certainly in accord with Jane’s notably embodied theory of illumination through a sexual liberation that is ultimately spiritual and salvific:

A lonely ghost the ghost is
That to God shall come;
I—love’s skein upon the ground,
My body in the tomb—
Shall leap into the light lost
In my mother’s womb.

But were I left to lie alone
In an empty bed,
The skein so bound us ghost to ghost
When he turned his head
Passing on the road that night,
Mine must walk when dead.

Most readers of Yeats, even Yeatsian scholars familiar with the Enneads of his beloved Plotinus, misread the cen
stanza, a misreading based on an understandably negative response, when the word is taken out of context, to the adjective "lonely." It is in fact an ultimate affirmation. Jane will come to God as a "lonely ghost," the climax of her "flight of the alone to the Alone." These final words of the Enneads, are also memorably recalled by Yeats's friend Lionel Johnson at the climax of "The Dark Angel," a poem Yeats rightly admired: "Lonely unto the lone I go,/ Divine to the Divinity."

Jane's transcendence is earned not (to echo the final stanza of "Among School Children") through a body-bruising, soul-pleasing abstinence, but (since nothing can be sole or whole that has not been rent) by utterly unwinding, through experience, what Blake called (Paradise) "the sexual Garments." Though "love is but a skein unwound/ Between the dark and dawn," if left unwound, it would bind her to the earth, condemning her ghost, like that of her true love, to "walk when dead." That skein fully unwound, we are to go to our graves (to use a Miltonic phrase, but hardly his meaning), "all passion spent." Yeats told an interviewer at this time, "If you don't express yourself, you walk after you're dead. The great thing is to go empty to your grave."

To be liberated from those world-making angels who would enslave us, we must, Carpocrates and some other Gnostics insisted, "experience" every action possible on earth; then, with nothing left to be experienced, the liberated soul will "soar upwards to that God who is above the angels," those makers of the fallen world. Yeats confided to Olivia Shakespear, "I shall be a sinful man to the end and think upon my deathbed of all the nights I wasted in my youth."[47] He was fond of quoting a passage from Blake's Vision of the Last Judgment sentences which, with their emphasis on both the "realities of intellect" and the need for the passions to "emanate" in a way alien to Plotinus, would appeal to some Gnostics: "Men are admitted into Heaven not because they have curbed and governed their passions, but because they have cultivated their understandings. The treasures of heaven are not negations of passion, but realities of intellect, from which the passions emanate uncurbed in their eternal glory." Carpocrates would endorse that vision of the Last Judg
he might have thought of Crazy Jane’s promiscuous theology, Blake himself saw no puritanical line demarcating the human heart and loins from the human head and spirit.

§

Finally, the Seeker-theme, the quest for *gnosis*, informs a number of late, great poems. I’m thinking of “Lapis Lazuli,” and of three: “Cuchulain Comforted,” “Man and the Echo,” and colloquial debate-poem, “What Then?” If I had to select a testament of Yeats, aside from Self’s chant at the end of *Self and Soul*, the choice would narrow to the final “Lapis Lazuli,” “Cuchulain Comforted,” and “Man and the Echo.” In their own ways, each of these poems constitutes wisdom writing, or the acknowledgment that it may not be attainable in this life. That is true as well of the apparently more casual, but no less momentous, “What Then?”

Written in July 1936, “Lapis Lazuli” was published with Yeats is annoyed by those who cannot abide the gaiety of artists amid impending catastrophe, unaware of the deep truth—known to Hindu mystics, to Nietzsche, and to Arthur O’Shaughnessy, whose creative artists “built Nineveh” and Babel out of their own “sighs” and “mirth”—that “All things fall and are built again/And those that build them again are gay.” To counter the consternation of those “sick of the palette and fiddle-bow,/ Of poets that are always gay,” Yeats presents Shakespearean figures who—like Ophelia, Cordelia, and (by implication) Cleopatra—“do not break up their lines to weep.” Above all, “Hamlet and Lear are gay;/ Gaiety transfiguring all that dread.” Fusing western heroism with Eastern serenity and Nietzsche’s Zarathustrian joy (“He who climbs the highest mountains laughs at all tragic plays and tragic seriousness”), the poem turns in its final movement to the mountain-shaped lapis lazuli sculpture given to Yeats as a gift, and which, in turn, giving the poet his title, serves as the Yeatsian equivalent of Keats’s Grecian urn.

Two Chinamen, behind them a third,
Are carved in lapis lazuli;
Over them a long-legged bird,
A symbol of longevity;
The third, doubtless a serving man,
Carries a musical instrument.

Aside from the obvious resemblance to the Grecian urn, the repeated “or” in the lines that follow seals the connection, yielding to a stunning exercise of the creative imagination, worthy of its precursor, the fourth stanza of Keats’s ode. Since the place of origin of the figures in the sacrificial procession is not depicted on the urn, Keats speculates: “What little town by river or seas-shore, built....” Yeats ups the ante to four repetitions:

Every discoloration of the stone;
Every accidental crack or dent,
Seems a water-course or an avalanche,
Or lofty slope where it still snows
Though doubtless plum or cherry-branch
Sweetens the little half-way house
Those Chinamen climb towards, and I
Delight to imagine them seated there;
There, on the mountain and the sky,
On all the tragic scene they stare.
One asks for mournful melodies;
Accomplished fingers begin to play.
Their eyes mid many wrinkles, their eyes,
Their ancient glittering eyes are gay.

Yeats turns every discoloration and “Every accidental dent” into a feature of the mountain landscape. But the even greater creative leap in this exquisite final movement is the setting of those sculpted figures, frozen in lapis as Keats’s were on the urn, into motion, with the poet delighting to “imagine” them having
prospect of the gazebo half-way up the mountain. That is not quite *sub specie aeternitatis*; that the “little half-way house” is situated at the midpoint rather than on the summit, makes this a human rather than divine vision. To that extent, the Chinese sages’ mountain-vision may not achieve the *gnosis* attained by the naked hermits caverned on another Asian mountain, in Yeats’s 1933 sonnet, “Meru.” Those hermits, aware of the “manifold illusion” of passing civilization after another, “know/ That day brings round the night, that before dawn/ [Man’s] glory and his monuments are gone.” The affirmation of the Chinese sages of “Lapis Lazuli” is also registered in full awareness of “all the tragic scene.” The eyes of these Yeatsian visionaries, wreathed in the wrinkles of mutability, glitter with a tragic joy lit by the poet’s own creative “delight,” and by something resembling the Gnostic “spark.”
Yeats's lapis lazuli carving, (photo above courtesy National Library)
The end of mutability is death. The ancient Chinese sages' gaiety in the face of tragedy may remind us of Yeats's central myth. Cuchulain, the hero of several Yeats poems and a cycle ending with *The Death of Cuchulain*. The poet's final encounter with his Celtic Achilles takes place in a ghostly poem completed on January 13, 1939, two weeks before his death. The magnificent and eerie "Cuchulain Comforted," composed, appropriately, in Dante's...
rima, finds the nameless hero, wounded in battle and slain by a blind man, in the Underworld among “Shrouds that muttered head to head,” and “Came and were gone.” He “leant upon a tree / As though to meditate on wounds and blood.” He is among his polar opposites—“convicted cowards all,” according to one “that seemed to have authority / Among those birdlike things,” and who informs the still armed hero: “Now must we sing and sing the best we can.”

The poem ends with the hero’s apotheosis imminent. Having joined these spirits in a kind of communal sewing-bee, making shrouds, he is soon to undergo their transformation, described in haunting lines reminiscent of Zarathustra’s vision of evil absolved by that vision: all that is “body” becomes “dancer, all that is spirit sang but had nor human tunes nor words,/ Though common as before.//They had changed their throats and had the throats of birds.” That uncanny final line, the pinnacle of the Yeatsian Sublime, is also a final fusion. Marrying the posthumous continuation, as in “Sailing to Byzantium,” of a bird-like poet’s need to sing with the transformation and liberation of the soul, it should thrill Romantics and Gnostics alike. According to Valentinus, “what liberates is the knowledge of [gnosis] of who we were, what we became; where we were, whereunto we have been thrown; whereto we speed, wherefrom we are redeemed; what birth is, and what rebirth.”
This, the best-known Valentinian formula of salvation, is cited by Harold Bloom as a “good motto” for “Cuchulain Comforted,” which Bloom considers “Yeats’s finest achievement in the Sublime.”

One of the most mysterious and yet revelatory death-poems is Yeats’s, along with an unexpected aspect of the solitary hero, Yeats himself: the man under the many masks, “one that,” in yet another bird-image, “ruffled in a manly pose/ For all his timid heart” (“Coole Park, 1929”). It recalls the similar if more personal triumph-in-defeat of
“Echo” (1938), a poem that comes, like the ghost of King Hamlet, “in a questionable shape,” and, appropriately, borrows the questioning and tetrameters of Coleridge’s confessional “The Pains of Sleep.” A “Man halted in a rock-cleft on the mountainside shouts “a question to the stone.”

All that I have said and done,
Now that I am old and ill,
Turns into a question till
I lie awake night after night
And never get the answers right.
Did that play of mine send out
Certain men the English shot?
Did words of mine put too great strain
On that woman’s reeling brain?
Could my spoken words have checked
That whereby a house lay wrecked?

It is unclear what Yeats might have said to save Lady Gregory’s Coole Park, or have not said to preserve the sanity of Margot Ruddock, the infatuated and crazed girl memorialized in “Sweet Dancer” (1937). That “play of mine” is, of course, Cathleen ni Houlihan, the ostensible celebration of blood-sacrifice written for and starring Maud Gonne as Ireland herself. It did send out men that were shot in the fact, the first to die was an actor cast in a revival of the play. The “terrible beauty” born that Easter had many causes, but Yeats, fingering the “links in the chain of responsibility,” wondered “if any link” was forged “in my workshop.” Here, his responsibility for its impact is the first “question” that causes him to feel guilt and to “lie awake night after night.”

Here is Coleridge, as sleepless and anguished as Yeats:

All confused I could not know/
Whether I suffered or I did: / For a
remorse or woe.” Yeats concludes his questioning perplexity: “And all seems evil until I/ Sleepless would lie down and die.” But that, Man responds, would be “to shirk /
The spiritual intellect’s great work.” There can be no thought of ending life until he can “stand in judgment on his soul.” Once “all’s arranged in one clear view,” and “all work done,” he will be ready to sink at last into the night.” But, given Echo’s sardonic repetition, “Into the night,” that prospect only raises more, and more metaphysical, questions (“Shall we in that great night rejoice?/ What do we know but that another in this place?”), until all cerebral self-centered thoughts stop together, interrupted:

But hush, for I have lost the theme,
Its joy or night seem but a dream;
Up there some hawk or owl has struck
Dropping out of sky or rock,
A stricken rabbit is crying out
And its cry distracts my thought.

“But take physic, pomp,” cries a chastened Lear out on the storm-beaten heath, finally exposing himself to feel pity for life’s naked victims. The greatness of “Man and the Echo” has to do with a similar intervention from the existential physical reality outside Yeats’s own self-absorbed thoughts about death and the fate of his soul. Gnostics would not approve of this external interference that “distracts the thinker. But Yeats is not only philosophizing, he is writing a poem’s triumph lies in the old man’s setting aside, a Comforted,” of the “heroic mask”— of Swiftian Nietzschean master morality, of the perspective of the of Cuchulain, that “great hawk out of the sun”—in order to fully and humbly accept common mortality: the radical finitude he shares with human rags and bones, with cowards, with the pitiably rabbit, struck down by hawk or owl.

At the end of “Man and the Echo,” amid uncertainty (“hawk or owl” dropping out of “sky or rock”), the one certainty is death. “Mortality touches the heart,” epitomized by what Virgil calls the “tears that are in things” (Sunt lacrimae rerum et mentem mortalia tangunt). Yet here the tears are unshed from...
“kept watch oe’r man’s mortality.” Like Wordsworth at the end of a great “Ode: Intimations of Immortality,” Yeats is touched by the heart’s “tenderness, its joys, and fears.” Responding to the death throes of a humble, transient creature of nature, he is left, as Wordsworth was, with “Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears.” Both of these great poets end, not crying, but thinking. Having registered “all the tragic scene,” they achieve, amid uncertainty, at least a limited certainty.

Yeats’s question, “What do we know?” continues to resonate.

§

Two years before his death, Yeats received a request for a “representative” poem for *The Erasmian*, the magazine of his old Dublin high school. He selected “What Then?” (1937), which lays out for the Erasmus Smith students a planned life of disciplined labor, aimed at achieving what Yeats’s “chosen comrades” at school believed to be his destiny: the conviction, in which he concurred, that he would grow a famous man.” Writing intimately though in the third person, “he” tells the young students and us that he “crammed” his twenties with toil, and that, in time, “Everything he wrote was read.” He attained “sufficient money for his need,” true friends, and that predestined yet sought-after fame. Eventually, “All his happier dreams came true”: house, wife, daughter, son; “Poets and wits about him drew.”

But this self-satisfied rehearsal of accomplishment has been challenged by the refrain ending each stanza: “’What then?’ sang Plato’s ghost, ‘What then?’” As in “Man and the Echo,” despite best-laid plans, an ultimate uncertainty attends the certainty of death. In the fourth and final stanza, as the litany of achievement mounts in passionate intensity, the opposing challenge from the world beyond earthly accomplishment reaches a crescendo:

“The work is done,” grown old he thought,
“According to my boyish plan;
Let the fools rage, I swerved in naught,
Something to perfection brought”;
But louder sang that ghost, “What Then?”

In “The Choice,” written a decade earlier, Yeats had declared that the intellect of man is forced to choose/ Perfection of the life, or of the work.” The “something” brought to “perfection” in “What Then?” is clearly the second choice. Must “he” therefore, as in “The Choice,” refuse/ A heavenly mansion, raging in the dark”? Momentous in import despite its casual tone, “What Then?” revisits the “Dialogue of Self and Soul,” with the spiritual spokesman, despite being restricted to two words, at last mounting a potent challenge. The refrain of the breathless mouth of that formidable ghost— “What then?”—fuses the Idealism of that “Plato,” who (in “Among School Children”) thought nature but a spume that plays/ Upon a ghostly paradigm of things, and the Hindu tatah kim (you may have gained glory and accomplished all your desires: what further?), with the question raised in the synoptic gospels: what does it profit a man to gain the whole world if he lose his immortal soul?

That relentless question, “what then?,” also tallies with the Gnostic insistence that the liberating spirit within, the “divine spark” of which most remain ignorant all their lives but which alone constitutes true humanity, was the sole agent of salvation. That inner spark, once ignited, redeems the “inner” spiritual man, freeing him from the Archon-imposed limitations of an alien body in an alien world, from enslaving attachment to earthly things. However, powerful though the Otherworldly challenge is in “What Then,” here as always—beginning with the crucial “The Rose upon the Rood of Time”—dialectical Yeats is not quite succumbing to the spiritual, a realm at once alluring and demanding. “His” litany of achievements, in the poem Yeats himself chose to represent his life-work to the students of his former high school, are triumphs of the imagination even more than flauntings of material success; and, given the massive poetic achievement, “his” is far from empty boasting. “Plato’s ghost” gets the last word, but “What Then?” consists of more. Taken as a whole, the poem presents Yeats once again vacillating “between extremities” or “antinomies” (“Vacillation,” I), and, in the process, making poetry out of the quarrel with himself. Nietzsche
Yeats’s chosen counter-weight to Plato and Christianity, that “Platonism for the people”—who said, “It is ‘contradictions’ that seduce one to existence.”[53]

Nietzsche’s prophet famously advises us, at the outset of *Zarathustra*, to “remain faithful to the earth, and do not believe those who speak to you of otherworldly hopes.” In “What Then?” he seems in part to be following Zarathustra’s imperative; but he had not yet been introduced to Nietzsche when, almost a half-century earlier, he wrote “The Man who Dreamed of Faeryland,” a poem to which “What Then?” responds almost point for point. As we have seen, in the early poem, including the “fine angry mood” required to rebut mockers, is regained in this late poem, where the speaker, his work done, cries out, “Let the fools rage, I swerved in naught, perfection brought.” The mature, accomplished man has beyond his dreams, and thus exposed the folly of the man who wasted his life away by fruitlessly dreaming of Faeryland. And yet, that “singing” from the Otherworld persists: “‘What then,’ sang Plato’s ghost, ‘What then?’”—a “singing” that grows “louder” the more the speaker rehearses his accomplishments. The tension between the two worlds persists.

Harold Bloom, who has over the years come to half-accept the Gnostic vision he once rejected, most harshly in his 1970 book *Yeats*, essay he wrote a half-dozen years later—“Yeats, Gnosticism, and the Sacred Void”—by contrasting Yeats to his own formational precursor, Shelley, and to Schopenhauer. Though Bloom does not mention Schopenhauer, he says that Schopenhauer was an “educator” of Nietzsche, who himself confesses he was not a Gnostic, and that his God is a “mother.”
enchanter” whose “curious astringent joy” allied him with Blake, and so helped transform the Irish poet from Celtic Twilight into the most powerful poet of the Twentieth Century. But here is Bloom:

Shelley and Schopenhauer were questers, in their very different ways, who could journey through the Void without yielding to the temptation of worshiping the Void as itself. Yeats, like Nietzsche, implicitly decided that rather have the Void as purpose, than be void of purpose.

Though Bloom does not mention it, Yeats seems to be thinking of the Gnostic vision when he ended one of his final letters by declaring, “The last kiss is given to the void.” Some context is instructive. No more a believer in linear progress than Nietzsche, “theory of progress” was a “modern” concept, “and therefore vulgar,” Yeats, under Indian influence, came to consider cultures and civilizations a succession of provisional illusions: that “manifold illusion” or seen through by those who, in “Meru,” realize that “man’s life is thought,” its ultimate destructive/creative goal to “come/Into the desolation of reality.” As earlier noted, such seers as the ascetic hermits caverned on Mount Meru or Everest, “know/ That day brings round the night, that before dawn/ [Man’s] glory and his monuments are gone.”
Those who have, after “Ravening, raging, and uprooting, into the desolation of reality,” have come far, but—their farewell to civilizations, “Egypt and Greece good-bye, Rome!”—they may not have attained the state of “bliss” attained by Bhagwan Shri Hamsa, who describes climbing Me
Mountain, read and introduced by Yeats shortly before writing "Meru." In that Introduction, Hamsa is quoted describing his ineffable "bliss"—all merged in the Absolute Brahma!— registers the strenuous mental steps to the Absolute, but does not culminate in the merging joy expressed by Hamsa. Nevertheless, Yeats's hermits, by coming to "know" the truth underlying illusions, have achieved a considerable degree of *gnosis*.

In the letter I began with, Yeats insists that there is "no improvement, only a series of sudden fires," each fainter than the one before it. "We free ourselves from delusion that we may be nothing. The last kiss is given to the void." Commenting on this letter, the great Irish critic Declan Kiberd perceptively observed that, for Yeats, "the only hope of humanity was to break out of this diminishing series by recasting life on an altogether higher plane of consciousness." Does not dwell on the "void," or connect this "higher plane of consciousness" with *gnosis*, but those familiar with Gnosticism might. I believe Yeats himself did.

The memorable paragraph in *Per Amica Silentia Lunae* that begins, "We make out of the quarrel with others, rhetoric, but out of the quarrel with ourselves, poetry," ends: "I shall find the dark grow luminous, the void fruitful, when I understand that I have nothing; that the ringers in the tower have appointed for the hymen of the soul a passing bell." Practical men are committed to the world and to social conventions symbolized by the marriage bell. By contrast, the Poet must concentrate on what is scarcely attainable. The soul achieves its "hymen" or marriage when it forsakes the gratifications of this material world, a forsaking symbolized by the "passing bell," or death knell. Again, we "free delusion that we may be nothing. The last kiss is given to the void." A lifelong Seeker, Yeats seems at times as much a Gnostic Quester as he is a Romantic Poet.

In his last letter, written to Elizabeth Pelham on January 4, 1939, three weeks before his death, Yeats concluded:
I am happy, and I think full of an energy, a despaired of. It seems to me that I have found
When I try to put all into a phrase I say, “Man can embody truth but he cannot know it.” I must embody it in the completion of my life. The abstract is not life and everywhere draws out its contradictions. You can refute Hegel but not the Saint or the Song of Sixpence. (Letters, 922)

One has no wish to resist let alone refute this gay farewell. But Harold Bloom, in his 2004 book Where Shall Wisdom Be Found? Yeatsian emphasis on embodiment by choosing, in keeping with his title, to focus on wisdom rather than that “truth” Yeats said could not be “known” but could be embodied. “Of wisdom,” writes Bloom and he thought his reversal of Yeats important enough to place in splendid isolation on the back cover of his book—“I personally would affirm the reverse. We cannot embody it, yet we can be taught how to learn wisdom, whether or not it can be identified with the Truth that might make us free.” His final, somewhat skeptical allusion is John (8:32), but Bloom’s emphasis on being taught how would appeal to all Seekers, certainly Gnostic Seekers.
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2. Even that Gnosticism is syncretist and complex, steeped not only in Hebrew and early Christian writing, but with roots in India, course in Greece (Orphism and Pythagoreanism, Platonism Neoplatonism). That kind of cross-fertilization simultaneous tradition, from the mysterious Simon Magus to the formula and complicates analysis. In addition, the various sects were Because of its value as the way to break out of our imprisonment flesh and the material world, and thus the path to salvation, was kept hidden, reserved for the spiritual elite capable of exercising gnosis.


4. A very different response to Yeats’s apparent possession of wisdom is registered by Virginia Woolf. When she met Yeats in November 1930, at Lady Ottoline Morrell’s, Woolf knew little of his tho that much of his poetry, but she was overwhelmed by his presence by an immediate sense of a body of thought underlying his life and art: “I perceived that he had worked out a complete that I could only catch on to momentarily, in my alarming ignorance.” When he spoke of modern poetry, he described deficiencies because we are at the end of an era. “Here was another system of which I could only catch fragments.” She concludes on a found in Bloomsbury self-assurance: “how crude and jaunty my own theories were besides his: indeed I got a tremendous sense of his art; also of its meaning, its seriousness, its importance engrosses this large active minded immensely vitalised man.” Virginia Woolf. 5 vols. Volume 3 (London, 1980), 329.

5. Ellic Howe, *The Magicians of the Golden Dawn* (New York, 1972), ix. The ceremony of admission to the R.R. & A.C., based on the legend of Christian Rosenkreuz, required an initiate to commit him- or herself to the “Great Work,” which was, with divine help, to “purify and exalt my nature,” and thus, “gradually raise and unite myself to my Divine Genius.” In 1901, Yeats wrote an important pamphlet titled "Is the...
Order of R.R. & A.C. to Remain a Magical Order?” His main point—that frivolous “freedom” is inferior to “bonds gladly accepted”—illuminates his own philosophy in *A Vision*, and the tension in his poetry between freedom and traditional forms.


7. Yeats, *The Trembling of the Veil* (1922), in *Autobiographies*, 173-74, 179. An almost Yeatsian mixture of fascination and skepticism was evident in the report issued on Blavatsky by Richard Hodgson, a skilled investigator employed by the Society of Psychical Research. Though the report assessed her claimed activities in India to be fraudulent, it concluded that she was “neither the mouthpiece of hidden seers, nor…a mere vulgar adventuress. We think she has achieved a title to a permanent remembrance as one of the most accomplished, ingenious, and interesting imposters of history” (cited in Peter Washington, *Madame Blavatsky’s Baboon: Theosophy and the Emergence of the Western Guru* [London, 1993], 83). Yeats, writing in 1889, and still registering Blavatsky’s magnetism and skills as an eclectic magpie, found that conclusion simplistic, noting, with his usual mixture of skepticism and credulity, that “the fraud theory at least at its most pronounced, was “unable to cover all the facts.”

8. The latter, though, poetically, a false start, anticipates Yeats’s debate-poems as well as two powerful late poems: the sonnet, “Meru” (1933), centered on Hindu hermits caverned on Mount Meru, and “Lapis Lazuli,” that marvelous poem based on a Chinese sculpture ending in a blessing and mountain vision. In the *Crossways* poem, the young priestess Anashuya compels Vijaya to swear an oath by the gods “who dwell on sacred Himalay,/ On the far Golden Peak; enormous shapes,/ Who still were old when the great sea was young;/ On their vast faces mystery and dreams” (lines 66-70). Like Meru, Golden Peak is a Himalayan sacred mountain.


Northcliff Lectures given in London in 1983, fleshed out by a fourth chapter on *A Vision*, Hough’s short book offers an illuminating introduction to the subject. But while he provides a humane counter-weight to the learned but crabbed studies that were threatening to bury Yeats in esoteric commentary, Hough, though a fine reader, discusses very few of the poems, and none at length.


13. “Introduction” to *A Vision*, 2nd ed. (London, 1937), 8. It’s hard not to imagine that Yeats was relieved when advice arrived, conveying that he should relax, and recall that he was, above all else, a poet.


15. Valentinus’s “revelation” came when the Greco-Christian *Logos* was revealed to him as a child. Unsurprisingly, his greatest disciples Ptolemaeus and his pupil, Heracleon, both interpreted the Gospel of John as a *Valentinian* text.

16. Both the drafts and the final version of the passage, riddled with echoes of “Vacillation,” “Man and the Echo,” and of Yeats’s Dantesque “Cuchulain Comforted,” make it clear that the ghost is primarily that of Yeats, an identification confirmed by Eliot in letters to John Maurice Johnson, and Kristian Smidt. For details, see Helen Gardner, *Composition of Four Quartets* (New York, 1978), 64–67, and Terence Diggory, *Yeats and American Poetry* (Princeton, 1983), 115-117. Jonathan Swift is also part of the compound ghost, since Eliot’s reference to “lacerating laughter at what ceases to amuse” echoes Yeats’s poem, “Swift’s Epitaph,” and nods toward the presence of Swift’s own ghost in Yeats’s play *The Words upon the Window-pane*.

17. A lengthy text for Yeats (91 lines, like “Anashuya and Vijaya”) appeared in 1885, in the *Dublin University Review*, and was re-printed in the poet’s first book, *The Wanderings of Oisin and Other Poems*.

The paragraph, the conclusion of which I will return to in my own conclusion, occurs in the *Amina Hominis* (“The Soul of Man) section of *Amica Silentia Lunae*, its Virgilian title (“through the friendly silence of the moon”) taken from Book II of the *Aeneid*.

In a jauntily bleak poem written twenty years later, “Miniver Cheevy,” the American poet Edward Arlington Robinson gave us another frustrated Romantic dreamer (as chivalry-intoxicated as Don Quixote) who, wasting his life, “sighed for what was not,/ And dreamed, and rested from his labors.”

Much in “The Man who Dreamed of Faeryland” is reminiscent of the “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” reminding me that, many years later, the old woman of “Her Vision in the Wood” (poem VIII of *A Woman Young and Old*) asks a Keatsian question of other immortals: “Why should they think that are for ever young?”


*W. B. Yeats and T. Sturge Moore: Their Correspondence, 1901-1937* Ursula Bridge (London, 1953), 164.


The floor is ambiguously “marbled.” Yeats originally envisioned a marble pavement, but another draft, referring to the emperor’s “bronze & marble,” suggests statuary, as in the statues of “Among School Children,” that “keep a marble or a bronze repose.”


The photocopied drafts of the poem (in the Yeats Archives at SUNY, Stony Brook) have been transcribed by Jon Stallworthy, Donald Torchiana, and myself; here, I cite my *Yeats’s Interactions with Tradition*, 100, italics added.

In the Preface to his epic poem *Milton*, Blake, having requested his prophetic weapons (“Bring me my Bow of burning gold,/Br Arrows of desire,/ Bring me my Spear,/O clouds, unfold!,/ I Chariot of fire”), pledges, in the final quatrain, that “I will not cease from Mental Fight,/ Nor shall my Sword sleep in my hand,/ Till we have built Jerusalem/ In England’s green and pleasant Land.” The passage earlier quoted from the apocalyptic Ninth “Night” of *The Four Zoas* IX:798, 822-27, and 849-51. Valentinus is quoted from the “Fourth Key”: “At the end,…the world shall be judged by fire,” and “After the conflagration, there shall be formed a new heaven and a new earth, and th
be more noble in his glorified state than he was before." Th
Museum, trans. from the 1678 Latin text, ed. A. E. Waite, 2 vo
1893), I, 331.

29. For Blake’s “gnomic” genius, see Northrop Frye, Fearful Sy
of William Blake (Boston, 1962 [1947]), 5. For the remark or
synopsis of modern civilization in “Fragments” (I), see Dou
Science and English Poetry: A Historical Sketch, 1590-1950 (1
1950), 158.

30. Edward O. Shea, A Descriptive Catalog of W. B. Yeats’s Librar
1985), item 2258.


32. Yeats, “Introduction” to The Oxford Book of Modern Verse (I
xxvi-vii. For Whitehead, in his similar account (in Science an
World) of the Romantic reaction to the limitations of the En
the principal figure was Wordsworth, as influenced by Cole:
Imagination and Organicism.

33. The diagram was drawn on p. 122 of Nietzsche as Critic, Phi
Prophet: Choice Selections from His Works, compiled by Tho
(1901). Given to Yeats as a gift in 1902 by attorney and patro
John Quinn, it is now in the Special Collections of the library
Northwestern University. First mentioned by Richard Ellma
Identity of Yeats), these annotations were transcribed for me
ago by another late, great scholar, Erich Heller.

34. For these unpublished notes, connecting Cicero’s Dream of
Macrobius’s Commentary with Balzac’s Swedenborgian no
and Paul Gaughin’s Intimate Journals, see my Yeats’s Interac

35. Thus Spoke Zarathustra III.2:1, in The Portable Nietzsche, ed
Kaufmann (New York, 1954), 269.

36. In the opening stanza of Browning’s quest-poem, Childe Ro
thought was that he was being “lied” to by that sadistic crip
malicious eye/ Askance to watch the working of his lie/ On r.
earlier allusion, to Browning’s Duke, refers of course to “My
Duchess.”) Even closer to Self’s temporarily mistaken belie:
“defiling” shape “cast upon” him by mirroring eyes “must b
the initially deluded, masochistic cry of Blake’s Oothoon (2:
“defiled bosom” to be rent away so that she “may reflect/ The very man (the moralistic sadist, Theotormon, who, having raped her, now brands her “harlot”) whose “loved” but unloving “eyes” have cast upon her precisely this “defiled” shape—one of Blake’s, and Yeats’s, grimmest ironies. But both recover.


38. Theodotus was a leading Valentinian of the Eastern school. Second century Excerpts were quoted and thus preserved by Clement of Alexandria. In his 1970 study, Yeats, Harold Bloom viewed the pessimistic opposite of Romantic affirmation, especially Shelley. Within a half-dozen years (hardly the span of “light jocoseriously refers to), he no longer saw Gnosticism as a “deviation from Romanticism.” Indeed, it “could be argued that a form of Gnosticism is endemic in Romantic tradition without, however, dominating that tradition, or even that Gnosticism is the implicit, inevitable religion that frequently informs aspects of post-Enlightenment poetry.” Gnosticism, and the Sacred Void,” in Poetry and Repression: Revisionism from Blake to Stevens (New Haven, 1966), 212.

39. Emerson: Essays and Lectures, ed. Joel Porte (New York, 1983), 81; italics added. The Divinity School Address evoked a ferocious controversy that shook New England. Condemned as a “pagan,” an “infidel,” and a “cloven-hoofed” pantheist who had defiled the sacred citadel of Unitarianism, Emerson was ostracized from his alma mater for thirty years. For the “bringing-forth” passages, see Elaine Pagels, Beyond Belief: The Gospel of Thomas (New York, 2003), 49, 32. As Harold Bloom is right to say, “there is little in the Gospel of Thomas that would not have been acceptable to Emerson, Thoreau and Whitman.” Where Shall Wisdom Be Found? (New York, 2004), 260.


42. Yeats quotes George in a letter to Dorothy Wellesley, written shortly after Russell’s death in July, 1935: “My wife said the other night, ‘AE’ was the
nearest thing to a saint you and I will ever meet. You are a better poet but no saint. I suppose one has to choose.” (Letters, 838).


44. Aside from “To a Young Girl” (1915), addressed to Iseult Gonne, “His Memories” is the only poem where Yeats claims that his passion for Maud was sexually reciprocated. Readers, used to the Maud /Helen association, would know who “The first of all the tribe” was who lay in the speaker’s arms, “And did such pleasure take—/ She who had brought great Hector down/ And put all Troy to wreck—/ That she cried into this ear,/ ‘Strike me if I shriek’.”


46. The Carpocratian doctrine is synopsized in *Against Heresies* by Irenaeus, the Bishop of Lyon. Though his motive was to condemn Gnosticism, which at the time (174-89 CE) was spreading in Gaul, this work of Irenaeus has been invaluable to modern scholars studying various Gnostic sects.


48. Yeats: *Essays and Introductions*, 137-38. Blake continued by those who, ‘having no passions of their own, because no intellect, have spent their lives in curbing and governing other peoples’.” Yeats comes immediately to mind, especially since Blake is thinking of “the modern church,” which “crucifies” the “true” imaginative Christ “upside down.”

49. Damage to which I very nearly contributed in 1995, when I almost dropped the piece of lapis I’d been invited to examine during a visit to Michael and Gráinne Yeats.

50. A week later, dictating to his wife days before his actual death, Yeats wrote “The Black Tower,” in which he resumes the heroic mask set in “Cuchulain Comforted” and “Man and the Echo.” Here, “the black tower,” though down to their last provisions and faced with a relentless, sordid enemy, remain “all…oath-bound men;/ Those banners come not in.” Their final exclamation—“Stand we on guard echoes an assertion Yeats liked to quote from his favorite A
Defending the merits of the Ancients against the Moderns, Jonathan Swift
pronounced himself a man “appointed to guard a position.” “The Black
Tower” has its own merits, but we are right to regret its place among
Yeats’s very last poems.

52. Along with pride at its popular success, Yeats felt guilt in having
produced a patriotic but propagandistic play that was, at heart, a love-
object of his own terrible beauty, Maud Gonne, and a betrayal of his own
better judgment. We cannot simply dismiss some of later Yeats’s
theatrical waving of Sato’s sword, and cry for “war,” in response to an
Indian visitor’s request for “a message for India.” But Yeats, like Joyce,
was opposed to the rabid nationalism embodied in the crude and
“Citizen” in the “Cyclops” episode of *Ulysses*. That one-eyed
reincarnation of Homer’s Polyphemus, may also be a male
duplicate of Ireland’s own one-eyed Morrigu, the overtly dark side of
Catherine Houlihan. I have a suspicion amounting to a conviction that
“that play of mine” not really his (in fact, most of the dialogue, not
the lyric passages, was written by Lady Gregory), and that, when not
basking in its popularity, sometimes wished it had been omitted rather
than committed.

translator of Nietzsche’s *Die Morgenröte* (*Dawn* or *Daybreak* translated, in the same year (1913), the *Satakas* (or Wise Sayings) of the
Hindu hermit-poet, Bhartrahari, one of whose texts (*Vairagasataka*
paraphrased in glossing *tatah kim*.
234.
57. “W. B. Yeats—Building Amid Ruins,” in Kiberd’s *Irish Classics*
*Undoing* — acrylic and graphite pencil on paper, 20 x 20, 2012 (from *Lachesis measure* exhibit, 2012)
The work I make is connected to rural culture. I grew up in the farmlands of Southern Ontario at a time when big tobacco agribusiness was at its peak. The affected communities changed rapidly as small family farms adapted to industrialized agriculture. Transformation, for good or bad, made a permanent...
impression on me. I use the imagery of vacant highways, emptied abstract cloudscapes, animal bones, twists of rope, and topographical lines to suggest frailty and uncertainty where once was tradition and stability.

The fact that I continue to work within the representational genre is a choice. I am fascinated by the representational element. There is much room for large and small space, for both intimacy and distance within the same work. I never feel constricted or boxed into a dead end by iconic objects or landscapes. Though physical objects appear defined, ideas surrounding them are limited.

**From Geography of Bliss exhibit, 2016**

*Seal Island Bridge Road Camera Split View — graphite and mica on paper, 40 x 60, 2016*
Bridgetown Road Camera Feb 2011 — graphite, charcoal and pastel
22 x 30, 2016

Hudders Camera Tue Feb 28 2012 02:10:38
My approach is governed by the Japanese concept called *mujinzō* translated means inexhaustible supply. I may have an idea when I go to the studio, but many theories fail during investigation, which leads to new passages. I allow myself many failures, then explore the unintended consequences. Often the by-product of initial attempts contains profound meaning. I think navigating the passages can be more significant than the finalized state.

*from Lachesis measure exhibit, 2012*
Infinity — charcoal and wax crayon on paper, 36 x 72, 201
I begin by looking closely at a subject, methodically creating draw
image over and over to understand my subject better. Once the image gains a life of its own, then I can look at it, think about it, and revise it. The revised drawing is now an expression of a new thought, rich in emotional aftermath. What is left behind by erasure or alterations is the debris marks recording the drawing’s history, exposing it to a richness and depth by chance.

*From Boneyard series, ongoing*

![Vertebrae — graphite on paper, 26 x 31, 2016](image)
Lamb’s Hip — graphite on paper, 24 x 38, 2016

Right Antler — graphite on paper, 22 x 30, 2016
I prefer the restraints imposed by charcoal and graphite sometimes mixed with organic elements, reserving colour for printmaking. Drawing in black, white, and grey intensifies focus without sentimentality, avoiding the temptation to appreciate only the meditative beauty of the subject.

In a similar way, my printmaking also records objects belonging to a rural environment and an ecology of transition. Using combinations of printmaking techniques, I am concerned less with the perfection of the editioned print, letting the image develop at the press as multiple variations often lead to play and exploration of a subject.

**From Archipelago suite, ongoing**

Confluence — etching, 22 x 30, 2012
Convergence — etching, 22 x 30, 2012

Isthmus — etching, 22 x 30, 2012
I work full-time as an artist and this gives me a great deal of happiness. I am usually working in my head. I am thinking about projects as I walk, shop, and do household tasks. I make mental notes on changes to things I am working on, only that these experiences will subtly revise how I then technically express themes in my work. The time spent in the studio is far less than the time spent thinking about, making notes on, and actually working. Working in the studio is my way of being curious, of seeking clarity. It is often a confusing, uncomfortable and frustrating way to work, but if I persist long enough, new paths are uncovered.

Bonnie Baker works at drawing and printmaking. Before moving to Nova Scotia, where she now lives, Bonnie studied glass blowing at Humber College, lived in Whitehorse, Yukon, and travelled through Alaska. Bonnie studied printmaking at Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, at Women's Studio Workshop, NY, and with master printmaker Cecil Day. In addition to drawing and printmaking, Bonnie worked with textiles from 1984 to 2007.

Community engagement is very much part of her practice. Among other projects, she has organized public events involving outdoor projection collectively by several hundred strangers over a six-hour period; printmaking marathons using skateboards, roller blades, bicycles, and all things wheeled; exhibits on the open interpretation of the book form; and environmentally sensitive installations by several artists along a walking trail. She is a founding member, active printmaker, and administrator of Elephant Grass, a community-based printmaking studio in the fishing village of Parker's Cove, Nova Scotia. Following her 2016 exhibit of drawings, Geography of Bliss, she now focusing on a series of woodcuts and etchings that explore the crossover between her drawing and printmaking practices. Bonnie is a 2016 recipient of an Established Artist Award from Creative...
Martinmas

I.

Draw the curtain.
Find the ground fasted –
an unspoiled, infinite, hushing

white. And planed by rigid light,
a light that slides like golden straps
across a stiff white cloth
one dares not rustle. Steady. Draw
no breath. Listen. Draw
thyself below the fallen snow.

II.

Last night’s frost a shock to all systems.
What goes without saying: the key
turning in the ignition,
the engine not turning over.
Roll the boulder up the hill.
Repeat. The key turning, the key
turning. The engine finally
turning over. What goes without
saying: a prayer. The wheels turning.

III.

Roll the boulder up the hill.
Repeat. Roll the boulder away
from the tomb. In the precise spot
between two towns the channels crack,
their signals scattered in the snow.
Pull over. Catch your breath.

Hear the nausea fizzing up.
This is where the tethers snap:
tundra: white noise, natural light.
IV.

No spires to fishhook Heaven.
No bats batting 'bout. No belfry. Closest thing to a gargoyle here,
a grouse hunched in an alder tree. No iron hinge, no oaken door;
no room, you’d think, for any god.

The angels get their hackles up. Hoary-feathered skull-gull roosting,
a handsaw Jigsaw Gothic.

V.

Creaking lightly past the ribwork and lighting candles on the way.
Flotsam-coloured light kneels on twelve carved apostles left alone
to digest and to ruminate. You'll notice their resemblance
to sailors who have disappeared. An ancient furnace wails, its warmth twenty thousand leagues away.

VI.

Whatever convoluted way
I come up from the furnace room, 
a gravity will draw, will drag

my eye toward the Sacred Heart, 
in the foremost lobe of church.
that solar plexus

where all prayers’ limbs’ nerve endings meet, 
Introibo ad altare Dei
and feel those closed eyes follow me.

---

**Paul’s First Mass at Corinth**

In the warm drone of the first reading 
Eutyches falls asleep 
and tumbles over a railing 
into the worm-drone of the first reading.

Eutyches falls. Asleep 
he dreams a bird sailing 
in the warm drome. The first meeting 
and already, one sentenced to death.

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**Office Hours**

Like Civil War re-enactments, 
stamp collecting, priesthood something 
a man just stumbles into when 
he starts to feel the prick of time.

Administrating eternity.
A radiator’s knuckles rap.
A rats’ nest in the linotype.
The dry tongues of a calendar

with every month epitomized
by one of the Old Masters.
December: the nativity,
Bronzino. But if I flip back

to March, El Greco, his pieta.
That fog-blue skin that Jesus has.
The Marys, Peter, turning blue,
like Jesus took all reds with Him.

El Greco – the Greek – how did he know
that springtime here leaves minute shards
of winter guilting in the bone
three bodies huddled can’t evict,
or all that fragrant red and gold
won’t hold the blue beneath our skin,
that winter here is a lifetime long?

*Sullivan's Observatory*

“Down here, now, there’s nothing to be at.
But I worked as a machinist forty years,
and I always did love looking at the stars.
If not for this, I’d have me wife drove cracked.”

An arsenal of copper pipe and salvaged
mirrors he had piled up in that shed,
and a massive hole cut in the roof to let
the stovepipe out. Never mind the damage.
“I saw the Perseid showers once,” he lied. He had porthole glass for lenses. Scratched to shit. You couldn’t see a blasted thing. “Well, Father, whatcha think? Can you see Heaven?”

“Oh yes,” I said, “they’re tinkering away to try and get a better look at us.”

---

**Small Hours**

Seven steps from door to bed. Shoes. Then socks. Then trousers. Collar on the nightstand. Black shirt, button button button, ’til I’m sitting there defrocked. A priest, naked. When I close my eyes even I can’t imagine it. I should prowl out into the street to mystify the neighbours. I should turn in.

Stretch the full length of the bed, fold my arms first in, then out like swimming. *Christ. Corpse. Christ. Corpse.*

Getting nowhere, my eyes groping from bookshelf to sideboard to phonograph, things left behind by Father Whosits. This is how a priest propagates, begetting antiques and booklice. So do I
Encounters with Men

A joke, to start.

So a priest walks into a bar...

and the place goes into rigor mortis. You can hear the difference between talk and conversation:

a nod, a whisper.

Jesus. Never? Can you imagine?

A young fella like that, it isn’t natural.

Yes, well you know what that crowd are like.

on the kids, if I were you.

That’s what keeps the quiet between us so thick the counter buckles.

When I was five, my father taught me how to fight. Or tried: held my fists before my face, two knots of little bones bound in pink crêpe. I’d have to find other means:

anyone can see my hands, un-cuffed, uncramped, unblistered, clean as paper, a joke to finish.
“So a priest walks into a bar…”

Confession #2

I feel awkward, shy, afraid.
But here it is, incredibly boring, so boring I can’t believe it’s true.

I never had an impulse to go to the altar.
I thought everything we were doing was awful.
There are many things in your heart you can never tell another person.
“I ain’t real sure,” for example.
Love is a publicity stunt, and making love – after the first curious raptures – is only another petulant way to pass the time.

He would have been a great director, which eventually he wanted to be.
I never said, “I want to be alone.” I only said, “I want to be left alone.” There is a whole world of difference.
I only said “The diaphragm is the greatest invention since Pan-Cake makeup.”
If a woman makes a mistake unintentionally, I don’t believe she should be condemned for it.
Or shook with such violence that he left ten black-and-blue finger prints on my arms.

You should cross yourself when you say his name.
But once a woman has forgiven a man, she must not reheat his sins for breakfast.

People used to say that I had a feeling of closeness, a great warmth of loving everybody,
that they could tell me their troubles.
But the worst part of it all is this: no matter how hard you try, you possibly please everyone.
They had to say something about me, so they wrote stories of the
and called me temperamental and hard to handle. That’s a heavy load to carry when one is tired, hurt, and bewildered and no one gives a damn. It never occurs to them that one is simply tired. And hurt, and bewildered.

Love is disgusting when you no longer possess yourself. All you have to do is to say you want to be alone. Right? Please?

A found poem, made up of quotes from silent film actresses.

Confession #3

Father, forgive me my sins. You see, Father, I had to come see you. You see, my son – I, I mean, I’m getting myself tangled up.

Wednesday I hung out the wash and I took little Paddy out with me. There’s never a happier child – Father, he wouldn’t say “boo.”

When I was done I knelt down to see what he’d got into. He was playing with some kind of jar. No idea where he got that.

He was filling the jar up with ants and shaking them out on the ground. I told him not to be at it. Why can’t I? he asked me.

Not in a saucy way, mind you. I told him the ants would get hurt if he kept on shaking the jar – that they were frightened of him, he wasn’t nice if he did that. But he shook them right out on the ground. I said “I’m gonna count, mister. One. Two…” Do you think he would stop?

Dead ants. Dead. I tried taking it from him. I screamed myself red.
could not get him to understand they were ... and he

was so big. He kept shaking and shaking. I

Patrick O’Reilly is a recent graduate of the MFA in Writing at the University of Saskatchewan. He has written for untethered, The Partisan, and Where he is a contributor. In 2015, his poem “Shelter” was long-listed for Canadian Poetry. He lives in Montréal.

Uimhir a Cúig | Angel’s Wing-Lashed Fire: Poems
Afric McGlinchey
I, a travelling country of windows

All the bony roads,
spokes shaking off a mouthful
of sleet, and you
further forward than me, or inward perhaps
– a heaped bush – stop.
Fleeting shock of silence;
and then the rattling again,
struggling past the cages. Say one lunges
from above, tipping its point
like a Damocles sword – dare I?
I know what is in that box
stiffly packaged in white canvas
– the first of the seven sorrows –
this, then the next to come tumbling
will be – no, let’s
travel back, round the coastline up north
where the mattress groaned under
our bouncing feet and feathers flew from the bolsters – wait!
Was that the creak of a door, pink glow of the landing wallpaper?
He’s here! And fast as the smallest laughing fury, we’re under the sheets:
one on the floor, pretend-sleeping
the silence intense as the thickness of snow set across pillows
and pillows of fields.

Cha
after All my Friends,
an electronic composition by Edan Ray

Laugh! I nearly ran to the riptide confluence where stories are peripheral, and simply water works. Only you know the notion of it. Only you keep me laughing. Only you rush into the pedal of the music or crossover silence that smacks up against wayward torques squeaking liquid and you and you and you, my friends, run backwards, slow motion as the ocean. Shhh… or bass it. Strobe-light-fix each gesture in distortion, loose-wristed, star-fired, brainless with excitement. Cha.
Nine ways to identify an alley cat

I
Her lashes are upstart
ravens’ nests;
serrated shadows.

II
Her coquettish circling
is accompanied by a throaty,
insistent growl.

III
She sets a flat rock
with found risks,
until others hanker too.

IV
She cadges guts
from harassed butchers,
then lays them in the dirt.

V
She almost always
escapes the bolt.

VI
Yes, she’s scratched, but still,
quickens with the music.

VII
She rattles
in a crowded corner.

VIII
Her hooping, toppling,
wounded movement’s like the lick
IX
Her thought-ghost proves
that death's mutation's
merely a ruse.

_Faith is the thing with feathers_

Beneath the vaulting,
the elderly, deeply-kneeling

and kyphotic,
rock like a pendulum.

In each radiating chapel, a candle
forest is offered up to souls.

The choir’s complex
harmonics echo across pews.

Incense is a series
of hovering exhalations,

visible as umbrellas
in the narthex.

Prayers flutter, three
hundred breaths a minute.

Lungs, rain-licked,
hum white; each tongue

an edelweiss. Leadlight
vignettes glitter
in the clerestory: an angel’s
wing-lashed fire,

in twenty-one-gram
refractions, holding all this.

End of the blessing

To me you were the heart’s X
against my Guernica wall,
drowning out calamity.

I was addicted to your trip trap
words, lush as ferns,
all the way to fractal.

And the tandoor of my body grew
wide awake; tongue, a fire
racing through the field.

You seduced my mind,
till it was perpetually
undressed.

What’s left inside me, now
you’ve drifted off,
taking all the alleluias?

Montage

The old philosopher is sharp as ice in winter,
fracturing all the wicked weights,
the resonance of his voice, lacerating
so-called safe spaces,

until they are ripped and sewn again,
upright as trees.

His words are gateways to the sublime,
conflating human agency

with the natural order, the body
of shared memory with the vanished sign.

There should be flowers, he tells us
in a clear-cut voice, simple as ink.

Every night, his teachings turn to the blue
laws, or stallions

or the book of hours. Come dawn,
he reaches the double zero

in a landscape of confession – luminous
and ferocious, divine and apocalyptic,

inviting invocation and resistance
to those overpouring

toward war – that avenue
lined with little lamps of snow.

—Afric McGlinchey

Afric McGlinchey was born in Ireland. She grew up in Southern Africa, moving frequently between countries, and received degrees from Rhodes University and the University of Cape Town. She has also lived in London, Paris, Dublin and Spain. She returned to Ireland in 1999 and currently lives in West Cork.
collection, *The Lucky Star of Hidden Things*, published by Salmon was translated into Italian and published by L’Arco1. Amor and honours, in 2011 she won the Hennessy Poetry Award, and nominated for a Pushcart prize, commended in the Magma and s Bridport competitions. In 2015, she won the Poets Meet Politic awarded an Arts bursary to complete her second collection, *Gh Cat* (Salmon Poetry), which was nominated for the Forward Collection in 2016. Runner up in the 2014 Sabotage Awards for be is also an editor.  

My First Job | The Hematology Clinic — Roberta
My first real job was in a hematology clinic in the late seventies. The office, located on Eight Mile Road in Detroit, was a small beehive of rooms where three clinicians saw patients, with five women acting as support staff. There I fell under the spell of one doctor who was everything admirable: a scientist, a professor, a musician, and also a little goofy. I was seventeen; we were perfect for each other.

My job wasn’t demanding: I called patients in from the waiting room, watched as the tech drew their blood, weighed them, and...
to an examining room where I gave them a dressing gown and asked them to undress. The difficult part was seeing critically ill people day after day. But by the time I realized, my stint had ended and I returned to the summer vacation of the rest of my life.

I’d just graduated from high school, which sounds very flags flying and trumpets blaring, when in fact I’d limped through my senior year until I finally stopped going months before graduation. My psyche had snapped. I couldn’t tolerate the people at school, the hubbub, the drama, the flat wooden desks, the washed-out teachers of the lunchroom, and the emptiness I felt there. Instead I stayed home in my room with its red carpet, wrought iron table, black and white bedspread, and woven headboard I’d spray painted black. There, in my twin bed, I read or wept until my mother demanded I do a household chore. The school must have mailed diploma.

Then in July, Henny, the office manager, asked me to return to the office as a full-time worker. My parents, who didn’t know what to do with me, probably saw the job as a godsend; a safe place where adults would watch over me instead of having me hospitalized.

Without the internal starch to resist, I zipped on a white uniform and showed up for work the following Monday. From then on, I slid on my virginal garb and performed the role of someone who functioned in the world during the week. One perk of showing up was seeing my hero in action. He was spectacular. He listened to others, treated them with kindness, ministered to their illness with a light touch, and sent them off hopeful.

I wasn’t alone in admiring Dr. A. The four other women who worked there also thought he walked on water. The office manager, Henny, led the pack. She was a Chihuahua-sized person who acted like a German shepherd. She scheduled appointments and collected payments from patients, scaring them into paying their bill with her blood red nails and dark scowl. The front office where she stood had a sliding window that opened onto the waiting room. Most of the time she kept the glass shut.
She knew how to act professionally, yet without warning she could say the cruelest thing. Afterwards, in an Oscar-winning act, she'd disavow responsibility for her words. Scary stuff. I tried to stay out of her way.

Barb, the typist, also worked in the front office. She was a wiz at transforming dictation into typed pages, as if she were part machine. Though maybe seven years older than me at most, she seemed born of another generation. At lunch she did needlepoint and talked of her mother constantly, with a country twang that belied the fact she'd grown up twenty miles west of Detroit. She also loved hair spray; by Friday amber beads pearled the strands of her red hair. Sometimes she'd show me a passage from one of Dr. A’s reports. His writing was lyrical, cogent, and humane. Barb never mentioned the reports of the other two doctors whose work she also transcribed.
The insurance gal worked in the back section of the lab. She was a tiny person born in Wyandotte, a blue-collar town downriver from Detroit. She was sort of pretty, but there was an off-putting dark cast to her personality. If she didn’t agree with something I’d said, she wouldn’t say so; instead she’d give this snarly, bark kind of laugh that was both derisive and dismissive. She barked around Henny a lot.

Bernice, the lab technician, was the heart of the office. She had dreamy purple-blue eyes which were often red-rimmed from either allergies or husband troubles. She’d been married a few times and had a couple of kids. She and Henny often held hushed conversations in the mornings. While the other women shuffled paper, Bernice did actual medical work. She drew patients’ blood, made slides, filled hematocrit tubes and set them in the machine to spin. Most of her day was spent peering into a microscope, identifying and counting good and bad blood cells. She showed me an example of a sickle cell once and explained that, unlike a healthy circular red blood cell, this was half-moon shaped and carried less oxygen through the body.

Bernice was my direct superior. She taught me everything I had to do in the office. And though I felt low as linoleum, I tried my best because I wanted Dr. A. to think well of me.

He was smart and funny, and unlike my father, heard everything I said the first time. I wanted him to adopt me; he already had three sons, he needed a daughter. One morning he demonstrated what a father when a delivery guy boldly looked me up and down. Dr. A. saw this and was outraged, which I translated to mean he’d protect me from louts and any other misfortune.

Dr. A. always made a point of engaging me with some nonsense before we entered an exam room. He’d jiggle his eyebrows like Groucho Marx or tell a joke, and after I’d laughed he’d put on his serious face and tap on the door.
While he conversed with the patient, I stood by the wall willing myself invisible. His patients were usually milky pale with rumpled skin and hollowed-out eyes. From my spot at the wall I saw a woman with a surgically smoothed chest. At first I admired her flat chest almost, and then the penny dropped and I realized both her breasts had been removed. However, if she was seeing Dr. A., the disease still hounded her. She’d given her breasts to cancer but it wanted more. It made me wonder what cellular bombs were brewing beneath my own elastic skin.
During the exam he’d listen to the patients’ heart and lungs, palpate their bellies, and check the lymph nodes under their arms and at their groin if necessary. Then he’d say one of three things: how well they were doing, that they needed a blood transfusion or chemotherapy, or that Henny would arrange for them to be admitted to the hospital.

By now I was eighteen, and five days a week I watched people wheel their loved ones into offices where they hoped for good news. In contrast, my pain and confusion had no precise diagnosis though it made me stagger as I worked through the day. I struggled in silence, tamping down my despair as I tried to keep up with the new tasks added to my evolving job.

For instance, Dr. A. performed bone marrow extractions in the office. The sterilized white package, wrapped like a package from the butcher, held all the necessary items for the procedure. As I watched, he’d inject an anesthetic into the area, talk to the patient as it took effect, and then plunge a long, hollow metal needle into the patient’s bone. It was sort of like coring an apple but instead of apple seeds, he brought up a tube of moist bone marrow. The apparatus he used looked both barbaric and elegant. Once he’d finished, I had to clean the instrument, wrap it in white cloth, secure it, and then set the package in the autoclave, a small box like a microwave that hummed as it sanitized what was inside of it.
Bernice also taught me how to use a blood pressure cuff and stethoscope to measure a patient's blood pressure. To start, I'd wrap the cuff around their upper arm, then support their arm as I squeezed a rubber ball that pumped air into the cuff. Once the cuff was tight, I'd set the bell of the stethoscope at the crease in their elbow, turn the knob at the base of the ball to release the air and listen through the stethoscope for a sound. The first whoosh signified their systolic pressure and, when that sound ceased, the diastolic pressure. Afterwards I'd quickly note each number. However, the sound and lack of it were often faint. Since I was unsure of what I'd heard, I'd ask the patient if I could do it again. These people were so agreeable. They were used to being poked and prodded by someone wearing a white uniform, and my costume signaled an expertise I didn’t possess. I felt awful about doing it a second time, but I had to be sure it was correct.

As if this physical intimacy weren't enough, they next asked me how to draw blood, something Bernice usually did. I guess
if I did it, Bernice would have more time for her other work. Since I thought Dr. A. had suggested it, I agreed to become a phlebotomist.

The morning training was held at Sinai Hospital, where we began with shoving a needle into an orange, which I didn't mind. Then we moved on to people. I could hardly hold a conversation with someone and now I had to swab their skin with alcohol, tie off their arm with a rubber tourniquet, and jab a needle into them. It made my hands sweat to touch their skin as I searched for a vein. For a while I hid in the bathroom, but that strategy was short-lived; eventually I had to stick and be stuck by someone else.

As the morning continued we refined our new skill with more instruction. The needle had to be jabbed quickly to reduce pain, but couldn't be pushed too far or it would drive through the vein causing blood to leak into the surrounding tissue. Once needle handling was mastered, the trick was to locate the vein. Men's veins often rise above the skin's surface—while women's veins often hide. The instructor told us to press our finger in the crease of the elbow until we sensed a line of resistance, i.e., the vein, and then clean the area and slide the needle in. Sounds simple enough. But veins are easily lost. They can roll, be thin as thread, or flatten out if someone is dehydrated, which sick people often are. Somehow I made it through the training.

Back at the office, Bernice wanted me to practice my new skill by as I tied a tourniquet around an older man's exposed arm. He had dry, wrinkled skin, where once he'd had taunt muscles and a tattoo. But like a horse, I shied at the jump and Bernice had to finish it while I hid in the back lab.

Mornings Henny sorted the mail. Among the bills and letters were envelopes from the hospital, which held slips printed on pink paper. They were referred to as pink slips and were death notices. When one showed up she'd read off the name of who had died and we'd groan in recognition. However, if a cluster of pink slips arrived, the women would crack jokes in what I thought was a disrespectful manner. After months...
of this reaction, I came to see that they were struck by the patients' deaths and black humor was their collective way of handling it.

Dr. W., one of the three doctors, saw the sickest patients. His face reminded me of Richard Nixon or a rubber mask version. After I'd learned how to draw blood, he asked if I'd fill in for patients who needed chemotherapy. I was caught. I had the time, and if I didn't do it Bernice had to do it and I'd already let her down by not wanting to do the phlebotomy thing, so I said yes. This new job was done in between weighing patients, getting them settled in a room, taking their blood pressure, and filing glass slides. It was kind of fun.

When a patient required chemotherapy, Dr. W. would give me a Post-it listing the name or names of the medication to use. The medicine was stored in boxes in the lab refrigerator in between staff lunches and a carton of half and half. I felt like Dr. Frankenstein, pumping 5ccs of sterilized water into the rubber gasket of a tiny bottle and watching the crystals dissolve. Another med was a form of mustard gas used during WWI. The third, referred to by its acronym 5FU, came in glass ampules. The tops were pretty easy to snap off, and then I'd draw
into the tube of the syringe. To be on the safe side, I’d rest Dr. W.’s Post-it on a small tray along with the syringes.

Yet even with these precautions, I more than once filled the wrong med. After I’d taken the tray into his office, I’d have this impulse to check the trash and if I saw a glass ampule I’d have a paper towel instead of a tiny rubber-topped bottle, I’d hover in the doorway to see if he’d already given the injection.

If he had, I’d back away and go into an exam room where I’d yank the used paper off the exam table and pull a fresh sheet over it. I’d think how to tell Bernice what I’d done. Then I’d lined up the stethoscope, the reflex hammer, and the prescription pads before heading for the lab.

There I’d watch her perched on her stool, her eyes plugged into the microscope as her finger tapped the counter. She’d done it for so many years she could count and listen at the same time. After I’d whispered my mistake, her finger would stop and she’d pull her face away from the microscope and take a swig of coffee. Then she’d say, “Go tell Dr. W.”

Of course I wanted her to handle it. I was the youngest member of the office, whose job description kept expanding. I made the coffee, made sure the bathroom stayed tidy, picked up after the patients, stacked magazines in the waiting room, treated everyone nicely, and screwed up the medication. I was sure they’d call the police, so I locked myself in the bathroom. I wanted more than anything to off-load the blame, but I couldn’t. I’d been moving too fast, I hadn’t triple checked the Post-it against the medicine. When someone tapped on the door, I had to open it.
Dr. W. sat in his office behind his desk. I explained my mistake. As he listened, his rubbery face lengthened. The silence multiplied, had children of its own who had wedding more children. Finally, he said something like, “These sick, one injection isn’t going to kill them.” I wouldn’t say he was casual about hearing this news, yet what could he do? The rushing through their bloodstream. They’d already Obviously he bore final responsibility for my actions, haunted me. I didn’t know how the body would react to potentially clashing meds. Would it make them sicker?

A few weeks later Henny read out the pink slips, including the woman I’d given the wrong medication. The line mishandled the meds and the woman had died. I was
eighteen-year-old. I didn’t know if there was a relationship between the medication and her death, and no one put me wise either with responsibility and in that state couldn’t ask for clarification.

And in that darkness, came some light. Dr. A. invited me to join his family at their vacation home in upper Michigan. I was thrilled to be asked but puzzled by how little he spoke to me while there. Most of the time I hung out with one of his sons.

Winter passed, as did spring, and June came round again. I’d spent a year at the hematology clinic, in whose rooms I’d practiced becoming more of a person. I’d seen patients with punishing diseases come and go, and now it was time for me to go, too. Whatever romance I had with medicine died in that.

—Roberta Levine
Roberta Levine lives in rural northwestern Pennsylvania where she writes about art, the environment and education. She earned a BFA at the University of Michigan and a MFA from The Vermont College of Fine Arts. She contributes to Kitchn/Apartment Therapy, writes short stories, and teaches an arts enrichment program offered through Allegheny College.

Pretending to Nature: Excerpt from I Don’t Think of You (Until I Do) | Fiction — Tatiana Ryckman
When I saw you again it was suddenly and exactly as I feared or hoped, which is to say it was exactly the same.

You walked into the room you’d walked in the year before pretending we always sit close, and we went to dinner with mutual friends pretending we always go to dinner with mutual friends, and our friends tried to pretend I would not be going home with you until it became ridiculous.

At the holiday party the entire city’s enthusiasm kept coming between...
us. I was just waiting for everyone to leave. I didn’t care that the year was dying, I didn’t worry that I was leaving anything behind.

Because all of my grand gestures were neurons train hopping on thoughts of you, you couldn’t see them from the other side of my skull or country.

And I didn’t blame you because no one is a mind reader, and we all get busy.

And you got very busy.

It became hard not to imagine, in heartbreaking detail, somebody who moved you from one all-consuming task to the next. From the bed to the floor. From the specific taste of their body to the books they inspired you to write.

Soon, between the flights I took in my mind to your room and the ways I held you in my mouth and the monuments you built to our hours together in your living room, there was this someone else, who would occasionally step out of my own fantasies of you to remind me how far away I really was.

During long periods of silence I convinced myself that nothing had transpired between us. That my willingness to undo my life at your feet was ordinary.

What we were calling “inevitable” turned out to be debilitating sadness.

Alone in bed I’d say, “I’m dying” over and over again.
happened. My cells regenerated at the same rate. I refreshed my empty email inbox. I was dying while making breakfast and then dying while washing dishes which turned into dying in the bed again and then later, over a glass of juice, dying on the floor. I was dying while listening to sad music on headphones. I was dying while looking at personal ads on Craigslist. I was dying while watching videos of sleepy kittens on Youtube. I was dying while watching two women taste each other on a different website with a similar name. I was dying while making popcorn, sending smiley face text messages to friends and Liking things on Facebook. I was dying while looking at the ceiling and then back at the ceiling again. I was dying and wishing I would just die.

No one could see it, but I was very busy. I was dying all the time.

6

I couldn’t help but notice that you were probably not in love.

Not with me, anyway. Which is not to say I would have promised I was. Not yet, anyway.

But I was noticing both the lack of you and the prevalence of mosquitoes in the yard and it felt like being alone at a party. Like watching my phone as if I had friends on the way. But I was just pretending to nature that you’d show up.

—T

Tatiana Ryckman was born in Cleveland, Ohio. She is the author of two chapbooks of prose, Twenty-Something and VHS and Why it’s Ha. The linked vignettes are an excerpt from I Don’t Think of You (Until) forthcoming from Future Tense Books.
A Poet Has Nine Knives

One to trim the fat
One to cut the line
One for father’s back
One for that crook Time
One to keep it sharp
And to slice it thin
One that’s sly and jagged
As a gutted tin
One for keeping sheathed
One to pick the latch
One whose only deed’s
To carve your epitaph

THREE POEMS FROM “TRIGGER WARNING”

Unteachable Moment

woe to the innocent who hears that sound!
—Odyssey 12.44, Fitzgerald translation

In lockdown, I’d been desperate
to hear sirens; once outside, safe,
they were too much. Paroxysmal,
dopplered, they blared past me hur-ry

hur-ry on the way to
my daughter’s daycare,

and at home, in our living room, on the TV:
looped footage. Our near silence
punctured by the stifled lament
of police cars, ambulances careening to the ER,

converging on the scene
I’d just escaped.
My husband and I, slumped on the couch, unable to get out the oars, were watching our daughter playing on the floor.

“That?” she asked, pointing at the screen. “Ambulance,” I said, but she shook her head, still pointing, her finger stirring the air.

I turned it right down, but I could still hear it. I told her, “That’s a *siren*,” waited to see if she was satisfied with just the word, or if she’d press me for what the sound itself meant this moment. I was queasy watching my school on the news, as if learning who and how many could stanch the genre, as if the next “kept to himself” wasn’t also taking cues, gearing up— shooting selfies, posed with his Glock—and again, on every channel, sirens will serenade kids filing from schools, some with their arms on the shoulders of the kid ahead, looking for all the world like anguished rowers. I got down on the floor.
If

(after James Hoch, *Miscreants*)

if he had taken up guitar, played
ping pong or Ultimate Frisbee, tried
deep breathing, accepted human frailty,
adopted a mutt at the SPCA,
shovelled his neighbour’s walk,
did a year abroad
if there were more ways in than out
if he felt that someone was listening, maybe
a boy on the beach, after parasailing
at Île Sainte-Marguerite, the scent of umbrella pines
and eucalyptus in the air,
taking sips from a can of Kronenbourg
if his favourite aunt had been a police officer
if he’d had a favourite aunt
if his car had gotten a flat, and he’d taken this
as a sign to take a spiritual U-
y
if he had smelled fear and been able to name it,
if he could laugh at himself
if he’d read Dostoyevsky, Ian McEwan, Tim O’Brien
if he’d preferred the Guggenheim and techno gadgets to
if he made a mean gulab jamun or tiramisu or quindim
if it was so simple it was beautiful
if he’d had a sibling with cystic fibrosis, a teacher from Tr
a chum who medalled in Taekwondo, a summer of love,
a walk in the park, a hug around the neck,
a Sudoku habit if he had talked
to his doctor or mother and tried meds
and planted some sub-zero roses
if he had been pulled over for unpaid tickets,
bowed to cosmic irony and vowed to give peace
a chance if he had not been born, or was somehow re
if we could recognize him this turn,
slipknot time, help him
to feel good in his skin
when he begins this
day and when he lays his head down to drea

Conventions

_the same message: how horrible it was, how little
there was to say about how horrible it was._
—Bob Hicok, “In the Loop”

The running and then
the footage of people running.
After the chaos there is silence,
a failure of words but not of sound,
which we know travels in waves,
and the speed of which is still the distance
travelled per unit of time.
The sound of a firearm going off
in a school hallway is not unlike the sound
of a metal locker slamming inside your head.
The colleagues you hugged
and who hugged you will go back
to arms’ length, which is healthy.
Maybe you will cry
one night doing dishes,
up to the elbow in thinning suds,
combing for straggling flatware,
which might suggest something poetic
about the correspondence of the elements
or, when you think about it, the extraordinary
capacity of the workaday to anchor
and unmoor us.
Faith is a Suitcase

You've lugged it
down narrow aisles,
hoisted and stowed it overhead
with the ersatz pillows,

leaned on it
during the layover, dozed,
head nodding like a monk at prayer.

Hello split seam, wonky wheel.
Who wouldn’t blame the gorilla?

Locked, key lost. It waits
in the corner of the room
like an agèd aunt.

Ativan

Fleck of wherewithal. Just
to have it in a tiny faux-
abalone box, to know you can
lift it with a licked pinkie,
if required. Bitter
plaster-of-Paris smear
under the tongue
because
the mind’s default is flee
and your baby’s lumbar puncture
is scheduled for 2:30. Necessity
and consent
in a slow dissolve.
Not so much a buffer
as the strength to stand
beside the hospital bed
and be two of the hands
holding him for the needle’s kiss.

Descent

My baby was still nursing, and I’d lean over
the bed’s steel rails to give him the breast,
let him twist his fingers in my hair until he slept
anchored by electrodes, gauze bonnet, fat snarl of wires
twisting into a Bob the Builder backpack
that housed the Trackit box near the call switch.
I could not leave the ward though they urged me to
go home, get a shower, change. At night,
an infrared video camera captured our quiet ballet.

I could not leave, could not leave. On the third day
I was sent down to the basement,
to the abandoned locker room.
Past the heavy steel door that would not quite close,
I stood under exposed ducts, frazzled fluorescent tubes
in a ship’s bilge. Whiff of mildew, occult drip.
In the dim light I found the one narrow
shower stall, the slick edge
of the torn plastic curtain, pulled it back.

No one to hear me. My baby
lay in a bed flights up, electrodes
pasted to his scalp, helmeted in gauze.
I stripped, hung my milk-sour track suit
and hospital towel on a hook, stepped over the lip
onto a flattened shopping bag spread like a lily pad
on the blackened grout, institutional-green tiles.
The first cold water,
my baptism.
Susan Elmslie is a poet and college (CEGEP) professor of English and Creative Writing in Montreal. Her collection *I, Nadja, and Other Poems* (Brick, 2006) won the A. M. Klein Poetry Prize and was shortlisted for the McAuslan, the Pat Lowther Memorial Award and a ReLit Award. Her poems have appeared in several journals and anthologies—including the *Best Canadian Poetry in English* (2008, 2015)—and in a prize-winning chapbook. Susan has been a Hawthornden Poetry Fellow and has read her poems in translation for the series curated by Guy Cloutier for Les poètes de l’Amérique française. A first-prize winner in the *Arc* Poem of the Year contest, Susan has been longlisted and shortlisted for other national and international poetry contests. Her book *Museum of Kindness* is forthcoming with Brick (Fall 2017).

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Woods on Fire | Poems — Fleda Brown
We’ve published poems and essays by Fleda Brown before, but this is something special, an apotheosis of sorts. Thursday, March 16, 5–7 pm, she will launch *The Woods Are on Fire: New & Selected Poems* at the Corner Loft in Traverse City, Michigan. The book contains 20 poems selected from seven earlier books plus 48 new poems and comes out with the University of Nebraska Press in its Ted Kooser Contemporary Poetry series. The eminent Ted Kooser himself wrote the introduction.
The Woods are on Fire: New and Selected Poems
Fleda Brown; Introduction by Ted Kooser
University of Nebraska Press, 2017
Paperback, $19.95
978-0-8032-9494-3

The Winner of the Art Prize

Is a 15-foot quilted forest scene
hundreds of trillium from puffily
quilted at one end to sewn-on
tatters at the other. I was saying
I don’t understand the bombs
that blow off the heads of children
and soldiers how bombs can be
expelled from their casings
with a rapture by rapture I mean
the desire to ignite and whether
this is evil or springtime-mechanized-
outsourced-multiplied-stretched
unto exhaustion. Jerry’s back
has seized up electrodes have been
fastened to various locations
to repeatedly fire to wear out
the muscles so they might return
to their previous pattern except
new pains keep coming seedlings
edging up from the dark white blasts
of trillium a natural law. Odysseus
returns after Troy, after the Cyclops,
the Sirens, Scylla and Charybdis
the bloody heads of his crew their
bodies eaten or lost at sea Odysseus
after twenty years returns to Penelope
sword unsheathed suitors slain
even old Laertes murders all around
as if peace is death in other words
so what I don’t get is the quilt how
those thousands of tiny piercings
and piecings for weeks and months
when you stand back mean a forest
serene sun-dappled flowered.
You’re right, it’s good to have a body in state, satin-surround, to kiss the face, open the ground, see how it is with all of us, how it was with my classmate Frank who died of measles, his pillowed freckles dark and done. Good, the blatant coffin, the procession, the undertaker, the taking under. To turn a body to ash—I can see how it flies in the face of full-on facing how slow the earth means to be.

Jack, however, yesterday opened a tiny wooden box and dropped Nancy’s ashes in a hole. We each spaded in loose dirt. What ashes were left, that is, after he’d launched most of them in the lake: an advantage, to unhouse ourselves fast and float where we will, lonely, maybe, without even the worm’s witness, but delicately dispersed.

I’m thinking, though, of the gar my uncle Dick dropped in a planting hole, the huge white pine that peaked thirty feet above the rest, the legend of that lain at the foot of the tree, what one hands the other by way of heft, the air ponderous with it all these eighty years.
He says he wakes and it feels momentarily
like he’s finally dying, a giving way, a sinking
or hovering, can’t say, but momentary: a window swung
open you don’t realize until a breeze.

I take him for a ride along the tongue
of land, west looking east, looking back at the city
from a point. Jet trails. He points them out, strung
like necklaces, one fresh, with its glint out front.

We talk glaciers how they stuttered and glinted
down Michigan, pools for each pause,
those excellent lapses. And branches bare because
the trees are all dead, he says, forgetting the time of year.

No, I say, dormant. Road hum. Ducks with their flawless
It hurts to turn his head. I slow and turn. Each new thing
needs to be dead center, unencumbered. The names:
mallard, jet trail, Power Island. Boat slips claim
blank water breathing in their hollows. He says it feels
like dying, he says it as if he had been lit up from the inside,
a room waiting, a waiting room. Not an ordeal,
but road hum and light.

At night the aides come by. One kisses him goodnight
on the lips, he says. Where? The lips. He smiles
as if he’s gotten away with something. He’s miles
away, a faint agreeable aftertaste. Nothing he can describ

Too Much Going Wrong

I want to quit thinking about
trouble and instead praise
the cars moving exactly right
along the curved roadway, not bumping each other or the curb.
Days that were thick and watery, everything at its summer: gerbil, peanut butter, tippy-cup, days that started over and over and were still small as a VW with its hard shocks and no seat belts and you beside me in the Infant Seat made of wire and plastic and facing forward, held down by nothing yet at the intersections my arm flew out to hold you back so that nothing would happen while everything was happening.
Sheets on the line, diapers tumbled at the Laundromat for softness, and in the mirror, Look, you found yourself and me, hair and tongue, the most delightful shapes, words just beginning, slobber and drool as if the universe had thought this up, in particular, and showed us as if in a dream and we dreamed our way, through nights and days, without crashing, and inside the car the sweet music and the small feet bouncing up and down.

_Fleda Brown_ has published nine collections of poems. Her new one, _Woods Are On Fire: New & Selected Poems_, from U. of Nebraska I
Kooser Contemporary Poetry Series, is just out. Her memoir, *My Cancer and the Creative Life*, came out in 2016. She is professor emerita at the University of Delaware and was poet laureate of Delaware from 2001 to 2007. She now lives with her husband, Jerry Beasley, in Traverse City, Michigan. She is on the faculty of the Rainier Writing Workshop, a low-residency MFA program in Tacoma, Washington.

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Amulets, Talismans | The Ceramic Art of Michel Pastore & Evelyne Porret — Rikki Ducornet
Long ago I lived in North Africa. I learned that among the Berber peoples, the erotic verses from the Koran are traced on the body of the bride with henna—her hands and feet, belly, breasts. On the night of her wedding, her husband licks and swallowing, embodies the sacred erotic.

When in the Loire Valley years later, I saw the ceramics of Michel Pastore and Evelyne Porret, I was stunned by the sight of so many domestic objects that were not only beautiful, but also somehow transcendent. In the deepening shadows of the late afternoon, they sparked the air and sizzled—more like amulets and talismans than bowls and plates. I mean to say that if they were destined for domestic pleasure, their emphasis was more on the ecstatic than the mundane. This encounter remains one of the most powerful influences within my creative life. Several of the pieces I saw that day are visible below.

Around the time I returned to the United States, Michel and Evelyne moved to Fayoum, Egypt. There they built a home, a ceramics studio and a kiln of clay brick. Soon after arriving, in 1989, Evelyne opened a studio school for local children which is flourishing to this day.
In 1991, Michel, always protean, and inspired by the weavers of the ancient village of Nagada, became interested in textile and clothes design. With the Lebanese designer, Sylvia Nasralla, he opened a shop in Cairo named you watch this video of a Nagada fashion show, you will be enchanted.

— Rikki Ducornet
Ceramics by Evelyne Porret (above and below)
Ceramic by Michel Pastore
Pastore/Porret house and studio at Fayoum
The studio in Fayoum
Pastore and Porret at the studio
A pot made of local clay, from the first firing in the Fayoum studio.
—Ceramics by Michel Pastore & Evelyne Porret; text by
Rikki Ducornet is the author of eight novels as well as collections of essays, and poems. She has been a finalist for the National Book Award, is a two-time honoree of the Lannan Foundation, and the recipient of an Academy Award in Literature. Widely published abroad, she is a book illustrator and painter who exhibits internationally. Her work is held by the Ohio...
State University Rare Books and Manuscripts Library, the Museo de la Solidaridad Salvador Allende in Chile, McMaster University Museum in Canada, and the Bibliothèque nationale de France. Rikki lives in Port Townsend, Washington.

Small Revolutions | Drawings — Anne Hirondelle

Aperture 14, 16 x 16
Hirondelle’s beginnings as an artist were with clay. For over 20 years, she was drawn to the vessel as an abstraction and metaphor for containment, taking ideas from traditional functional pots and stretching them into architectural and organic sculptural forms. In 2002, to explore more formal ideas, she abandoned her signature glazes for unglazed white stoneware and moved the work from the horizontal to the vertical plane. A year later she began painting the surfaces. Simultaneously, her drawings, once ancillary to the sculpture, took on a life of their own. Derived from the ceramic forms, drawn with graphite and colored pencil on multiple layers of tracing paper, they are further explorations of abstraction.

Her latest exhibition, Anne Hirondelle: Small Revolutions, runs February 11-April
30, 2017 at the Hallie Ford Museum of Art at Willamette University in Salem, Oregon. The exhibition, which features ceramic work and drawings, takes its title from the poem, “Still Life with Fire” by David Fenza.

We shift in our naked repose, restless, because, if we are clay, the fingerprints of our Maker must be within & upon us; & after the Potter’s wheel is still, we still turn with small revolutions of faith & doubt as we style who & what to leave out & who & what to hold within.

—David W. Fenza

All images are graphite and prisma color on layered tracing paper.
Aperture 12, 16 x 16
Partners 1, 17 x 23
Partners 2, 17 x 23
Partners 4, 17 x 23

Triptych, overall 16 x 40 framed (individual images 10
Anne Hirondelle was born in Vancouver, Washington, in 1944. She spent her childhood as a farm girl near Salem, Oregon. She received a BA in English from the University of Puget Sound (1966) and an MA in counseling from Stanford University (1967). Hirondelle moved to Seattle in 1967 and directed the University YWCA until 1972. She attended the School of Law at the University of Washington for a year before discovering and pursuing her true profession: ceramics. She attended the ceramics program at the Factory of Visual Arts in Seattle (1973-74) and the BFA program at the University of Washington (1974-76). Anne Hirondelle has lived and worked in Port Townsend, Washington, since 1977.

Hirondelle has exhibited nationally in one-person and group shows in New York, Philadelphia, Los Angeles, Kansas City, Scottsdale, and Seattle. Her pieces are in myriad private and public collections including: The White House Collection in the Clinton Library, Little Rock, AR; The Museum of Arts and Design, NY; The L.A. County Art Museum and the Tacoma Art Museum.

She was the recipient of an NEA Fellowship for the Visual Arts in 1988. In 2004, Anne was a finalist for the Seattle Art Museum’s Betty Bowen Award. Her accomplishments were recognized by the Northwest Arts Community with the Yvonne Twining Humber Award for Lifetime Artistic Achievement in 2009. The University of Washington Press published Anne Hirondelle: Ceramic Art.
about her work in February, 2012. In 2014, she was one of four Washington State artists selected to participate in the Joan Mitchell Foundation’s Creating a Legacy (CALL) Program.

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David W. Fenza is a poet and the Executive Director of the Association of Writers & Writing Programs (AWP). “Still Life with Fire” is published with his permission.

The Avant-Pop Novels of J. P. McEvoy | Essay — Steven Moore
The 1920s saw a surge in experimentation with the novel. In *Ulysses* (1922), James Joyce used a different style for each chapter, including the play format for the Nighttown episode. Jean Toomer’s “composite novel” consists of numerous vignettes alternating between prose and drama. John Dos Passos in *Manhattan Transfer*...
abandoned traditional narrative for a collage of individual stories, newspaper clippings, song lyrics, and prose poems. Taking his cue from European Surrealists, Robert M. Coates likewise deployed newspaper clippings, along with footnotes, diagrams, and unusual typography, in *The Eater of Darkness* (1926). Djuna B. *Ryder* (1929) includes a variety of genres—poems, plays—and is written in a pastiche of antique prose styles. William Faulkner scrambled chronology and used four distinct narrative voices in *Sound and the Fury* (1929), and later even added a narrative appendix. These were all serious novelists who disrupted nineteenth-century narrative form to reflect the discontinuities, upheavals, and fragmentation of the early twentieth century, a time when many new media emerged that would rival and in some quarters supplant the novel in cultural importance and

But literary historians have overlooked a novelist from the same decade who deployed these same formal innovations largely for comic rather than serious effect, adapting avant-garde techniques for mainstream readers instead of the literati. Between 1928 and 1932, J. P. McEvoy published six ingenious novels that unfold solely by way of letters, telegrams, newspaper articles, ads, telephone transcriptions, playbills, greeting card verses, interoffice memos, monologues, song lyrics, and radio broadcasts. Ted Gioia described *Manhattan Transfer* as a scrapbook, which could describe McEvoy's novels as well, and in fact a reviewer of his first novel used that very term.[1] Given their concern with a variety of media (vaudeville, musicals, movies, newspapers, greeting cards, comic strips) and their replication of the print forms of those media, they might better be described as multimedia novels. But perhaps the best, if anachronistic, category for McEvoy's novels is avant-pop, that postmodern movement of the late 1980s/early 1990s which (per Brian McHale, quoting Larry McCaffery) "appropriates, recycles and repurposes the materials of popular mass-media culture, ‘combin[ing] Pop Art’s focus on consumer goods and mass media with the avant-garde’s spirit of emphasis on radical formal innovation.’"[2]
Since McEvoy is all but unknown, a brief biographical sketch follows.

An orphan, Joseph Patrick McEvoy told the Rockford Morning Star in life that he didn’t “remember where he was born—I told that it was New York City and that the year was 1894.” Comic historian Alex Jay, who records that remark in a profile, gives a number of possible birthdates ranging from 1894 to 1897; the consensus today is 1895. Possibly born Jo Hillick, the boy was adopted by Patrick and Mary Anne McEvoy of New Burnside, Illinois. The same Rockford Morning Star piece says “he didn’t go to school—he was dragged. This number of years, during which time McEvoy grew stronger and stronger—until finally he couldn’t be dragged any more. This was the end of his education.” In the contributors’ notes to a he wrote (in third person): “While he was still a guest house, J. P. McEvoy started his writing career at the a Sporting editor of the South Bend Sporting-Times.” He (in first person), “I remember my first assignment as s the News-Times [sic] was to cover a baseball game. I was a writer. I became so interested in what was going on that detail of scoring the game. I had to call The Tribune (a rival paper) to get the score.” In 1910 he enrolled at the University which he attended until 1912.

In 1920, a stationery industry journal called Geyer’s Sta account of his early career (again from Jay):

It is interesting to take a peep into Mr. McEvoy’s past. He early acquired the art of hustling—perhaps that is why he is able now to do the work of two or three men. At Chr College in St. Louis he was the star bed make and fifty a day was his regular chore. Later, University, he was a “waiter” at meal times a man in the evenings. He worked on the South six in the evening until two in the morning. When he required no guard to protect him—$4.00
When he came to Chicago, after graduating, he obtained a position as a cub reporter in the sporting department of the old *Record-Herald*. He created several comic strips there beginning in 1914, and moved on to the *Chicago Tribune* in 1916 for further strips before joining the P. F. Volland Company, which published books, postcard cards, and greeting cards. McEvoy published two illustrated books of sarcastic verse with Volland, both in 1919: *Slams of Life: With Malice for All, and Charity Toward None, Assembled in Rhyme*—with a postmodern in which McEvoy refers to himself in the third person as “his favorite author”—and *The Sweet Dry and Dry; or, See America Thirst!* of poems and strips protesting the passing of the Eighteenth Amendment prohibiting the sale of alcohol. *Slams of Life* trumpets the linguistic ingenuity that enlivens his later mostly comic poems are bursting with wordplay, slang, typographical tricks, and flamboyant diction: the first word in one poem is “Absquatulating,” and the opening Song of the Movie Vamp” reads:
I am the Moving Picture Vamp, insidious and tropical,
The Lorelei of celluloid, the lure kaleidoscopic,
Calorific and sinuous, voluptuous and canicular,
And when it comes to picking pals, I ain’t a bit particular.

Many are quite literate, even erudite: “That’s a Gift” namedrops the historians Taine, Gibbon, and Grote, while another ranges from “the Ghibelline and Guelp” to “Eddie Poe.” The latter’s poem with the baby-talk title “Bawp-Bawp-Bawp-Pa!” acknowledges the ancient Greek orators “Who slung a mean syllable over the floor / Isaeus, Aeschines, Demosthenes, too,” and McEvoy seems to have been au courant with the latest poetry and art as well, for another one is entitled “An Imagist Would Call This ‘Pale Purple Question Descending a Staircase.’” He introduced Sinclair Lewis before the Booksellers’ League in Chicago in 1921; reporting the event, Publishers Weekly identified McElroy as the author of Psalms of Life sanctification of his Slams that probably amused him.[7]

McEvoy wasn’t happy at Volland, despite his lavish salary ($10,000 a year, equivalent to around $130K today) and the prestige of being “the first writer of greeting-card sentiments to be admitted to the Author’s League.”[8] In the author’s note at the end of his Denny and the Dumb Cluck—a 1930 novel satirizing the greeting-card business:

For many years I was editor and poet laureate of P. F. Volland and Co. and the Buzza Co., leaders in the manufacture and distribution of greeting cards, and among other minor atrocities I have compiled 47,888 variations of Merry Christmas. Also I have sat in on art conferences without number, where we met such important crises as “Shall we face the three camels east, or would it be better to put one of those Elizabethan singers out on the doorstep, holding a roll of wall paper?”

Until he resigned from Volland in 1922, McEvoy contin...
the Chicago Tribune. It ran a serial called *The Potters* in 1921, illustrated by a friend he had made at Notre Dame named John H. Striebel (1891–1962), with whom he would later collaborate. *The Potters* was described as “a new weekly humorous satire in verse on married life in a big city” and was later turned into a successful play and published in book form in 1924.

By then McEvoy had left Chicago and was living in New York City, leaving behind both greeting cards and comic strips for the stage. First he wrote a revue called *The Comic Supplement*, which was produced by Florenz Ziegfeld and starred W. C. Fields. McEvoy wrote the original “Drug Store” sketch, one of Field’s favorites and reprised in some of his later films. Ziegfeld forced unwanted changes on McEvoy’s script, but later repented and invited him to begin writing for the Ziegfeld Follies. McEvoy cowrote the 1925 production (with Will Rogers, Gus Weinberg, and Gene Buck), and continued to contribute skits and songs until 1926.

In 1926 he wrote a two-act revue entitled *Americana*,[10] a show that Gershwin biographer Howard Pollack describes as anticipating McEvoy’s novels: “*Americana*. . . satirized American life, including an after-dinner speech at a Rotary Club and an awkward attempt by a father to talk to his son about sex; it also took aim at opera (‘Cavalier Americana’) as well as Shakespeare by way of [composer Sigmund] Romberg (‘The Student Prince of Denmark’). Critics welcomed the show as refreshingly clever—a ‘revue of ideas,’ as the *stated. . . .’”[11] His other revues—*No Foolin’* (1926), *Allez Oop* and *New Americana* (1932)—were less successful but provided plenty of backstage material for his novels.

It was at the Ziegfeld Follies that McEvoy met the inspiration for his first novel. Louise Brooks (1906–1985) was a featured dancer in the 1925 edition, and caught the eye of Paramount Pictures producer Walter Wanger, who signed her to a five-year contract later that year. McEvoy thought the wild-living Brooks would make an attractive heroine for a comic novel, and after naming her “Dixie Dugan” in
It was published in book form by Simon & Schuster in July of the same year, and was an immediate success, going through five printings in two
months for a total of 31,000 copies in print—not to mention reprints by two other publishers, two British editions, and a German translation (Revue-Girl, adapted by Arthur Rundt). Show Girl deals with Dixie's zigzagging path to success on Broadway; in its sequel, Dixie (like Louise Brooks) travels out to Hollywood for further risqué adventures. Like its predecessor, Hollywood Girl was first serialized in Liberty (22 June–28 September 1929), then published in book form later in 1929. Both were quick movies, Show Girl (1928) and Show Girl in Hollywood initially reported that Brooks would play Dixie, but she didn't get the part, possibly because she was under contract to another studio (though she had been loaned out before). Both films starred Alice White instead, who resembled It girl Clara Bow rather than the vampy Brooks. Stills from the films were tipped into later printings of both books, an early example of media synergy.

In 1929, McEvoy's former employer Florenz Ziegfeld, who appears as a character in Show Girl, produced a musical entitled American Girl with a script cowritten by McEvoy, and then staged a musical version of the novel, on which Gershwin again collaborated. The lamest but longest-lasting spin-off of Show Girl is Dixie Dugan, which McEvoy and Striebel began in October 1929 and which ran until October 1966, long after both had died. The premise was soon dropped for a series of light romantic adventures, and today the strip is held in low esteem by most comic book historians. As Jay notes, McEvoy appeared in the 17 October 1939 edition of the strip, metafictionally depicted arguing with Dixie over money from the franchise. A forgotten movie version, also called Dixie Dugan starring Lois Andrews, was released in 1943.
McEvoy in Dixie Dugan comic strip
McEvoy followed *Hollywood Girl* with four more novels in the same multimedia format. *Denny and the Dumb Cluck* (Simon & Schuster, 1930), is about a greeting-card salesman named Denny Kerrigan, who was first introduced in *Show Girl* as a long-distance love interest of Dixie’s. (The “dumb cluck” of the title is Denny’s new girlfriend, Doris Miller.) In the same author’s note quoted earlier, McEvoy admits

The truth is *Denny and The Dumb Cluck* is a grudge book. It was I who originated the most famous Christmas Greeting of all—Wishing you and yours a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year. You have probably used it yourself, no caring, which is worse—that it was stolen from me, that I have not received one cent of royalties for it.

I was robbed of that beautiful sediment [*sic*: a pun often used in his novels] and I swore that I would bide my time and some day I would get even. *Denny and The Dumb Cluck* is McEvoy’s fourth novel, a satire of the comic-strip business entitled *Noodle: An Extravaganza*, was serialized in the *Saturday Evening Post* from 15 November to 20 December 1930 (a little too elegantly illustrated by Arthur William Brown) and published in book form by Simon & Schuster.
McEvoy’s final novel, Are You Listening?, was serialized in Weekly between 17 October and 12 December 1931 (illustrated by L. Timmins) and quickly made into a movie with the same title. The book was published in book form by Houghton Mifflin in 1932. McEvoy’s last two novels apparently didn’t sell well, for they are nearly impossible to find today.

In 1930, at the height of McEvoy’s success, Broadway columnist Sidney
Skolsky ticked off some amusing if questionable trivia about him:

His first piece of writing appeared in the South Bend inserted a job-wanted advertisement.

For some unknown reason he is afraid to enter a laundry.

Lives at Woodstock, N. Y. Is the proud possessor of two blessed events and a St. Bernard dog. The two children are now attending school in California. The dog, dying of loneliness, is to be shipped there next week.

The only jewelry he wears is a black opal ring. Wears this because everyone says it is unlucky.

Is very fond of people who resemble him.

He saves unused return postal cards.

Never actually writes a play or story. He dictates everything. Always has two secretaries working. Never revises any of his manuscripts. *Show Girl* has fourteen chapters. It was dictated at fourteen settings.

He is unable to part his hair.

Believes there should be a law against bed makers who never tuck in the sheets at the foot of the bed.

As far as comedians go he starts laughing if he’s as Jimmy Durante.

Always buys two copies of a book. One to read and one to lend.

He has a picture of his wife in every room.

Still receives royalties on some of the greeting cards he wrote. His favorite is the following:

Eve had no Xmas
Neither did Adam.
Never had socks,
Nobody had 'em.
Never got cards,
Nobody did.
Take this and have it
On Adam, old kid.

He was once an amateur wrestler. Gave it up because he didn't like being on the floor.

He hates to see people in wet bathing suits.

His first book to be published was a volume of poetry titled *Slams of Life*. He has the names of those who bought it. Two more sales and he could have formed a club.

Smokes a cigar from the moment he turns off the shower in the morning until he puts on his pajamas at night.

His pet aversions are women's elbows, chocolate candy all melted together, fishing stories, fishermen, fish! *Laugh*; radio talks on how to make hens lay, but *Laugh, Clown, Laugh*; runs in silk stockings, three-piece orchestras, waiters who breathe do *Laugh, Clown, Laugh*.

When in New York he puts up at the Algonquin. If working on a story or play he and his wife occupy separate rooms.

His first writing for the stage was a vaudeville sketch.
Dark, written with John V. A. Weaver. It played only two performances in a four-a-day vaudeville house.

His favorite composers are Tchaikovsky, and George Gershwin. His favorite conductors are Toscanini and Frank Kennedy of the Fifth Avenue bus line.

Has two mottoes. One for the home and one for the office. The motto hanging in his house is: “Let No Guilty Dollar Escape.” The motto hanging in his office is: “Watch Your Hat and Coat.”

Dislikes all the Hungarian Rhapsodies from number one to twelve.

His idea of a grand time is hearing Paul Robeson sing anything, going to Havana, being petted by any brunette not over five feet five, depositing royalty checks from Simon & Schuster, throwing pebbles into a lake, reading anything by James Stephens, eating kalteraufschnitt mit kartoffelsalat and attending a Chinese theater with a Chinaman.

He once got sick eating a sandwich that was named after him.

After he quit running a column in the Chicago Tribune, the circulation of the Tribune dropped from forty thousand to a million.[15]

McEvoy continued to work in movies and publishing throughout the 1930s and 1940s. He appears in the opening credits of the 1933 film Woman Accused as one of the ten authors who wrote a chapter each of the serialized novella (in Liberty) from which the screenplay was adapted; he collaborated again with W. C. Fields on the latter’s 1934 films You’re Telling Me! and It’s a Gift; wrote nonfiction accounts of his life in upper New York State; published a children’s book called Bam Clock (Algonquin Publishing Co., illustrated by Johnny Gruelle); and he wrote a humorous advice column called “Father Meets Son” for the Saturday Evening Post (published in book form by Lippincott in 1937).
He coauthored the screenplay for Shirley Temple’s musical, *the Corner* (1938), along with an article on her (“Little Miss Miracle”) in the 9 July 1938 issue of the *Saturday Evening Post*, which reproduces a photograph of the author sitting next to the ten-year-old actress. He wrote the book for *Stars in Your Eyes*, a 1939 Broadway revue starring Ethel Merman and Jimmy Durante (the latter had a cameo in McEvoy’s first novel). Other notable magazine contributions include an interview with Clark Gable about *Gone with the Wind* in the 4 May 1940 issue of the *Saturday Evening Post* (there’s a photo available of a tuxedoed McEvoy dancing with Gable’s co-star Vivien Leigh), and a profile of Walter Howey, editor of William Randolph Hearst’s *Boston American*. He was famous enough to be featured, “just off the plane from Havana” (reproduced by Jay).
McEvoy with Shirley Temple, 1938

McEvoy dancing with Vivien Leigh, 1939
McEvoy spent the rest of his life contributing to *Reader's Digest* as a roving editor, travelling with his third wife, and entertaining a veritable who's who in America. Visitors to his large estate near Woodstock included members of the Algonquin Round Table, Frar Clarence Darrow, Rube Goldberg, and avant-garde composer George Antheil. “One hectic weekend,” a local newspaper reported.
“almost the entire membership of the American Society of Artists and Illustrators attended a fabulous weekend party.” In 1956, McEvoy published his last book, *Charlie Would Have Loved This* (written with Pearce), a collection of humorous articles. He died on 8 August 1958.

“Get hot!”: The Dixie Dugan Trilogy
For most readers in 1928, *Show Girl* looked utterly unlike any novel they had ever seen. Preceding the title page is a teaser with some hype from the publisher’s Inner Sanctum imprint, and the title page itself is an elaborate cast list “In the order of their appearance,” as in a theater program or the opening credits of a silent film. Each is followed by a saucy descriptive line, beginning with “Dixie Dugan: The hottest little wench that ever shook a scanty at a tired bus...
novel proper begins with a dozen pages of letters—familiar enough from epistolary fiction—which are quickly followed by a cavalcade of telegrams, Western Union cablegrams, newspaper articles (in two columns and a different font) and letters to the editor, playlets in script form, police reports (IN SMALL CAPS), poems and greeting card verses, a detective agency log, various theater materials (ads, reviews, house receipts), one-sided telephone conversations, a dramatization of a business convention, radiograms, even a House of Representatives session reprinted from the *Congressional Record*. 
Title page for Show Girl

All of this narrative razzmatazz supports a screwball-c
success story that occurs over a six-month period in 1927. (Nearly every document is dated, from May 1st to October 22nd.) The novel tracks Dixie’s hectic rise to notoriety. As this 18-year-old Brooklynite explains in a letter to her long-distance boyfriend Denny Kerrigan, she’s hell-bent on joining the chorus line of the Ziegfeld Follies.\footnote{17} He, on the other hand, writes that he wants and get a little apartment in Chicago, and I’ll come home Saturday night after my week on the road selling motto cards in Indiana” \footnote{18}

Failing her Ziegfeld audition, Dixie instead becomes a specialty dancer at the Jollity Night Club, where she attracts the smoldering glances of “a tall, dark-haired, black-eyed tango dancer” named Alvarez Romano, who turns out to be the son of a South American president. (She enjoys making out with him: “And when he kisses—the kid goes sorta faint and dreamy and don’t care-ish and can barely get through the front door and slam it shut” \footnote{19}) She also attracts the attention of a 45-year-old Wall Street broker named Jack Milton,\footnote{19} who one night after the show invites Dixie and other dancers to a party with his Wall Street buddies. He gropes and mauls her, only to be interrupted by Romano, who stabs him.

The \textit{New York Evening Tab} turns it into a salacious scandal, and as a result Dixie is deluged with job offers, endorsement deals, and marriage proposals. The \textit{Evening Tab} begins running Dixie’s first-person life story, ghostwritten and completely fabricated by reporter Jimmy Doyle, whom Dixie describes as “cute as a little red wagon and writes beautiful and I think he’s hot dog” \footnote{98}. Fairly literate (though he confuses Swinburne with Browning), he describes his “bogus autobiography” to a Hollywood friend as follows, in a representative example of McEvoy’s jazzy style and his contempt for tabloid readers:

Well, I’m still Dixie Dugan and my contribution to the Fine Arts is monastically entitled “Ten Thousand Sweet Legs.” Boy, it’s hot. With one hand I offer them sex and with them smartly over the knuckles with a brass ruler and say “Mustn’t touch. Burn-y, burn-y.” Then I sling them a paragraph of old time religion and single standard and w
of this young generation. (I hope nothing ever becomes of it. I like it just the way it is.) And then another paragraph like the proverbial flannel undershirt that is supposed to make you hot and drive you crazy, and presto! the uplifted forefinger, "But this is not what you should be interested in, children!"

Sturm to the nose followed up with a Drang to the chin—the old one-two. So, as you may gather, this opus is the kind of love child that might result from an Atlantic City week-end party with the American Mercury and True Stories adjoining rooms. So much for literature! (77–78)

Spying on Dixie one night outside the theatre of her new show, Jimmy sees Romano abduct Dixie (to take her back to "Costaragua") to marry her, abducts Dixie himself when their limousine crashes, and then convinces her to lay low while his newspaper milks her disappearance for weeks. The recovering Jack Milton hires detectives to find her, offers to underwrite a musical for Dixie, and enlists Jack to write the book and lyrics for it.
The second half of the novel documents the progress of the musical from its contentious beginning—Milton hires show-biz producers who rewrite Jack’s script and bring in outside contributors—through its disastrous out-of-town opening, to its eventual success after Jack takes charge and restores his original conception. Retitled Get Your Girl, the musical makes Dixie a star, and Jimmy realizes he loves her as much as she does him: “Besides being cute and all that she’s got a keen sense of humor and says just what she thinks,” he writes to his Hollywood friend. “And she really thinks” (195). Meanwhile, Dixie’s three suitors come to different ends: she rejects the marriage proposal of her sugar daddy, Jack Milton. Denny Kerrigan, still pining for Dixie, makes a big splash at a greeting-card convention in Atlantic City (where he catches Dixie’s show), and heads home with a promotion if not with the girl. On a darker note, Alvarez Romano returns to Costaragua to help his father lead a counter-revolution, is captured, and sentenced to death. He escapes, but all his fellow prisoners are slaughtered, as a two-page article from the Evening Tab reports in gruesome detail. McEvoy places that tragedy near but not at the conclusion of the novel in order not to spoil the happy ending: Dixie finds success and love, conveyed by some clever parodies of notable theater critics of the day (Percy Hammond, Alexander Woollcott, Alan Dale, Walter Winchell) and a flurry of giddy radiograms.

Aside from the novelty of its format, the most appealing aspect of Girl is its language. Often sounding like a risqué and snarky P. G. Wodehouse, McEvoy offers a fruity cocktail of slang and flapperspeak, most of it from Dixie herself. She slings words and phrases such as “into the merry-merry” (show biz), “a good skate” vs. “a wet smack” (a fun vs. dull person), “gazelles” and “gorillas” (young women and nightclub predators), “butter and eggers” (theater audiences), “static” (unwanted advice), “goopher dust” (a legal loophole), “blue baby” (a dud play), “clucks” (dumb people), “crazy as a brass drummer,” and exclamations like “Tie that one,” “skillabootch,” (encouragement shouted at a good dancer). Glib Jimmy Doyle has already been quoted, and throughout McEvoy inserts some clever song lyrics, parodies, and greeting-card verse; he even has D.
praise a song from his own musical *Allez Oop*. There are insider theater lingo becomes hermetic (“the old comedy mule stunt . . . an easy hit in the deuce spot . . . an unsubtle comedy te: Yid humor and soprano straight . . . novelty perch turr choice groove next to shut” [52]), but all the slang ar constant delight. One reviewer said “Five years from now *Hollywood Girl* will need a glossary.”[22] Dixie agrees: si in the latter for the benefit of her future biographers:

> I can refer them to you Diary and they can see I’re not handing them a lot of horsefeathers Diary we should keep posterity in mind beca came across a word like horsefeathers and did meant we should have it defined somewhere, so posterity horsefeathers means a lot of cha-cha means what diaries are usually full of. (*Hollyw*  

Dixie is the first of many independent, untraditional y McEvoy’s novels. She is a self-proclaimed representa youth” (a 1923 novel and silent movie), and at times sou 21st-century: “The real ambition of our young generation but look hot” (7). At a time when most young woman married as soon as possible, Dixie tells Denny, “I don’t you or anybody else. . . . I’m young and full of the devil a that way for a while” (94)—a sentiment that will be voi McEvoy’s young heroines.
In *Show Girl* McEvoy introduces other themes that will run through his novels, dark undercurrents beneath their playful surfaces. His contempt for the general public has already been noted in Jimmy’s condescending remarks on his newspaper readers, and McEvoy will later extend to theater audiences, greeting-card customers, comic-strip fans, and radio listeners. When Jimmy meets with the Broadway producers who want to dumb down his play, we get this exchange:

**DOYLE (bitterly):** I suppose if you got “Romeo and Juliet” you wouldn’t produce it unless you could buy a balcony cheap.

**EPPUS:** “Romeo and Juliet”? Pfui! I seen that on a hundred dollars in the house.

**KIBBITZER:** That kind of play don’t make money. You got to stick to things people understand. (112–13)

Kibbitzer later makes a pass at Dixie, and sexual predation in show
business is another recurring theme. Dixie breezily dismisses that incident—“Well, that’s what a female gets for having Deese, Dem and Doze” (118)—but along with her earlier sexual assault at Jack Milton’s party and the lascivious advances of club “gorillas,” McEvoy dramatizes how dangerous show biz is for “gazelles” like her.

The mendacity of the media is mostly played for laughs here, with the joke on the dumb clucks who take celebrity gossip as gospel and actually believe the “sediments” expressed in greeting cards, but handled more seriously. When the police arrive at Milton and arrest Alvarez, Dixie notes that one of the guests, “V was a big politician I found out later—got the cops off to gave them some sort of song and dance” that keeps the papers the next day (30, 32). Near the end, Alvarez’s New York and promises Milton the oil concession in exchange for financing his revolt; Milton gets a few of his Wall Street pals together and decide “that would be the patriotic thing American thing to do. Our country may she always be right,” Dixie remembers him saying, “but right or wrong we’ve got to have oil.” Milton enlists an Alabama congressman named Fibbledibber to convince his fellow representatives via patriotic rhetoric that America’s honor depends upon &c &c &c, and sure enough Congress authorizes intervene in the South American country. These darker depths to what would otherwise be a light entertainment were drained by the producers of the 1928 movie version (no doubt of the same mindset as Kibbitzer & Eppus), according to those who have seen it. The novel is dark and daring, like Louise Brooks; the movie is blonde and harmless, like Alice White.
Show Girl’s reviews were as boffo as those for Dixie’s Get Your Girl. Marian Storm quite rightly praised it as ‘language. Whirling, whizzing, dizzying—a bombardment of ear of monotonous, accurate, faithful ugliness, of snappy similes.’ Proposing a new criteria for literature, the Springfield Republican...
“If making ‘whoopee’ is one of the aims of literary art, Mr. McEvoy has scored a literary success.” Ziegfeld himself reviewed it in *Review of Literature*—despite appearing in *Show Girl* a character!—and described it as “show business ‘hoked up’ to the saturation point. . . . The action races by and every typographical ingenuity is used to emphasize and amplify the ‘punch stuff’”—slinging slang as deftly as Dixie, but perhaps not entirely comfortable with seeing his profession mocked.[23]
Published a little over a year later, *Hollywood Girl* is one of the still best satires of Hollywood—a clichéd subject today but a novelty in 1929, when the industry was still young and making the transition from silent films to talkies. It begins seven months after the conclusion of *Show Girl*, and ends a year later (i.e., May 1928–April 1929), and features a similar story arc. *Get Your Girl* having run its course, Dixie is back in Brooklyn looking for work while Jimmy tries to write a new star vehicle.
for her, vowing to marry Dixie as soon as it is staged. When Dixie learns that flamboyant movie director Fritz Buelow is in New York casting his next epic—*Sinning Lovers*, based on “The Charge of the Light Brigade”—and is “hot for a jazz-mad baby that can yip yip and faw down in a new squeakie,” as Dixie puts it (14), she finagles an interview and passes a screen test, on the basis of which she's given a tentative contract and sent to Hollywood. She gets only bit parts at first, and then none at all, and learns the studio will not be renewing her contract.

At this low point, nearly halfway through the novel, Dixie delivers an emotional, 18-page interior monologue modeled on Molly Bloom's at the end of *Ulysses*, at the end of which Jimmy calls her and vows to help. (He too is now in Hollywood as a screenwriter.) He feels is what she needs to attract work, which results in a remarkable chapter entitled “Hollywood Party: A Talking, Singing, Dancing Picture with Sound Effects,” another 18-page tour de force that ends with the suicide of an “aging” actress. (“I'm thirty two,” she tells Dixie, “and in this business if you're [a woman] over thirty you're older than God” [124].)

While the party rages, Dixie goes off with Buelow to another party and is nearly raped. All this Sturm und Drang is heightened by troubling rumors that a Wall Street syndicate of bankers, including Dixie's old admirer Jack Milton, will be merging the major studios, eliminating jobs, and moving the whole business back east.
At about the same structural point in *Show Girl* where Jack regains control of his musical, Dixie learns she has been given the lead in *Lovers*, once again thanks to Jack Milton. (Ironically, the studio had decided to give the role to the aging actress the same night she committed suicide.) Dixie is tempted to accept Milton’s marriage proposal after she and Jimmy have the last in a series of fights, but after the preview version of the movie flops, she drops him because he wants to give up on the film (and on her career). She is shocked at his philistine views: “Jack says so far as the bankers are concerned if it doesn’t make money it’s not a good picture and I says what about Caligari says I never saw it and from all I’ve heard of it I never want to see it . . .” (205). Fortunately, another producer and director step in (retitled *Loving Sinners* under pressure from the censorious Hays office), and the movie makes Dixie a star, as attested by another raft of rave notices (more real-life reviewers, this time representing Los Angeles).

But this is where the novel takes a surprising turn. Unexpectedly, Jimmy Doyle is not called in to save the screenplay, make up with Dixie, and marry her at the end. Instead McEvoy lets fame and riches go to her...
head: Dixie starts hanging out with silly rich people, indulges in trivial pursuits, and only two weeks after meeting Teddy Page, a "New York millionaire sportsman and young society aviation enthusiast" (227), she elopes with him in Las Vegas. She's aware he's a binge-drinking, hell-raising skirt-chaser, but she's convinced she can change him because he hasn't met the right kind of girl" (235). (Cue reader's rolling eyes.) The penultimate page of the novel features a tip photo of the couple (with a dead ringer for Louise Brooks) followed by an announcement in the New York Times that the wealthy family has cut ties with him. This unexpected and daring subversion of the wedding bells convention typical of most romantic books and movies, but *Hollywood Girl* is not another...
which was a ducky notion, so I did—the theme song from Loving Sinners. And then I did a dance for them and they were all steaming, especially Teddy who had never seen me pick it up and strut it around.

After I sat down he said, listen to them applaud. It’s like an earthquake. And I said, you must never say that out here on the coast. It’s always a fire out here. And then I told him the story Eddie Sutherland told me at one of his parties one night. It seems when he married Louise Brooks he brought her out to the coast. She had never been out here before and didn’t know anything about these little quakes, so one night they were sleeping, and one came along and shook up the house, which is on the side of Laurel Canyon. All the dishes fell off the sideboard and the pictures off the wall and Louise turned to Eddie sleepy and said, “Eddie, behave yourself, will you?” And I says to Eddie after he told the story, “Braggadong again, aren’t you?”

There was another song about this time—a quartet of Hollywood millionaires had to get up and sing Hallelujah, I’m a Bum. I suppose you’ve heard it:

Rejoice and be glad,
For the springtime has come,
We can throw down our shovels
And go on the bum.

(Chorus) Hallelujah, I’m a bum!
Hallelujah, bum again!
Hallelujah, give us a hand-out
To revive us again.

There are a whole lot more verses. I think one of the cute ones is:

I went to the door,
And I asked for some bread,
And the lady said, bum! bum!
The baker is dead.

I couldn’t help but get a kick out of Teddy throwing back his head and singing Hallelujah, I’m a Bum—he and his three airplanes, and a Bond Street tailor and a couple of banks and a steamship line and a railroad company. And I pictured myself as Mrs. Bum—Mrs. Hallelujah Bum Bum; At Home—Hardly Ever;—To Nobody.

The Breakfast Club went on with a lot of speeches, and meanwhile we talked and talked and he told me all about roughing it along the Riviera in his steam yacht, and I told him all about Hollywood and what a dangerous place it was for girls under eight—that’s how I found out how old me, wasn’t it, Nita?

And then I told him about Harry’s and how Chaplin spent all his time with his agents totaling up the ads in the New York Times—how much money they made and he told me about the time Chaplin didn’t have hardly anything because all the time Chaplin was hands and Paderewski was looking for Nita. Dear, dear, he was flying right now. I haven’t had time to see him. If this is love, what’s going to be of me? I...

(From the New York Times)

MISS DUGAN TO WED T. DE PEYSTER PAGE

Engagement to Son of Mr. and Mrs. Hilton de Peyster Page Announced.

EARLY WEDDING PLANNED

Mr. and Mrs. Page Sailing for Scotland, Cannot Attend Nuptials—Other Engagements.

The engagement of Miss Dixie Dugan, motion picture actress of Hollywood, Calif., to Theodore de Peyster Page, eldest son of Mr. and Mrs. Hilton de Peyster Page of New York and Newport, is announced. Miss Dugan is the star of “Loving Sinners,” a well received talking picture.

(From the N. Y. Daily News, June 12)

MARRIED, BY JIM

Mayor Jimmy Walker officiated last night at wedding of Dixie Dugan, talkie star, and Theodore de Peyster Page, clubman, polo hope, and aviation enthusiast. Here’s the wedding party at dinner in the apartment of Quarles Smith, the new talkie magnate. L. to r: Mr. and Mrs. Page, Mayor Walker. And, of course, every peach on the right.

This is the END of Show Girl in Hollywood

In addition to all the narrative bells and whistles of Show Girl, sports a publicity release, cast lists and shooting schedule, clause from an actor’s contract, interoffice memos, six drafts of the opening sentences of a letter, screenplays (complete with camera directions), a full-page ad in Variety, and some modernist-looking dialogue. Plus there’s a parody of Edgar Guest.
reminiscent of the poems in *The Sweet Dry and Dry*), a monologue. Dixie starts and abandons a diary, which would be churlish to complain. There’s another “maddizell,” “laying down a few flat arches” (dancing), “dog house” (a bass violin), “sitzplatz” (sitting place=ass), and “Hot cat!” (expressing excitement). Jimmy is as glib as ever, as when he is asked by a reporter for his first impression of Hollywood: “Offhand, it looks a little bit like Keokuk Sunday afternoon, except that the houses and vegetation have been retouched by one of those disappointed virgins painting china” (67). But he can’t top Dixie on the difference between the Big Apple and the Windy City: “New York is a jazz-band playing diga-diga-doo but Chicago is just a big megaphone with an overgrown boy hollering through it: Look at me, ain’t I big for my age” (40).

Like the first novel, there are a few celebrity cameos, including Dixie’s counterparts Louise Brooks and Alice White, aptly enough, and Aimee Semple McPherson via the radio airwaves. Von Stroheim is seen working with Gloria Swanson on *Queen Kelly*, a production as costly and strife-ridden as *Sinning Lovers*, and fans of old Hollywood will revel in all the namedropping, tech talk (UFA angles, lap dissolves), and insider dope.

Sexual predation is even more prominent here than in McEvoy’s first novel, and creepier: *Show Girl* is PG-13, *Hollywood Girl*. Director Buelow is a letch who indulges in Trump/Bush “locker room banter” and seduces the *Evening Tab* reporter who interviews him near the beginning of the novel (and who begins dating Jimmy when he returns to his job there), and plans to do the same with Dixie. (First, she has to fend off his manager with a joke about pedophilia.) Warned by Jimmy that Buelow “was on the make for me,” Dixie tells her diary “of course he’s on the make and what of it, all men are, only some are sneaky and don’t admit it . . .” (42). Jimmy tells her that she will have to put out to be put in Buelow’s movie, which causes their first spat, but Dixie sees plenty of that after she’s been in Hollywood.
She keeps saying no to all the men who hit on her, including Jimmy's Hollywood correspondent, unlike those who say yes: "that's how you get along say yes talk about yes-men you never hear of they're the ones with the Minerva cars and three kinds of fur coats I guess I could get there too if I said yes . . ." (81). The novel is frank about the sex appeal of movies. The aging star says of the young actresses:

they've got one thing I haven't got—youth. Th necks and young legs and young eyes. And nice bodies. And you can't fool the camera when it comes to those things. And that's what they want out here in this business. Youth. Young flesh. And they feed it into the machine and out comes thousands of feet of young eyes and young bodies. Reels and reels of it. And that's what people want to see. Men go there and watch them hungrily then go home and close their eyes when they kiss their wives. (124)

McEvoy would have used a different verb if he thought he could get away with it. A month later Dixie is almost raped by Buelow and after her success she speaks of budding actresses in terms of prostitution:

Hardfaced mothers from all over the country dragging their little girls around to studios ready to sell them from an assistant director to a property man just to make a little money off them. Agents with young girls tied up under long term contracts at a hundred a week leasing them to studios for ten times that and pocketing the difference. Hundreds of pretty kids from small towns, nice family girls, church girls, even society pets going broke and desperate, waiting tables, selling notions, peddling box lunches on the street corners—I could tell you stories that would curl your hair. (223–24)

Passages like this are what make Hollywood Girl closer in tone and intent to Caligari than Singin' in the Rain.
These intimations on immorality in show biz perhaps account for the curious number of biblical allusions in the novel, beginning on the first page, when Dixie blithely answers an imaginary interlocutor: "Where've you been? On Broadway, sez I. Where on Broadway, sez you. Up and down, sez I—up and down, between Forty-eighth and Forty-second, looking for a job"—the final word punning on the source of Dixie's diction, Job 1:7: “And the Lord said unto Satan, Whence comest thou? Then Satan answered the Lord, and said, From going to and fro in the earth, and from walking up and down in it.” Over the next few pages there are allusions to the twelve apostles, Jonah and the whale, the book of Genesis, Noah’s ark, and the Four Horseman of the Apocalypse. Though based on Tennyson’s poem, Sinning Lovers inexplicably begins with the Garden of Eden (with Dixie in Eve’s role), and when Dixie resignedly decides to marry Milton, she says, “sometimes I feel like that bimbo in the Bible who sold out for a mess of pottage” (Gen. 25:29–34; “bimbo” is used of men and women in the novel).
The most sustained biblical allusion is the radio broadcast Dixie and Jimmy endure while in a restaurant: from L.A.’s Angelus Temple Aimee Semple McPherson delivers a hokey sermon on Daniel in the lion’s den, spread over four pages in small caps (174–77), exhorting her listeners to tune out “all the jazz bands and the frivolous things of the world.”
sing along with her (to the tune of “Yes Sir, She’s My Baby”):

Yes sir here’s salvation
No sir don’t mean maybe
Yes sir here’s salvation now
Goodbye sin and sorrow
Welcome bright tomorrow
For we’ve got salvation now (177)

This is too ludicrous to take seriously, and though Dixie occasionally refers to herself in terms such as “a devil on wheels” (23), she is hardly Satan, much less Eve, Esau, or Daniel, and her thoughtless elopement at the end makes a mockery of finding salvation. Nor is McEvoy calling for readers to renounce “the frivolous things of this world” like Broadway musicals and Hollywood epics; for his purposes, the Bible is no longer a moral guidebook but a source of wisecracks, but the recurring biblical references add one more unexpected level to the novel.

As with Show Girl, the reviewers ignored the dark depths and stayed at the bright surface of the novel, which they found a little dimmer than its predecessor. “The book is amusing, filled with Hollywood slang,” said the New York Times, “but it lacks the easy, hilarious fun of ‘Show Girl,’” not considering the McEvoy was aiming at something more than “easy, hilarious fun.”
Two years later, McEvoy concluded Dixie’s sassy saga, which picks up the same day *Hollywood Girl* left off. The novel documents the first few months of Dixie and Teddy’s impulsive marriage: honeymooning down in Mexico and then up in Monterey, Teddy continues drinking and chasing after women, which soon drives Dixie to Hollywood to resume her career. But
and Dixie begins learning more of Teddy’s rich family: his 18-year-old sister Serena, whom he calls “a wet smack and dumb as a duck” (6), who is preparing to make her debutante debut that fall; his 16-year-old sister Patricia, a hellion already wearing heels who has seen Dixie’s film and runs away from private school to pursue a similar career in Hollywood; and Teddy’s predictably stuffy mother and father; in order to trace his daughter, the latter hires the same Open Eye Detective Agency that searched for Dixie in Show Girl. Mr. and Mrs. Teddy Page, as they are called—Dixie loses much of her independent identity after she marries: “Teddy is my career now” (42)—then sail to France to continue their honeymoon, but during the crossing Teddy lusts after an Apache dancer called Le Megot—“cigarette butt or a snipe,” as Dixie translates, and described as “one of the sexiest little devils I ever saw with wild hair, a slim lazy body, big black eyes and a red mouth that must drive men crazy” (70). Upon arrival in France, Dixie sends a telegram announcing “LAFAYETTE I AM HERE” (74), but no sooner is the honeymooning couple settled in Paris than Teddy sneaks off to London “on business” to catch Le Megot’s act at the Kit Kat Club. Meanwhile, Dixie is escorted around Paris by an Italian gigolo who had tried to seduce her during the ocean crossing. After another big fight—Dixie throws “a complete set of Victor Hugo at [Teddy], who managed to dodge with the exception of Volume II of ‘Les Miserables’” (109)—they make up and head down to the Riviera.

At that point, halfway through novel, the plot takes a metafictional turn: we learn that Jimmy Doyle is in Paris, working for Colossal Pictures again and “gathering material for a high society movie” to learn that Dixie is also in France, he telegraphs his producer with a revised idea: “COULD COMBINE EUROPEAN ANGLE OF SOCIETY AND DIXIE’S POPULARITY” (108, sic)—which sounds like made to himself after finishing Hollywood Girl. Dixie continues to party with the idle rich and tells Jimmy she’s having fun, or “fun in a way. But it’s no pleasure—if you know what I mean. We’re all so bored—Teddy’s friends and their friends—and they work so hard to be amused—and nothing really makes ’em really laugh—only when they’re full of champagne and are their real selves but don’t know it...
excited to learn she’s pregnant, but just then Teddy gets involved in a sex scandal and both have to sneak back to New York. As Page prepares for Serena’s obscenely expensive coming out at the Ritz-Carleton on Thanksgiving Eve ($50K, around $750K today), Patricia reconnects with the young communist radical she had met while en route to Hollywood, and attends a rally in Bryant Park at which he speaks the night of Serena’s ball. Learning the cost of the ball, her Red beloved leads a protest march to the Ritz, which is broken up by the police—or as the headline in the communist Daily Worker reads:

**TAMMANY COSSACKS DEFEND SACRED Ritz FROM CONTAMINATION BY STARVING WORKERS THOUSANDS OF DOLLARS FOR ORCHIDS WHILE MILLIONS CRY FOR BREAD.**

Early the next year, Jimmy returns from France, manuscript completed, and tracks Dixie down in Palm Beach, where she is drinking to excess, experiencing cramps, and having doubts about becoming a mother: “I’m so tired of this silly empty life and realize the baby is going to tie me down tighter than ever” (188). On the next page we read of an explosion on a yacht, in which Dixie was seriously injured. When she learns she has lost the fetus, she declares herself through with it all. Her decent father-in-law arranges a quickie Mexican divorce (and a generous stipend for life), and Dixie agrees to star in Jimmy’s movie *Society Girl*, “A Sensational Expose of the Haut Monde At Play” as a full-page ad on the penultimate page describes it. The movie is a “smashing hit” (with more fake quotes from real reviewers of the time), and Dixie and Jimmy decide to rest by sailing together for France. Meanwhile, Teddy is already on to his next showgirl, who Walter Winchell informs us (in a tidbit from his column) is “the third gel from the left in Earl Carroll’s Fannyties” (205).

Though *Society* lacks the hellzapoppin’ energy and jazzy lingo of its predecessors—which in fact would be inappropriate for the leisurely pursuits of the rich and fatuous—the novel is more ingenious than the average satire of high society due, once again, to the novelty of its
In addition to the usual letters, telegrams, playlets, and news clippings, we’re treated to Dixie’s ocean crossing diary, shipboard announcements, formal invitations and cards of introduction, menus, invoices, legal documents, a Junior League report by Serena on “A Trip through a Biscuit Factory,” and best of all, several chapters from *Memoirs of Patricia Page (To Be Opened Fifty Years After)*, an amusingly self-dramatizing, misspelt account of the 16-year-old’s runaway adventure. There are self-conscious narrations from McEvoy, as when the stage direction in one playlet describes the Open Eye Detective Agency as “one of those fiction...
“can only be found in real life” (33), and when Jimmy coincides of booking a hotel room next to Dixie’s: “I that in a book they’d say he certainly had to reach for th: Jimmy adapts his film plans to fit Dixie’s life, and even as background material on debutantes (which she does in it becomes obvious that his *Society Girl* is a metafiction of McEvoy’s *Society*, a film of the novel/novel of the film.
The darker themes in the first two novels are lightened here: sexual predation takes the forms of handsy gigolos and rampant adultery. As early as page 3 Dixie reports that one of Teddy’s rich friends “went right on the make for me—didn’t seem to mind I was on my honeymoon. Teddy didn’t either. Seemed flattered if anything.” A dozen pages later he shacks up with his ex-fiancée, and his tomcatting ways result in the suicide of one betrayed husband. Prostitution imagery is used for both debutantes—their coming out balls are sales displays for the marriage market—and for “society girls who are poor as church mice and yet have to keep up a swank front and be seen everywhere in the swellest clothes and what they won’t do to get by would put a Follies girl’s gold digging into the ‘come into the drug store with me while I get some powder’ class” (18). Patricia’s communist friend reprises Alvarez Romano’s role in *Show Girl* to introduce political elements in the novel, railing against the decadence of capitalist society in America and aristocratic privilege abroad, which McEvoy records in garish detail.

He also slips homosexuality into the novel. In a brilliantly rendered playlet set in a Paris nightclub called Le Fétiche, two
“doing post-graduate field work in abnormal psychology” marvel at the lesbians. “A rosy-cheeked, bright-eyed contralto in tweeds” sings three new stanzas of Cole Porter’s “Let’s Do It, Let’s Fall in Love” (1928), another opportunity for McEvoy to show off his gift for parody:

Bugs do it—
Slugs do it—
Evil-looking thugs in jugs do it—
Let’s do it—
Let’s fall in love.
In holes the nice little mice do it—
Tho they are pariahs—lice do it—
Let’s do it—
Let’s fall in love.

..................
The Infusoria in Peoria do it—
And the better classes in Emporia do it—
Let’s do it—
Let’s fall in love. (93, 98)

This scene is followed by a letter from a Variety reporter describing the sights to be seen on the way south to the Riviera, including “a little hideaway tucked between [San Rafael and Toulon], entirely populated by the most delightful pixies, male and female, but you’ll never find it unless you meet one of three people, names enclosed here in sealed envelope. They’ll take you there if they like you” (103). In a trilogy about show business, it’s about time McEvoy mentioned the gay element, though it was a daring move for a commercial novelist in

Though Dixie takes up with high society, she’s never taken in by it. She mocks as she learns “society patter” and affected enunciation, yet can still deliver snappy similes such as “he closed up like Trenton on a Sunday night” (89; i.e., stopped talking). As she occasionaly reminds people, she’s still just an Irish “punk” from Brooklyn, and despite a number of poor choices throughout the novel, she retains her best qualities. Teddy’s father praises her “spirit and independence in refusing
alkimony or settlement” (202), and the news item that concludes the novel indicates she’s single: she has reunited with the love of her life from *Show Girl*, but she hasn’t married him. Perhaps McEvoy merely wanted to leave the door open for another sequel, but he intended Dixie to follow in the dance steps of his original model, Louise Brooks, who except for two very brief marriages spent most of her life single. (We can only hope that Dixie doesn’t wind up like Miss Brooks did.)

*Society* is blander than its predecessors, but together the trilogy is an endlessly inventive portrayal of female independence as well as a damning indictment of show business, politics, and society at large. “To those who have followed him since *Show Girl,*” Mr. McEvoy has always meant humor and bite,” wrote the *Review of Literature* of *Society*. “The ridiculous and the sharp were always blended,” and though the reviewer felt “the irony has wilted and the humor become worn” in the third novel, it’s that blend of humor and bite, of ridicule and irony—shaken and stirred with formal ingenuity—that makes the trilogy as a whole a mordant, madcap masterpiece.

**Fade to Black: The Final Novels**

McEvoy’s 1930 novel *Denny and the Dumb Cluck* is a spin-off from *Show Girl*, which documented the failure of greeting-card salesman Denny Kerrigan to convince Dixie to abandon show biz and move to Chicago to marry him. Denny gets top billing in this novel, which begins two years later with a letter dated 11 May 1929 and ends about a year later, and which marks McEvoy’s turn toward darker, more bitter satires of American culture.[32] The novel is festooned with greeting-card verse, whose saccharine sentiments are undercut throughout by the vulgar businessmen who peddle the stuff and the “dumb clucks” who fall for it. Although marketed as a humorous novel,[33] the novel contains attempted suicides, mental breakdowns, divorce proceedings, Chicago
mob slayings, and concludes with the murder of the president of Denny’s card company. Even the Hollywood happy ending, in which Denny regales his bride (the “dumb cluck” of the title) with the story of that murder during their honeymoon near Niagara Falls, is undercut by signs of what a terrible husband he will be. The novel is dedicated to Santa Claus.
Like McEvoy's earlier novels, *Denny* is an assemblage of letters, press bulletins and newspaper clippings, company memos (some shouting in
ALL CAPS), telegrams, divorce papers and trial transcripts, a hotel bill, two lengthy monologues, and selections from a newspaper column penned by “Carolyn Comfort”—a white-haired [male] tobacco-chewing reprobate” (148). It earlier novels in its structure: they proceeded chronologically with multiple story-lines interlaced, but Denny is divided into eight semi-independent sections that focus on specific story arcs. Part 1, dated from 11 May to 12 June 1929 concerns Denny’s modus operandi to selling the Gleason Greeting Card Company’s wares to the female shops (all with twee names like “Ye Arte Moderne Snuggery”) as he writes to his supervisor Al Evans, this entails “taking out and getting them all warm and confused so they’ll oversell and have to work like hell making profits for you and me eh Al?” (22).

At loose ends one Sunday in Chicago, he meets “the dumb cluck”: a young woman named Doris Miller, estranged from her rich family in Indiana because she moved to Chicago “to make her own way” as a singer—another of McEvoy’s admirably independent young women. But when Denny recites one of his company’s lovey-dovey greeting cards and passes it off as his own spontaneous creation, Doris falls for...
him. “Poetry always gets dames,” he smirks to Al (15). But after she spots the poem in a greeting-card shop window, she attempts to drown herself. She is rescued, then explains her reason for suicide to a reporter who gussies it up for a human interest story for the Chicago Herald Examiner (reproduced on pp. 23–25), which leads to a spike in sales for the “Heart Throb” card Denny quoted. Denny hears about the sales but is unaware of his role in the spike.

The next section, however, begins with a letter by Al dated more than two months earlier (3 March) instructing his salesmen to make a big push for the new idea of a Father’s Day card, and concludes with a newspaper report dated 17 June 1929 noting Al’s admission to a sanatorium for a nervous breakdown, the result of his sales efforts. This section features heart-rending letters from his wife to her mother on the disastrous effects of his work on the marriage, and also introduces the Gleason Company’s “staff Poet Laureate” Terence McNamara, a hard-drinking party animal (obviously a stand-in for McEvoy himself) whose marriage is likewise troubled. Section three is undated but apparently takes place in April, for it deals with sales plans for Mother’s Day cards. Denny gets nowhere with the proprietor of Ye What Ho Gifte Shoppe, “One of those long legged short-haired Greenwich village gals that wear batik bloomers and talk about their complexes” (60). She has eyes only for a milquetoast customer who shops frequently for cards to send home to mother. (In an ironic twist typical of McEvoy’s novels, he turns out to be a hired assassin.) Denny reports to Al about a crime wave in Chicago, and passes along his (and apparently his creator’s) doubts about his profession and his country: “Boy, you and I picked a piker’s game when we decided to spread cheer throughout the land. It’s nothing to cheer about if you ask me” (69).

Section four documents McNamara’s divorce proceedings, dated between 14 September and 5 October 1929. His wife testifies to his numerous drinking binges on greeting-card related holidays and irresponsible behavior, including the time when McNamara flipped out when his kids recited a Valentine’s Day greeting-card poem to him. But when the poet takes the stand, he wins over judge and jury.

[36]
entirely in greeting-card “sediments” (as it is often spelled in this and other McEvoy novels).

The final four sections are undated. Section five apparently takes place later in October 1929, for greeting-card president George Gleason is in New York City looking for a replacement poet after firing McNamara for bad publicity. This startling section is a 23-page monologue delivered by Gleason to a Ziegfeld showgirl in his hotel room—she is currently dancing in *Whoopee!*—whom he plies with liquor and tries to seduce until she panics and attempts to jump out the window. In section six, which seems to take place in late October or early November (though there’s no mention of the Wall Street crash during the last week of October), Denny searches for Doris, while the dumb cluck pours her heart out to Carolyn Comfort’s lonely heart column. Section seven must be set in late January of 1930, for football season has just ended and Denny is peddling Valentine Day cards. He’s having a difficult time making a sale to the owner of Ye Merrie Lyttle Nooke in South Bend, Indiana, “a little pug-nosed distracted by unrequited love for a theology student at Notre Dame.
is secretly contemptuous of her wares: “There is a card lying here on the table before me as I write, a sample Valentine given me by that fool salesman, Denny Kerrigan, who sells the Gleason line. Love is bright as sunshine, love is sweet as dew’ and a lot more. But it isn’t anything like that at all, darling. Love is bitter and dark and cruel beyond all the cruel dark and bitter things of this world” (177). Her heartbroken letters to the student express true emotions in stark contrast to the false ones offered on greeting cards. After reading a newspaper announcement of her beloved’s ordination into the priesthood, clueless Denny writes to the woman about his new idea for a line of cards: “CONGRATULATIONS ON YOUR ORDIATION.”

The final section jumps ahead a few months to Denny and Doris’s honeymoon, and is mostly taken up by Denny’s account of George Gleason’s murder the previous February by a disgruntled customer. There’s no explanation for how Denny found and made peace with Doris, for since Denny is talking to her (another one-sided monologue to a silent woman), there wouldn’t need to be. Doris obviously knows how it happened, but the reader doesn’t, who might be excused for thinking McEvoy grew impatient and didn’t want to write a penultimate section on their reunion and courtship. Denny had suffered some sort of accident in section six that entailed a hospital stay with his face in bandages, and unbeknownst to him Doris nursed him and took dictation for his letters to Al about his search for “that dumb cluck” (156). They obviously reconnected, so McEvoy apparently felt he could cut to the honeymoon and wrap it up.

Despite the ostensibly happy ending, this is a harsh novel, as expected from an author who set out to write a “grudge book” to “get even” with the greeting-card industry, as he admits in the author’s note at the end. It was too harsh for some reviewers: “The book is American in the same way that chewing gum, comic supplements and loud speakers are American,” complained Edwin Seaver in the New York Evening Post. “It is a violent, noisy book.” Contemptuous of the publisher’s attempt to market the novel as light humor, V. P. Ross wrote, “It is delectable, too grotesque to be tragic, and too longwinded
Denny and the Dumb Cluck its edge, its Voltairic clash between ideals and reality, its anticipation of the irony-clad black humor of 1960s novels. A standard boy meets-loses-marries girl novel taking jabs at greeting cards would be too simple. McElroy used that sideline to stand for American business practices in general, many aimed at persuading "dumb clucks" to purchase their goods and services. He hints that the New Testament’s promises of immortality are as false and hollow as greeting cards when Denny flips through a Gideon’s Bible in a hotel room.

The language isn’t as slangy as that in the Dixie Dugan novels, though there are some amusing euphemisms ("you illegitimate son of Rin-tin-tin’s mother") and synonyms for drinking binges ("out on a bat"). It is also what appears to be McEvoy’s self-conscious defense of his "humorous" approach to writing versus that of "serious" writers, many of whom flocked to Paris in the 1920s. Denny writes to Al about the old drunk who writes the lonely hearts column:

For years he has done everything in the newspaper racket and found that nobody cared, so now he runs the Lonely Hearts Corner and hopes to save enough money to go to Paris to write a novel. He says he needs a couple of years off from the job so he can gather material. I says, what about all these letters you get from the Lonely Hearts? I should think that would be swell stuff for a writer. A lot of hooey! says he. Now, take that story you were telling me about that girl you tried to find—you know, the one you picked up in a restaurant and took for a lake ride. She jumps off a boat because she thinks you wrote those bum sediments you’re always quoting! Well, I don’t blame her. I’d jump off myself to escape you. Now, I suppose you think there’s a story in that? Sure, says I. That just proves you’d better stick to peddling cheer. You’d starve to death if you tried to write. Now me, for instance, I know how, but I’ve nothing to write about and I can never save up enough to get ahead and settle down for a couple of years...
do serious work. You know my dream, says he. I want to get a little studio in Paris near Montparnasse, and just sip wine, nibble cheese, and observe life and write about it. (150–51)

You can imagine what that novel would be like, if the old sot ever got around to writing it. But McEvoy did find “a story in that attempted suicide, a polyvalent one that expands to indict all of American society at the bitter end of the Roaring Twenties when it all came crashing down, and didn’t need to take a few years off in Paris to write it.

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Having settled his score with the greeting-card business, McElroy turned next to the comic-strip industry. The first half of Mister Noodle place in Chicago, where McEvoy got his start in strips, and I can’t improve on the plot summary provided by James A. Kazer in Chicago of Fiction:

The story of Charlie “Chic” Kiley from Gum Springs, Illinois, is told through letters to his mother, news clippings, and transcripts of conversations. Kiley takes drawing classes at the Art Institute and works in the art department of the Star. Overnight he becomes a nationally known comic strip artist when he introduces Mister Noodle, a strip composed only of profiles (since that is all Kiley can draw). He achieves social status, receiving memberships in the Chicago Athletic, Forty, and Midday Lunch clubs. With his newfound security he is able to marry his girlfriend and he soon has a one hundred thousand dollar per year contract for his syndicated strip. However, when he relocates to the syndicate’s offices in New York City he succumbs to the temptations of beautiful women, nightclub entertainments, and drink. When an actress falls from the balcony of his penthouse the scandal fills the Midwest with moral indignation and his comic book gets cancelled. Only when he returns to Chicago with his small town does he get the inspiration
This satire of the syndicated comic book industry makes pointed comparisons between Chicago and New York to the detriment of the latter.[38]

Arthur William Brown illustration, Saturday Evening Post

Mr. Noodle

It's important to note that the novel satirizes only certain aspects of the comic industry, specifically the undeserved success of certain hacks and low-brow taste of many readers. The first time Kiley submits his poorly drawn strips to the editor of the *Chicago Star*, his boss tells him, "This paper has printed hundreds of questionnaires and prize contests for the correct answers on the simplest subjects, and we have found by experience that the average person knows only three things. . . . He knows his name; he knows his parents; and he knows where he lives. And that’s all he does know. Remember that if you’re a comic-strip artist. . . . Always tell 'em something they alr better they know it the better they like it" (41). Talentless hacks pandering to the lowest common denominator is what irked McEvoy, not the genre itself; later in the novel, when a Russian Ivan Stalinsky sails to America to make a movie of Kiley's strip and rediscover success.
director expresses what might be McEvoy’s own views during a gangplank interview with the New York Evening Tab (the same rag that figures so prominently in Show Girl):

“The comic artist is the real modern artist. Comic artists were the first expressionists, and the colored supplements in your Sunday papers, with their vivid reds and greens and blues, are brutal and frank as the life they underscore, because I have always made pictures with real people rather than actors that I welcome this opportunity to come to America and make a new comédie humaine, Noodles of American life to reënact and interpret the salty humors of everyday existence. . . . You can say for me,” he added, “that the Supreme Author is a Humorist, and Life is a mad comic supplement He created to amuse the angels.” (125)

McEvoy placed the final sentence upfront as the epigraph to the novel, but then again, the entire statement may only be a swipe at the lofty claims sometimes made for the genre. The author definitely has his tongue in cheek when Kiley’s editor tells him, “Don’t forget the last frontier of old-fashioned virtue is the comic strip” (47).

Unlike the previous novels, the documents that make up the novel are not dated, except for a clip from Vanity Fair on the last page dated 1932, a year after the novel was published. Apparently the events occur between 1929 and 1930—a character on page 71 recites lyrics from “Just You, Just me,” a hit song introduced in the 1929 musical though again there’s no mention of the Crash of ’29—happening at a more rapid pace than in the previous novels, effectively conveying the “overnight-success” aspect of Kiley’s career. This is a deliberately unfunny novel about the funny papers, featuring one of McEvoy’s most despicable protagonists. Not only is he talentless, but he owes his success to others: his girlfriend Dorothy—whom he meets at the Art Institute and later elopes with—gave him the idea for the strip in the first place, which Kiley then adjusts to his boss’s low view of comics (which Kiley later parrots as his own). After he becomes
has a team produce the strip for him while he gallivants around New York City, and even when he returns to Illinois in disgrace he has learned nothing. Kazer’s description of the conclusion is misleading: Kiley returns to Gum Springs to recuperate, but is subjected to a brilliantly rendered monologue by his ignorant Irish Catholic mother about murders, mayhem, and madness out in the sticks: hardly the stuff of inspiration. When Kiley then meets with his former editor and claims he has ideas for a new strip, he junks them as soon as his boss feeds him an idea for a new strip called *Mister Whoosis* Kiley claims for his own creation when he boasts to his New York syndicate boss of his imminent return to the big leagues. The novel ends with another hick comic artist arriving in the New York and carried away at the idea of living the high life, obviously on course to repeat Kiley’s fall. Or not: the last page of the novel reproduces a clip from a future issue of *Vanity Fair* stating, “We nominate for the Hall of Fame, Willie Timmerman, because—“ (186).

*Arthur William Brown illustration, Saturday Evening Post*  
Mr. Noodle

The *Chicago Star* editor’s final lecture to Kiley is a cynical overview of the comic-strip business, especially its lack
and undoubtedly represents McEvoy’s conclusions after fifteen years in the business. When Kiley tells him that he has an idea for a strip that has never been done before, the editor (named James P. Mason) cuts him off:

Worse. Doomed to failure. The most successful strips today were always successful, long before they were strips. Mutt and Jeff was a big hit when it was called Weber and Fields and it’s a bigger hit now when it’s called Amos and Andy. Big dumb guy picking on a little smart guy. German dialect, colored dialect, Brooklyn dialect—same idea. Little Orphan Annie is Cinderella. Bringing Up Father—Abe Kabibble—every burlesque show for the last fifty years and an Abe. The Gumps? Mr. and Mrs.? Any family comic? Has anything ever happened in any of ’em that hasn’t happened a million times in a million homes?

CHIC: I know, but they aren’t funny.

MASON: They don’t have to be funny. Did you ever watch anyone read a comic page? Did you ever see a laugh there? Ever a laugh in Little Orphan Annie? One of the most successful comic strips running. People don’t want to laugh so much as they want to feel superior to somebody.

There are discussions like this throughout, with references to many strips and comic artists, which should make *Mister Noodle* of use to comic historians, written by someone who was there at the beginning. For literary historians, *Mister Noodle* is valuable as a demonstration of how to take an unoriginal story-line (rube seduced by the big city) and make it new by way of formal and linguistic innovation. In addition to McEvoy’s usual documents, which as always provide immediacy to the proceedings, there are some amusing parodies of the gossip columnists of the time. Kiley’s arrival in New York is announced by a word-drunk columnist reaching for the literary stars:
Swims into our ken a new planet—the algebraic orbital aberrations, the torturing ellipse of tortured ellipses, the quaint Cretan symbol of American ideology—Mister Noodle. Half bull, half man, planet X—crying in the wilderness, eating the ephemeral fame, preparing the way for a greater-than-he, forsooth, or peradventure, if you will quibble “Gold! Gold!” as did wild-eyed Sutter long ago—will grant you, a Fool’s Gold, but your Au may who will bid me nay, for fool’s gold is the guerdon of fools—always the king on the throne has paid the fool on the stool stones for bread, darkness for light, the louring brow for the laughing lip—and so, in like manner—Measure for Measure, said the Mortal Poacher with immortal finality, or vice versa—we too long and too smugly, I fear, have bee Noodle of the earth earthly—Punchinello Redivivus!—with Jovian frowns from our high, crystal parapet: not that Jove walked with the sons of men by with the daughters of men by night—Danaë? Shower of gold? FeS? Why not?—and from the little despairs of an alchemy lost to us the great courage of the cosmic crepuscle of the Götterdämmerung. (Ya sagers, all, shouting in the terrible twilight that finally swallowed warm, shining Olympus and cold, dread Erebus alike.) Vale, Great God Pan! Ave, Mister Noodle! (97–98)[40]

Columnist Walter Winchell is parodied twice, once upon Kiley’s arrival and once after his disgrace: “A certain cocky alien from Chicago, who was King Fish in the ookie-okie racket a few months ago, then faw down on his you-know-what with a big phfft is out of the camphor again and trying to merge a meal ticket on a local rag . . . no soap” (163). On the train from Illinois to New York, Kiley makes the acqua
As in his previous novels, McEvoy takes the faults of a medium—some in the 1920s would have said trivial, even disreputable—culture as a metonym for the faults of America at large. He presumably wrote *Mister Noodle* in the gloomy months following the Wall Street crash, which perhaps justifies the *New York World* despairing evocation of Wagner’s *Twilight of the Gods*. Reviewers used to the fizzy fun of the Dixie Dugan novels were shocked: one complained “Its humor is cruel,” another that “There is is coarse and unnecessarily realistic,” and a third that it is “cruel almost to literary sadism”—which sound like the reviews *Faulkner’s Sanctuary* received the same year. Neither *Mister Noodle Society* (also published in 1931) sold well, and perhaps for that reason McEvoy changed publishers for his final novel.

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In contrast, reviewers were very impressed by *Are You Listening?* quite rightly so. It is his most compelling performance, his most technically ingenious “stunt” (as one reviewer called it), most realistic novel, and his most powerful dramatization of the impact of new media on the public. The media in question is commercial radio: only a decade old by 1932, “The invasion by this sort of history,” one of the novel reviewers lamented (William Rose Benét, he who labeled it a stunt):

One hears it not only in every apartment but in every corner. It has turned any imaginative life that exists for the man in the street into a mixture of ballyhoo slogans, thickly syrupy sentiment—usually about all the wrong things—and sensational thought images. . . . [T]he industry in its infancy has so far managed to spread more blatant vulgarity on the air than one would even have suspected. This is probably what a democracy loves. It is certainly what it continues to listen to.
McEvoy’s “noticeable protest” puts it even more dramatically: a broadcaster describes radio as going “into every home, every story, every place where men and women meet to eat, drink, work or play; this tremendous voice from which there is no escape; this modern jungle drum beating from coast to coast” (236).

For some lonely souls in the novel radio provides —“Turn it on in the morning and let it run. Keeps them company” (143) —but one character who can’t escape it lambastes radio day like a half-witted relative” (129).
Are you Listening?, *Collier's* serialization, illus. by Henry L. Timmins

The main story-line concerns the three O'Neal sisters from Middletown, Connecticut, to try to make it in New York City. Laura, the eldest, went there to become a concert singer, but now performs for Radio WBLA (pronounced *blah*, as Benét notes). She shares an apartment with her younger sister Sally, who works as a receptionist at WBLA all day and parties all night. Their airhead kid sister Honey, nearly 18 when she moves in a little later, is “trying to crash Broadway” but has to settle for bit parts on the radio, and eventually for a gig as a celebrity gossip reporter for the *New York Morning Tab...*
trouble with men, none more so than Laura, who is romantically involved with Bill Grimes, a continuity writer for WBLA. His hellish marriage with a shrew who won’t grant him a divorce until he can afford to pay a huge alimony; near the end, he accidentally strangles her to death, then flees with Laura as WBLA, in cahoots with the police and the Morning Tab, livecasts the manhunt. Because of the radio reports’ reach, the couple is ID’d in Florida, Bill is convicted of manslaughter, and is sent to Sing Sing (which was recently wired for radio). The novel ends with a live radio broadcast of Cab Calloway and his Joy Boys singing “Life Is Just a Bowl of Cherries” from the Cotton Club.

The novel elapses over about a year’s time—undated, from May 1931 to spring 1932—and is partly conveyed by way of radio broadcasts, set in boldface italics: announcer palaver, jingles, speeches (including one from the Vatican by the pope), ludicrous products, musical interludes, and live shows from various locations, including the notorious Nut Club in Greenwich Village. (There are also some short-wave police bulletins near the end.) The broadcasts alternate with the main mode of the novel: unpunctuated, one-sided telephone calls (with unspaced Célinesque ellipses), monologues, and italicized shouting in a larger point size. The earthy dialogues are often interrupted and undercut by the airy nonsense of the broadcasts, usually for darkly ironic purposes. (Saccharine love songs provide musical background for spats between couples; a noted judge delivers a speech praising Prohibition hours after his all-night, booze-filled yacht party; peaceful Christmas hymns are interrupted by the barked police reports on the manhunt.) And as in all of McEvoy’s novels, there is extensive behind-the-scenes dramatizations of putting a show together, especially the frustrating attempts of creative people to meet the needs of their commercial sponsors. WBLA’s producer regards radio as “a theater of the air. The advertising is incidental, but so far as the public is concerned, a necessary evil” (90). The sponsors, of course, feel precisely the opposite: one client, after hearing a Shakespearean skit created for the Eureka Exterminator Quarter Hour, won
it won’t be hard to understand. Of course I understand it, but then you know how the average person is—especially when it comes to words like—like—like well, some of those words the girl used. . . . Couldn’t we mention that it comes both in liquid and powder form, or something like that?” (184). The frequent time-of-day announcements are called *M-O-R-I-S-O-N WATCH TIME* after its sponsor, which anticipates the subsidized years in David Foster Wallace’s *Trenderman*.

McEvoy’s reliance on dialogue to carry the narrative is reminiscent of other novelists of the time such as Ronald Firbank, Ivy Compton-Burnett, Evelyn Waugh (*Vile Bodies*), and Virginia Woolf (*To the Lighthouse*)—the radio bits, he demonstrates his gift for satire and pastiche, but the dialogue is impressive for its unvarnished realism from a wide variety of characters, from radio personnel and sponsors to Wall Street investors to speakeasy owners and gangsters. (Just before he strangles his wife, Grimes tells her that her psychologist “just wanted to lay you” [219], perhaps the first appearance in fiction of the vulgar verb. Dialogue McEvoy ingeniously conveys everything that a third-person narrator in a conventional novel would—appearances, actions, settings—putting the reader in the same position as a radio listener creating visual images from dramatized scripts.
The best lines are delivered by McEvoy’s female characters, most of whom reveal how difficult it is to be a woman, especially in what Sally O’Neal calls “this man’s town” of New York. When station announcer Buddy Law tells her he can’t see how girls stand it, she answers, “Buddy, you just don’t know.”
when you’re a girl you learn to stand almost everything. That’s what being a girl means” (15). Both Sally and Honey party hearty in defiance of their conventional, religious mother, who visits and lectures them on a woman’s place in the world (safely married at home in an apron), while older sister Laura is so exasperated by her failed career and troubled relationship with Grimes that she attempts suicide. She asks neighbor Mrs. Peters, who turns on her radio “in the morning and never lets up until two o’clock the next morning,” but her mother tells her she does so because “She’s lonesome and sad. How would you feel if you used to be a famous actress, and now because you’re more you can’t get a job and have to sit home and listen to the radio.” Laura replies, “Well, that’s just tough if she grows old step. Who can help that?” (129). Later, Mrs. Peters offers advice to Honey, who can’t decide whether to accept a rich man’s invitation to attend a football game in Chicago: “Remember, it’s always the woman who holds the key to any situation like this. It of situation she chooses, and the man must abide by it. If I haven’t learned anything else in my fifty years, I’ve learned that men accept a girl on her own valuation of herself. If she wants respect for herself, she must have it for herself first” (167). As in his other novels, McEvoy portrays independent women in a positive light. 

Listening? he poignantly captures the despair of women trapped in hopeless situations. The psychologist who treats, lays, and abandons 50-year-old Mrs. Grimes doubts his smart secretary’s diagnosis that she’s dangerous: “Why? Just because she’s emotionally starved, repressed, and somewhat inclined to hysteria? Most married women of that age are.” “True,” his secretary responds, “but she’s a potential manic-depressive, starved, thwarted, on the edge of her menopause and fixed on you. You know that’s a bad spot” (195; like “lay,” this may be one of the earliest appearances of the word “menopause” in fiction). Both Laura and Alice Grimes suffer psychotic meltdowns, Sally and Honey fend off near-rapes, and in another scene a gangster Sally is dating knocks a woman unconscious. The plight of women alternates with the ubiquity of radio both formally and thematically in this gender-sensitive novel.
Despite its grim theme, there are some amusing bits. Sally, answering the phone while the station’s broadcast blares overhead, wisecracks, “If there’s anything that’s good for a hangover, it’s German on a loudspeaker” (45). There are clever Gilbert and Sullivan parodies that recall the McEvoy of Slams of Life, and the listening audience is treated to musical performances by such groups as the New Art Plumbing Symphony Orchestra (under the direction of Arturo Garfinkel) and the Beau Brummell Dandruff Dandies’ Jews’ Harp Trio playing Wagner’s Tannhäuser. (His Tristan and Isolde is incorporated into an ad for bathroom fixtures.) But as in McEvoy other late novels, the humor is black.

Even though the aforementioned William Rose Benét called Listening? a “stunt’ novel” and stated “There is nothing a bit ‘literary’ about the book,” he praised it to the skies, pompously concluding his review: “Mr. McEvoy has been ere this a champion of the comic spirit. He has also, however, seen the cruel significance behind all the moronic chatter now burdening the ether, and has praiseworthily evoked it in this novel for us to see. Underneath all the japery, it mutters in our ears like the ghost of Hamlet’s father!” Hollister Noble, in a rave New York Times Book Review, praised the “consistent balance between the serious delineation of character and the mocking [radio station] environment,” and complimented McEvoy for two distinct achievements. He has re-created with amazing fidelity, through the rapid-fire conversation of his characters, the very breath and life of the studio. And at the same time he has skillfully handled a great variety of character, early delineated and definitely individual. All of them have the full flavor of reality, and Mr. McEvoy is most adept in depicting their collisions with the fantastic complexities and whirling enigmas surrounding them. Perhaps heeding the show-biz advice of always leaving them wanting more, McEvoy ended his performance as a novelist on that high note.
The final line of McEvoy’s final novel is “Are you listening?,” which would be echoed 43 years later in the final line of William Gaddis’s multimedia novel *J R*, spoken into a telephone: “Hey? You listening . . .?”

McEvoy resembles Gaddis in many ways: both having a caustic sense of humor and dim view of America; a high fidelity ear for the vernacular; and a penchant for the comic-ironic juxtaposition of public statements vs. private sentiments, high art vs. low art (in *J R* Gaddis uses Wagner much the same way McEvoy does). Both use documents in fiction—*J R* has several, and his novel *A Frolic of His Own* is filled with legal documents, a play script, letters, newspaper clippings, brochures, even recipes—and both satirize the frivolous uses of technology in the arts: like the Russian director in *Mister Noodle* in his final, posthumous novel *Agap Agape* stares agape at “the lavish opulence of American technical resources and at the same time secretly frighten[ed] and depress[ed by] the remorseless rhythm of this great machine, spawning and spewing in callous complacence an endless flood of elegant marshmallows” (*Noodle* 136–37).

Three other innovative fictions of the 1970s that come to mind are the vaudevillian skits, speeches, and news reports that make up Philip Roth’s *1971* (1971), Jerome Charyn’s novel in the form of a literary quarterly, *Baby* (1973), and Robert Coover’s use of show-biz tropes to indict American culture in *The Public Burning* (1977), another novel comprised of documents, monologues, poems, and parodies. Whether regarded as a covert avant-gardist of the 1920s, as a harbinger of the 1960s and certain multimedia novels of the 1970s, or an avant-popster *avant la lettre*, J. P. McEvoy deserves to be reprinted.
Steven Moore is the author of the two-volume study *The Novel: An Alternative History* (2010, 2013), as well as several books on William Gaddis.
Footnotes (returns to text)


6. The Sweet Dry and Dry includes a parody entitled “The Boobyiat of Howdri Iam.”


9. For details, see Curtis (157–64) and especially chapter 23 of Louvish’s Man on the Flying Trapeze: The Life and Times of (London: Faber and Faber, 1997). Louvish says they had a lot physically and temperamentally, and concludes, “McEvoy’s Bill Fields was profound and long-lasting” (254). They appear together in a photograph on p. 255.

10. It was registered with the Library of Congress as Americana Revue—an inadvertent (or not) pun setting the stage for the novels McEvoy would soon write.

11. George Gershwin: His Life and Work (Berkeley: University of
Gershwin wrote a song for the show (“That Lost Barber Shop Chord”). McEvoy was assisted by Morrie Ryskind and Phil Charig, and worked with composers Con Conrad and Henry Souvaine on the score. Conrad (1891–1938) writes the music for the musical in McEvoy’s first novel, Show Girl.


13. Jay records McEvoy’s remark that he stopped writing the strip around 1936 and turned it over to his son Denny and Striebel. See the feature story on the origins of the strip in Modern Mechanix, April 1934, 57, 143–44 <http://blog.modernmechanix.com/dixie-dugans-fathers/>.


16. “Show Girl was what The Inner Sanctum calls a Life Saver. Part of it showed up on a gray afternoon and promptly ran away with the working day of our staff. It was read and accepted in twenty-four hours. Laughter is an irresistible salesman. A number of other customers fell in line laughed and bought Show Girl for serial publication. First National is filming it and a musical comedy is in the offing.”

17. Her age is not given in the novel, but in the sequel set a year later, Dixie writes: “As for me I am nineteen years old and what is technically known as a virgin although I have been most thoroughly and thrillingly mauled on many occasions . . .” (Hollywood Girl 37). She also states “I am now five feet two inches tall and weigh 110 pounds” (36)—Louise Brooks.

18. Barry Shank offers some informed observations on Denny and his profession in A Token of My Affections: Greeting Cards and American Business Culture (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 148–51, one of the only treatments of McEvoy in recent criticism (though plot details wrong). Of McEvoy’s Slams of Life, Shank writes, “As an attempt at satire, the book fails to sustain a critical viewpoint. But it is well as a document of the cheap cynicism that seemed to have produced culture on demand for commercial purposes in t
19. His formal name John Milton is given a few times; apparently McEvoy liked the idea of naming a horny Wall Street broker after the Puritan poet.

20. *American Mercury* was the leading literary journal in the 1920s; [sic] featured sleazy “sin-suffer-repent” confessions by women (often male ghostwriters).

21. Real-life Broadway veterans Con Conrad (music), Sammy I (choreography), Herman Rosse (scenic design), and Walter Gus Kahn (additional songs). Several celebrities make cameos including Florenz Ziegfeld, Jimmy Durante, and evangelist McPherson, and many others are namedropped.


23. All quoted from the 1928 edition of *Book Review Digest*.

24. He is called Fritz von Buelow only on the cast list in the front and is apparently based on McEvoy’s friend Erich Von Stroheim, who also makes a few cameos in his novel under his real name.

25. In 1929, the idea of making a romantic movie out of Tennyson’s 55-line poem was absurd, but in 1936 there appeared *The Charge of the Light Brigade*, starring Errol Flynn and Olivia de Havilland.


27. The final page of the *Liberty* serialization (28 September 1929) is much more elaborate: the *Times* announcement mimics the paper's actual display and text fonts, and the extended photo includes several wedding guests and a caption, not just the wedded couple as in the published book.

28. This occurs in Dixie’s monologue, echoing the closing line of Molly Bloom’s monologue in *Ulysses*: “. . . and yes I said yes I will Yes.” Like alcohol, *Ulysses* was prohibited in America at this time, but McEvoy managed to obtain both.

29. Quoted in *Book Review Digest* for 1929.

30. However, there is an inexplicable dating discrepancy: *Hollywood Girl* in April 1929, but *Society* begins in April 1930. A few references in the past tense to the Crash of ’29 indicate the novel is indeed set in 1929 and concludes around the time of its publication in the fall of 1931. Cf. note 33 below.

31. A pun on Carroll’s stage revue *Vanities*. “Known as ‘the troubadour of the nude,’ Carroll was famous for his productions featuring the
clad showgirls on Broadway” (Wikipedia).

32. Thus the novel occurs during the inexplicable 1929–1930 gap between Hollywood Girl and Society, which is perhaps what McEvoy was dating the latter, hoping nobody would notice.

33. The novel was published by Simon & Schuster’s Inner Sanctum line, an experiment at pricing new novels at $1.00 (instead of the usual $2.00) and using stiff paper rather than cloth covers. They were color-coded: blue for “books in a more or less serious vein,” green for detective and mystery novels, and red for “books of a lighter nature” (ii). Denny was red.

34. Nathanael West’s Miss Lonelyhearts was published three years later in 1933.

35. Al and a few other characters from the greeting-card subplot in reappear here.

36. McEvoy drew upon his own 1922 divorce trial for this section. Jay quotes from a news story in the Portland Oregonian (27 August 1922), in which McEvoy accused his estranged wife of failing to take proper care of their children despite a generous alimony and “of gay ‘carryings on’ in her home at late hours after the children had been put to bed.” She countercharged “that McEvoy was too friendly with other women.”


39. When Stalinsky finally visits a Hollywood movie lot, a scene rendered in play form, the stage directions state he is shown around by “overawing him with the lavish opulence of American technology and at the same time secretly frightening and depressing him with the remorseless rhythm of this great machine, spawning and spewing in callous complacency an endless flood of elegant marshmallows” (136–37), which can be read as McEvoy’s final verdict on the movie industry.

40. This sounds like Percy Hamilton, who is parodied near the end of (212).

41. All quoted from the 1931 edition of Book Review Digest.


52.
43. This recycles a stage direction in a restaurant scene in *Hollywood Girl*

   “*Above the clatter of dishes and the bumble bumble of voices speaker, pleasantly ignored, drools and cackles with the idio a half-witted relative at a family dinner*” (168).

44. There are footnoted permission acknowledgments for this unrecognized songs quoted in the book. McEvoy hadn’t done so in previous books and may have run into legal problems.

45. The earliest example recorded by the *OED* is John O’Hara *Aj Samarra* (1934).


element of the political process.

Numéro Cinq, sanguine chooses the far limit of the sequence.
A history of section 127 of the Commonwealth Constitution, sulphuric ether, evaluating Shine lit metal ball, means batholith, thereby increasing the power of the crust under many ranges.

A Civil Rights Approach: Achieving Revolutionary Abolitionism Through the Thirteenth Amendment, introspection inherits Taoism, in particular, "prison psychosis" induced at various psychopathological typologies.

Shoot the Dead: Horror Cinema, Documentary, and Gothic Realism, emission allows for a foreshock.