

I. The Well-Tempered Self:  
Structure and Autobiography in Victorian Sonnet Sequences

II. At Home With Generations:  
A Study of the Poetry and Prose of Wendell Berry

III. A Controlling Sympathy:  
The Style of Irony in Joyce's "The Dead"

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## ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

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The first part explores the theory and practice of Victorian sonnet sequence writers in the light of Elizabethan practices. Major works considered include Shakespeare's *Sonnets*, Dante Rossetti's *The House of Life*, and Christina Rossetti's *Monna Innominata*. Because Romantic and Victorian sonnet writers had grown away from a sense of the way Elizabethans used conventions, they interpreted Elizabethan sonnets in terms of their own autobiographical notions of poetry. This is responsible for the many misreadings of Shakespeare which emphasize the "real" identity of characters like the "dark lady." Poets like the Rossettis reconceived the sonnet sequence, because of such misreadings, as a means of autobiographical expression. Dante Rossetti conceives the sonnet sequence as a grand autobiography structured around individual epiphanies much like Wordsworth's "spots of time." Christina Rossetti, equally compelled to autobiographical expression, structures her sequences as macrosonnets, each sonnet corresponding functionally to one line of a sonnet. This enables her to give a long, confessional poem the cohesion usually associated with individual lyrics.

The second part traces the development of Wendell Berry's poetry in the

light of his philosophical and critical writings. Beginning as a writer in the tradition of *Understanding Poetry*, Berry has come increasingly to emphasize history, a sense of place, and his experience as a farmer in his poetry. He believes the writer must not shrink from a role in the affairs of the world. All through his career Berry has written elegiac poems, and these best display his incorporation of such concerns into poetry of increasing individuality and subtlety.

The third part is a close reading of “The Dead” with attention to the way Joyce uses a shifting narrative perspective to control our view of his characters. Though some critics have argued that Joyce employed a withering irony against his characters, careful consideration of “The Dead” as an individual work suggests that the irony is actually gentle and embracing, looking forward to the development of his mature work.

FOR MY MOTHER AND FATHER

# The Well-Tempered Self:

Structure and Autobiography  
in Nineteenth Century Sonnet Sequences

At least since Descartes, solipsism has been for some the curse, for all at least the primary condition, of modern philosophy. It would not have occurred to Aristotle to question the reality of the outside world, and yet every modern philosopher since Descartes begins with this question.<sup>1</sup> As a matter of epistemology if not ontology, the self for Descartes is prior to the world and even God; for the self must be known before we can know God, whose existence—so we only later deduce—is indeed prior to our own.

In the *Meditations*, Descartes explains most fully his concept of methodological doubt which amounts to a strategic effort to free the self of all outward trappings, to recreate, as it were, an essential self of indisputable validity. (Interestingly, in the *Discourse on Method* published four years earlier, this same effort is preceded by much charming and conventional autobiography, as if to press home the point that the beginning of philosophic experience is experience of the self.) The details of Descartes' meditations are famous enough to require only a brief resume here. Having freed his "mind of all kinds of cares," he makes "a serious and unimpeded effort to destroy generally all [his] former opinions" (75). The evidence of the senses is immediately rejected as misleading. But what of the sensations of one's own body? One could indeed be dreaming all that. Yet even so, are not the limitations of the imagination precisely those of personal and sensuous experiences, and doesn't this argue a certain truth for those experiences? What of mathematics, which would seem to hold true whether one is dreaming or not? But perhaps God, or some hypothetically evil spirit of similar power is deceiving Descartes even in this. Indeed, there is but one thing that can be known indubitably: "*I am, I exist*, is necessarily true every time that I pronounce it or conceive it in my mind" (82). Though this *res cogitans* is a very spectral, abstract sort of self, thin pudding indeed for a typical romantic au-

tobiographer or poet, it does the enormous and revolutionary work of locating the beginning of all meaningful inquiry in introspection, the observation and analysis of the self.

Obviously, the investigation of the self becomes for modern man, in a way that it could not have been for the men of other ages, a task of paramount importance. And as we must fight our way, epistemologically, from the self to the outside world, the autobiographical mode of knowing is the central one. John Morris considers the romantic autobiographers “the largely unacknowledged pioneers of the modern sensibility” (*Versions of the Self* 7). But we encounter this same “mode of knowing” not only in formal autobiography, but in all the genres as practiced by the writers of the Romantic and Victorian eras.

What M. H. Abrams refers to as “the expressive” conception of art, the conception most typical of all romanticism, furnishes a good theoretical underpinning for the sort of autobiographical motive I have been and will be discussing. Briefly stated, Abrams distinguishes in *The Mirror and the Lamp* four basic critical conditions of art: *mimetic*, *pragmatic*, *expressive*, and *objective*. These conceptions stress one or more of the possible relations which constitute the experience of art (3-29). The expressive conception, which triumphed in the early nineteenth century, and which Abrams terms the “one distinctively romantic criticism” (7), stresses above all else the work’s relation with its author. As Abrams describes it, “the paramount cause of poetry” is no longer, as with mimetic critics such as Aristotle,

a formal cause, determined primarily by  
the human actions and qualities imitated:  
nor, as in neo-classic criticism, a final

cause, the effect intended upon the audience;  
but instead an efficient cause — the impulse  
within the poet of feelings and desires  
seeking expression, or the compulsion of  
the ‘creative’ imagination which, like God  
the creator, has its internal source of  
motion.(22)

Thus the primary function of art becomes, for the first time really, the sincere expression of the author’s inner consciousness—as it were, the “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” (Wordsworth 1800 Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*).

The dominance of this theory has had, of course, many interesting effects on poetry. The lyrical poem, which under other conceptions of poetry held a relatively minor position, was suddenly moved under the expressive conception to the very center of poetic endeavor (see Abrams 85-88). It provides, after all, the most pure and most direct transcription of an author’s inner feelings (Abrams 23). Tragedy had been considered by the mimetic Aristotle to be the greatest genre, as it most accurately imitated the actions of men (Abrams 24). Pragmatic critics had exalted rather the epic poem, which was held to offer men the loftiest ideals for instruction (Abrams 24). When expressive notions of art began to prevail, however, both these genres yielded place to the lyric, or else altered themselves. Abrams notes, for instance, that the romantic poets “tended to lyricize those poems which Aristotle had characterized as ‘possessing a certain magnitude,’ by substituting for characters, plot, or exposition, other elements which had earlier constituted the materials only of the pettier forms” (98). As A. C. Bradley puts it, “the center of



interest [in romantic poetry] is inward. It is an interest in emotion, thought, will, rather than in scenes, events actions” (183). Robert Langbaum also points out that the distinctively romantic organic theory of poetry

is destructive of the older theory of genres. For it suggests on the one hand, that there be as many genres as poets and even as poems; and, on the other hand, that there can be only one genre, since the dramatic movement from poet into poem and the lyrical movement from poem back into poet remains always the same. The organic theory also breaks down the distinction between the poet and his material, because the material is what the poet puts forth. (232-33)

We should keep in mind the centrality of John Stuart Mills’s contention that “all poetry is of the nature of soliloquy”(391). According to Mill, “poetry is feeling confessing itself to itself, in moments of solitude and bodying itself forth in symbols which are the nearest possible representations of the feeling in the exact shape in which it exists in the poet’s mind” (391). The action of poetry becomes thus the immediate transcription, as free as possible from the rational interference of the intellect, of the poet’s experience. This notion is echoed not only by most respectable theorists of the time, but by the poets as well. As Abrams argues, “much of the major poetry [in the romantic period], like almost all the major criticism, circles out from the poet as center” (99).

## II

The nineteenth century concern for the “realism and sincerity” which the

autobiographical way of knowing so readily yielded goes some distance towards explaining the curious Victorian notions about Elizabethan sonnets and the way the Victorians composed their own sonnets. Victorian critics had no doubt that their own poets had improved on the “taste and style” of the Elizabethan product.

It is amusing to note even James Ashcroft Noble, who had a finer sense of sonnets than most of his contemporaries, and who ranked Shakespeare’s efforts in the form at least as high as Milton’s, belittling in favor of a relative nonentity like Drummond many of the Elizabethan poets we have more recently come to cherish: “Time would fail us were we to attempt to speak of the minor singers of that vocal age; of Sir Walter Raleigh, George Chapman, Robert Greene, Michael Drayton, John Donne, William Browne, and the other less known poets; and if the truth must be told, there is — despite the rhapsodizing eulogies of a few critics — little in their contributions to sonnet literature to repay the study of any one but an editor or a specialist” (455). This is from the pen of a man who could write of Mrs. Browning’s sequence: “To appraise this collection adequately is difficult; to overrate it is impossible.... it can hardly be presumptuous to predict that for generations to come *Sonnets From The Portuguese* will remain....the noblest anthology for noble lovers which our language has to show” (467-68). What Noble likes particularly about Mrs. Browning’s sonnets is that “the individual flavour is as distinct as elsewhere [in her work]; never was personality more clearly discernible” (467).

As Joan Reese maintains, “the Victorians misunderstood and misestimated the Elizabethan work because they saw only that the sonnet was a medium of self-expression and they failed to recognize the nature and function of the Elizabethan conventions” (145-46). It is not strange that the Vic-

torian critics were so often obsessed with such biographical concerns as the identity of the dark lady of the sonnets of Shakespeare. Their vision of Shakespeare reflected their own autobiographical concerns. In the famous prefatory sonnet to his sequence, *The House of Life*, Dante Gabriel Rossetti sums up much Victorian thinking about the nature of the form.

A sonnet is a moment's monument, —  
Memorial from the Soul's eternity  
To one dead deathless hour.

The approach is autobiographical in the sense I have been discussing, for in effect the sonnet has as its proper business to memorialize a kind of epiphany or spot of time, the insight of “one dead deathless hour.” Indeed, most sonnet writing since the romantics recovered the form from its Augustan oblivion has aimed at such local and confessional intensity, the very brevity of the form suggesting not incompleteness but a moment (and what more is possible?) of heightened consciousness. Wordsworth, in “Scorn not the sonnet,” speaks of it as the “key” with which “Shakespeare unlocked his heart,” and the “trumpet” on which Milton “blew / soul-animating strains.”

Pleasant as all this may seem, it is not a notion of the sonnet which the Elizabethans would have approved or even recognized. Modern critics are not at all convinced that Shakespeare used his sonnets to “unlock his heart” in the romantic and confessional way which Wordsworth sensed, and Milton remains an idiosyncratic sonnet writer whose Puritan intensity indeed prefigures the romantics. The sonnet, as typically conceived and practiced by the Elizabethans, was of a very different order.

For one thing, the Elizabethans, following the examples of Petrarch and

Ronsard, did not consider the sonnet as an isolated form, but rather the strophic constituent of long sequences, often numbering more than an hundred poems and only loosely structured. The pretext for these sequences was typically a series of amorous addresses to a “mistress” on the order of Petrarch’s “Laura,” who just as typically resisted her poor poet-lover, forcing him as it were to endure and record a number of conventional amorous experiences. One such experience is the courting of sleep with its dream of fulfilled love, which we find in Sidney’s “Come sleep, Oh sleep,” (#39 A&S) or even Samuel Daniel’s “Care-charmer Sleep” (#45 Delia). Another is the quite common assertion, often in bravado fashion, that the poet-lover’s verses will immortalize their subjects (e.g. Drayton *Idea* #6, Spenser *Amoretti* #75). Indeed this convention inspired some of Shakespeare’s best known efforts in the form (e.g. #18, #55, #65). There are often a number of poems devoted to the paradox that beauty and cruelty coexist comfortably in the mistress (e.g. Delia #6, Spenser *Amoretti* #56, Shakespeare #131). Finally the poems come to an end either as in Spenser’s great “Epithalamion” with the union of the lovers, or more typically with their separation in a somewhat comic mood of worldly wise resignation to the “realities” of love. Consider Drayton’s conclusion to *Idea*, which makes conventional use of military imagery:

Truce, gentle love, a parley now I crave,  
Methinks ’tis long since first these wars began;  
Nor thou nor I the better yet can have;  
Bad is the match where neither party won.  
I offer free conditions of fair peace,  
My heart for hostage that it shall remain;  
Discharge our forces, here let malice cease,

So for my pledge thou give me pledge again.  
Or if no thing but death will serve thy turn,  
Still thirsting for subversion of my state,  
Do what thou canst, rage, massacre, and burn,  
Let the world see the utmost of thy hate;  
I send defiance, since if overthrown,  
Thou vanquishing, the conquest is mine own.

Like most of the mistresses of these sonnets, the mistress here is vanquished by a conceit, as indeed she was courted all along more through literature than love.

What holds together the larger structures of these sequences, if only loosely, is the development of a number of conventional themes, such as the insistence on the “immortality” of the verse, the chastity and beauty of the mistress, the villainy of time, and indeed often the “originality” of the Petrarchan sonneteers. In the hands of a Shakespeare, these conventional themes take on a subtle and dramatic life of their own, but the difference is one of degree and not, as Victorian autobiography seekers believed, one of kind. As J. W. Lever points out, “the renaissance sonnet, most personal of poetic forms, was also the most heavily indebted to convention”(56). This is not a fault of imagination so much as a reflection of the Elizabethan notion of the poetic art where, in Lever’s phrase, “imitation and convention were the prerequisites of all serious creative activity”(55). Any resemblances of Stella or Idea to Laura are indeed intentional and controlled, as are Sydney’s or Drayton’s departures from the Petrarchan vision.

It is important, therefore, to remember that even those Elizabethan sonnets which profess to fly in the face of convention are in fact enacting a con-

vention of their own. An interesting example of this is Sidney's sonnet number X:

Because I breathe not love to every one,  
Nor do not use set colours for to wear,  
Nor nourish special locks of vowed hair  
Nor give each speech a full point of a groan  
The courtly nymphs, acquainted with the moan  
Of them who in their lips Love's standard bear,  
'What, he!' say they of me, 'Now I dare swear  
He cannot love; no, no, let him alone.'  
And think so still, so Stella know my mind.  
Profess indeed I do not Cupid's art;  
But you, fair maids, at length this true shall find,  
That his right badge is but worn in the heart;  
Dumb swans, not chattering pies, do lovers prove;  
They love indeed who quake to say they love.

Writing in 1880, James Ashcroft Noble used this sonnet as an example of one of those times when Sidney "abandons [his courtly concepts] altogether, and his thought and language acquire the sweet naturalness and spontaneity which were the dower of both an earlier and a later age, but which in his time were for the court poets lost gifts" (453). This was his way of excusing part of Sidney at least from the typical Victorian charge of insincerity. And yet there is really no compelling evidence that Sidney, the author of more than a hundred of these sonnets, was ever known to quake when saying that he loved. He is here affecting the conventional role of the earnest lover almost, though not quite, struck dumb by the presence of his beloved. Much of

the energy of this convention comes from the ironic rehearsal of more usual Petrarchan conventions such as nourishing “special locks of vowed hair.” In fact, the general suspicion of eloquence, of those who “give each speech a full point of a groan” and thus merely “in their lips Love’s standard bear,” suggests a much older western tradition reaching back to Socrates’ scorn of the Sophists. And at least since Plato’s *Apology*, the west has been acquainted with the rhetorical device of a speaker claiming to be a “plain blunt man” with no rhetorical skills, and then in fact demonstrating such skills with great subtlety. This is precisely the way Sidney manipulates the Petrarchan conventions in this sonnet. As Hallet Smith points out, whereas “Astrophel is a poet who uses no art and keeps swearing that he uses no art....Sidney, on the other hand, uses very considerable art” (151). It is often misleading in Elizabethan sequences to identify too readily the speaker with the poet.

There is also the question of the “two audiences” to be considered, which Smith deals with extensively in *Elizabethan Poetry* (146-55). In this context, it is sufficient to point up the paradox that the sonnets, while supposedly written to be read by “the lady” to whom they are addressed, have also the larger audience of readers in mind. Indeed, this audience may well be moved by the very lines the lady so stubbornly resists. That Sidney was very much aware of this paradox there can be no doubt. In the *Certaine Sonets* of the 1598 *Arcadia*, he plays with the notion of poets as lovers:

Are poets then the onely lovers true?  
Whose hearts are set on measuring a verse:  
Who think them selves well blest, if they renew  
Some good old dumpe, that Chaucers mistresse knew,  
And use but you for matters to rehearse. (Quoted by

Smith 146)

In *Apologie*, he writes that many of his contemporary love poets, “if I were a Mistress, would never persuade me they were in love” (Quoted by Smith 147). His own approach, in Smith’s phrase, is to prepare “an emotional ground....for the decoration” (148). The larger audience of readers, at whom this strategy is actually directed, “will finally be more affected by the poetry if the lady, the other audience, and her assumed point of view are made paramount” (148). But this is art, the exercise of the convention of naturalness, and not what nineteenth century poets would have recognized as feeling. As Joan Rees has commented, “‘Naturalness’, so far as it means direct communication of personal experience, did not in fact come naturally” (145) to the Elizabethans. The naturalness and sincerity the Victorians wanted and celebrated were to be found rather in works like Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s *Sonnets From The Portuguese*, about which Patrick Cruttwell comments in *The English Sonnet*: “They show what was lost when the medieval-renaissance conventions were abandoned: what one then gets is the emotion, the experience, uncooked, and the result is somewhat indigestible” (42). One might add that even in more “digestible” works like *Monna Innominata*, we must look for something other than Elizabethan conventions and structure. There is surely more to learn about Victorian than Elizabethan practice in Barrett Browning’s oft quoted remark that Sidney “left us in one line [the last line of *Astrophel and Stella* I] the completest *ars poetica extant*” (Hayter 105).

Even Shakespeare is no exception to the Elizabethan practice. He too, for instance, makes use of the convention of seeming to be against convention in his famous sonnet #130:



My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun;  
Coral is far more red than her lips' red;  
If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun;  
If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.  
I have seen roses damasked, red and white,  
But no such roses see I in her cheeks;  
And in some perfumes is there more delight  
Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks.  
I love to hear her speak, yet well I know  
That music hath a far more pleasing sound:  
I grant I never saw a goddess go,—  
My mistress when she walks, treads on the ground.  
And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare  
As any she belied with false compare.

The point here, of course, is again to rehearse ironically by denying them, such conventional descriptions of “the mistress” as can be found in many Elizabethan sonnets or, for example in the following sestet by Petrarch himself:

Non era l'andar suo cosa mortale,  
Ma d'angelica forma; e le parole  
Sonavan altro che pur voce umana.  
Uno spirto celeste, un vivo sole  
Fu quel ch'i'vidi; e se non fosse or tale,  
Piage per allenter d'arco non sana.

She did not walk in any mortal way, / But with angelic  
progress; when she spoke, / unearthly voices sang in uni-

son. / She seemed divine among the dreary folk / of earth.  
You say she is not so today? / Well, though the bow's unbent,  
the wound bleeds on. — Trans. Morris Bishop.  
(*Lyric Poetry of the Italian Renaissance* 190-91)

Shakespeare's disavowal of Petrarchan hyperbole in the name of "realism and sincerity," amusing and convincing as it may seem, has really something of the nature of *trompe-l'oeil* in it, a linguistic sleight of hand, bespeaking not so much the author's "love" as his poet's power over the language.

And yet we should not ignore the fact that so many later critics did seek to uncover the secrets of Shakespeare's heart to which the sonnets supposedly gave access. Just how indebted to contemporary convention Shakespeare actually was has always been a thorny question. Barbara Herrnstein notes that the "controversy over the sincerity or conventionality of the poems accounts for [a] sizable portion of the commentary" (V), over seven hundred books and articles. It is obvious, however, that in terms of intensity and depth of imagery, Shakespeare's sonnets eclipse those of his contemporaries. A poem like the sonnet #64 is so forceful and natural that it seems indeed nothing short of a lyric cry from the heart:

When I have seen by time's fell hand defaced  
The rich-proud cost of outworn buried age;  
When sometime lofty towers I see down-razed,  
And brass eternal slave to mortal rage;  
When I have seen the hungry ocean gain  
Advantage on the kingdom of the shore,  
And the firm soil win of the watery main,  
Increasing store with loss, and loss with store;

When I have seen such interchange of state,  
Or state itself confounded to decay,  
Ruin hath taught me thus to ruminare,  
That time will come and take my love away.  
This thought is as a death, which cannot choose  
But weep to have that which it fears to lose.

If we observe this beautiful poem more closely, however, many of its constituents appear conventional. Here again is that personified villain “time”; here again are “lofty towers” which, like their cousins, the “marble” and “the gilded monuments / Of princes” from #55, are “slave to mortal rage.” The first person speaker in this poem is also arguably distinct from the poet; the “I” is really a kind of rhetorical device, part of the marvelous periodic sentence of the first twelve lines. The experience proposed is generalized, or even imaginative, as in the image of “the hungry ocean” gaining his “advantage on the kingdom of the shore.” Wordsworth would respond, if questioned, that he was writing a poem about Tintern Abbey, a real, quite visitable place. But one might reasonably ask of Shakespeare: what “lofty towers” are these? Why are they thus “down-razed”? Of course this is to miss, strategically, the point of Shakespeare’s sonnet, but it is to make the point that Shakespeare and Wordsworth approached poetry and its proper relation to experience in two completely different ways. It is easy for us to forget, when Hamlet upbraids Ophelia with such dramatic effectiveness (“God hath given you one face, and you make yourself another”), that we are witnessing another Elizabethan “painting speech.” What in the hands of a Webster seems a strained convention comes across here with beautiful “realism and sincerity.” It was natural for Wordsworth, with his autobiographical approach to poetry, to look for something similar in the work of his predeces-

sor, and mistakenly to find it. Sonnet #64, however, is a skeleton key to any number of hearts and not necessarily Shakespeare's own. As Sidney Lee argues, while Shakespeare's "supremacy of poetic power and invention creates a very wide interval between his efforts and those of his contemporaries,...the Elizabethan age was too completely steeped in the Petrarchan conventions to permit him full freedom from their toils.... Many a phrase and sentiment of Petrarch or Ronsard, or the English sonneteers who wrote earlier than he, give the cue to Shakespeare's noblest poems" (CX).

Consider another famous sonnet of Shakespeare, one where he even makes use of a personal form of address such as we find in many Victorian sonnet writers: #73

That time of year thou mayst in me behold  
when yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang  
Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,  
Bare ruined choirs, where late the sweet birds sang.  
In me thou see'st the twilight of such day  
As after sunset fadeth in the west;  
Which by and by black night doth take away,  
Death's second self, that seals up all in rest.  
In me thou see'st the glowing of such fire,  
That on the ashes of his youth doth lie,  
As the deathbed whereon it must expire,  
Consumed with that which it was nourished by.  
This thou perceiv'st, which makes thy love more strong,  
To love that well which thou must leave ere long.

The implications of these lines, that the speaker is in the "autumn" of his

years, is simply not born out by what we do know of the facts of Shakespeare's life. He was most probably in his early thirties when the poem was written, and even by pre-twentieth century standards this is not the "twilight" of life. No matter how strongly the poem moves us, no matter how sincere it impresses us as being, it need not be the companion of advanced age. But such age nonetheless is *dramatically* right, and it is perhaps for that reason that Shakespeare, no compulsive autobiographer but a wonderful dramatist, chose it for his speaker.

Even in the "dark lady" sonnets such a mixture of convention and drama is at work.

When my love swears that she is made of truth,  
I do believe her, though I know she lies,  
That she might think me some untutored youth,  
Unlearned in the world's false subtleties.  
Thus vainly thinking that she thinks me young,  
Although she knows my days are past the best,  
Simply I credit her false speaking tongue:  
On both sides thus is simple truth suppressed.  
But wherefore says she not she is unjust?  
And wherefore say I not that I am old?  
Oh, love's best habit is in seeming trust,  
And age in love loves not to have years told.  
Therefore I lie with her and she with me,  
And in our faults by lies we flattered be.

What distinguishes this poem from the common run of Elizabethan love sonnets is not that conventional elements have been dispensed with in favor of

sincere, personal expression, but rather the extraordinarily subtle dramatization of these elements. If the speaker and his mistress have a spontaneity lacking in the characters of other sequences, it is due to this dramatization rather than any injection of personal feeling. We should remember that the hallmark of the Shakespearian genius is the creation of *autonomous* characters, something by the way which the romantic poet-dramatists never really understood or mastered. It is thus as pointless to seek, as so many Victorian critics did, the “real identity” of this “mistress” as it is to read into Lady Penelope Rich the virtues of Stella, or indeed to seek a medical explanation for the mysterious powers of the girl Petrarch called Laura. Such mistresses are abstract entities, devices for focusing conventional poetic feelings, part of the weave of that great net of artistic form, without which, so Robert Frost assures us, we have been lately trying to play so much futile tennis.

To see this more clearly, one need only turn to a truly personal sonnet, such as John Keats’ “To Fanny:”

I cry your mercy — pity — love! — Aye, love!  
Merciful love that tantalizes not.  
One-thoughted, never-wandering, guileless love,  
Unmask’d, and being seen, without a blot!  
O! let me have thee whole, — all — all — be mine!  
That shape, that fairness, that sweet minor zest  
Of love, your kiss, — those hands, those eyes divine,  
That warm, white, lucent, million-pleasured breast,-  
Yourself — your soul — in pity give me all,  
Withhold no atom’s atom or I die,  
Or living on perhaps, your wretched thrall,

Forget, in the mist of idle misery,  
Life's purposes, — the palate of my mind  
Losing its gust, and my ambition blind!

Perhaps the first thing we sense in Keats is the genuinely personal nature of this experience as presented. The poem, with its weight of extravagance, succeeds only to the degree that it convinces us of the authenticity of its emotion. What other excuse is there for melodramatic punctuation? The sense in which one takes “those eyes divine” is very different from the way one might read a similar image in an Elizabethan poem: the cliché here is taken not as the conscious exercise of a convention, but the youthful exuberance of a genuine lover. Also, the poem is addressed to a real person and reads plausibly as such. It accords with what we know from other sources of Keats's relationship with Fanny Brawne in a way that Sidney's addresses to Stella, for instance, do not correspond to his actual relationship with Penelope Rich (See Walter Jackson Bate 619-20 and Lever 54). The very instinct to creativity behind such a poem is different from that of the Elizabethans: it is the typically romantic concern for the faithful expression of the poet's personal feeling, what M. H. Abrams has termed “the expressive conception of art.”

Another important difference to be noted about this sonnet is the fact of its isolation. The Elizabethan sonnets I have quoted are all parts of long sequences of poems organized according to rather loose conventions. Thus they are by their nature not complete artistic statements, but rather elemental poses of larger wholes, like minor allegorical figures painted into murals of the renaissance. The Keats poem, by contrast, presents itself as a complete experience.

Indeed, with the romantics the sonnet takes on a second popularity alto-

gether different from that it enjoyed with the neo-Petrarchans.<sup>2</sup> The romantic sonnets, though not nearly as numerous, carry with them something of the special radiance which romantic theorists, in unprecedented fashion, reserved for the lyric poem. We remember that Mill considered poetry “the expression or uttering forth of feeling,” and spoke of lyric poetry as “more eminently and peculiarly poetry than any other” (Quoted by Abrams 23). With all poetic genres under the injunction to aspire to the condition of lyric, it is not at all surprising that the sonnet should divorce itself from its strophic identity as the element of long sequences and gather to itself the spiritual intensity of lyric isolation.

Wordsworth’s sonnets are typical in this respect and worth considering. They are individual expressions, identified quite precisely in most instances by date and place, almost as if they were notations in a journal. This is no new effect, for the episodic structure of the renaissance sequences does give them a certain “day to day” feel, but in Wordsworth, the sense of the expression of personal experience is essential to our reading of the poem.

“Composed on Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802”

Earth has not anything to show more fair:  
Dull would he be of soul who could pass by  
A sight so touching in its majesty;  
This City now doth, like a garment, wear  
The beauty of the morning; silent, bare,  
Ships, towers, domes, theaters, and temples lie  
Open unto the fields, and to the sky;  
All bright and glittering in the smokeless air.  
Never did sun more beautifully steep



In his first splendor, valley, rock, or hill;  
Ne'er saw I, never felt, a calm so deep!  
The river glideth at his own sweet will:  
Dear God! The very houses seem asleep;  
And all that mighty heart is lying still!

What we see here is one of those epiphanic moments Wordsworth called “spots of time” and developed more fully in his autobiographical epic. Here, quite neatly contained in the “sonnet’s scanty plot of ground,” is the pure lyric expression of a moment of personal insight: for this moment, and to the observing consciousness of the speaker, even the city of London, that arch-villain of romantic nature lovers, is transformed into a thing of beauty rivaling nature’s own. Indeed, even in such a man-made environment (though the air must still be “smokeless”), there may be evidence of “that mighty heart.” But more important than the particular landscape is the consciousness of the observer. Without this the poem is little more than a pleasant description. What gives it energy is the shaping power of Wordsworth’s personal imagination, an imagination exercised through local consciousness. Indeed, as any comparison of the poems with Dorothy Wordsworth’s journals will suggest, Dorothy is better at recording objectively the details of their experiences. But it is Wordsworth’s consciousness that interacts with, manages, and shapes such experiences into great poetry. The experiences are measured by their importance to the development of his mind. The poetry records this development. Indeed, this was the notion of poetry Wordsworth bequeathed to the nineteenth century.

### III

It is not surprising that so many nineteenth century commentators on the

sonnet preferred Milton to the Elizabethan sonneteers, Shakespeare not excepted. George Sanderlin notes that it was not until the appearance of the volume entitled *Sonnets of Shakespeare and Milton* in 1830 that Shakespeare's works were even granted parity with Milton's (464). Egerton Brydges, for instance, writing earlier in the century, considers Shakespeare's sonnets "not among the best of .... his minor poems" (quoted by Sanderlin 462-63), while Charles Symmons, in his *Life of John Milton* (1810), echoes the widely held opinion that Shakespeare's sonnets were inferior to Drummond's (see Sanderlin 463). Similarly, Capel Lofft and George Henderson, two early nineteenth century anthologists strongly criticize Shakespeare's handling of the form. Lofft reiterates the popular censure of Shakespeare's eccentric sonnet structure. Henderson does not leave Shakespeare out of his general criticism of earlier writers, and even when he wishes to defend the looser form of sonnet, he supports his argument not with Shakespeare but Charlotte Smith (Sanderlin 463). Even into the third decade of the century, when arguments for the Shakespearian structure, bolstered by the likes of Keats, Wordsworth, and Beddoes, were gaining ground, it was still not uncommon to find the sonnets disparaged on the grounds of their ornateness (Sanderlin 464). As late as 1828, an article in *New Monthly* ranked them with modest praise "the best....anterior to....Drummond" (quoted by Sanderlin 464).

What all this suggests is a general antipathy in the early nineteenth century to Elizabethanism and what is most Elizabethan in Shakespeare. Those qualities which Shakespeare had in common with his contemporaries could be ignored by a Coleridge or a Hazlitt in their discussions of the plays, and had to wait for E.E. Stoll and the historical critics of the early twentieth century for full critical consideration. The sonnets, however, were not so easily

extricated from their historical context. Apart from their ornate language and use of conventional situations and imagery, a major fault was that Shakespeare composed his sonnets in a loose Elizabethan sequence. This denied many of them the wholeness in themselves that many romantic and Victorian critics found so important.

The author of an unsigned review in *The Quarterly Review* (1873), for instance, terming the sonnet “the alphabet of the human heart” (99), goes on to argue in the strongest terms that “the sonnet must consist of one idea, mood, or sentiment solely; and never more than one. It must be a full, rounded, and complete organism;... entire of itself, requiring nothing more from the reader than what itself suggests” (101). Similarly, David M. Main, in the preface to his *Treasury of English Sonnets* (1880), argues that the two cardinal laws of the sonnet demand that “the sonnet shall consist of fourteen rhymed decasyllabic verses, and *be a development of one idea, mood, feeling, or sentiments*” (italics mine). For the writer in *The Quarterly Review*, “it is better to write a single sonnet out of a full, rich mood, than a hundred out of barren and empty ones” (107). This would suggest more readily the isolated sonnets of Milton, Wordsworth, and Keats than the sequential sonnets of Shakespeare or any of the Elizabethans.

But nineteenth century considerations of Shakespeare’s sonnets, even when they began to be favorable if not enthusiastic, reveal another fallacy of interpretation suggestive of the Victorians’ distance from and lack of understanding of Elizabethan practices. This is their autobiographical approach to the writing of poetry. Henry Hallam, in a notable essay first published in 1839, goes so far as to suggest that it was “not impossible not to wish that Shakespeare had never written them” (6). Interestingly, his reasoning goes beyond the earlier writers’ censure of the sonnets’ structural deficiencies.

While he notes that “so many frigid conceits are scattered around, that we might almost fancy the poet to have written without genuine emotion,” his real fear is that he believes “such a host of other passages attest the contrary” (7). In other words, Hallam, being a man of his age, cannot but read the sonnets as autobiographical expressions, and he does not like what he finds:

an attachment to some female, which seems to have touched neither [Shakespeare’s] heart nor his fancy very sensibly, was overpowered, without entirely ceasing, by one to a friend; and this last is of such an enthusiastic character, and so extravagant in the phrases that the author uses, as to have thrown an unaccountable mystery over the whole work....No instance has been adduced of such rapturous devotedness, such an idolatry of admiring love, as one of the greatest beings whom nature ever produced in the human form pours forth to some unknown youth in the majority of these sonnets....Notwithstanding the frequent beauties of these sonnets, the pleasure of their perusal is greatly diminished by these circumstances. (6)

It is interesting to note the emphasis Hallam places on the fact that Shakespeare’s “fancy” was not very sensibly touched by the “dark lady,” and the fact that his praise of the “fair youth” was clothed in such “enthusiastic” and “extravagant” phrases. What “diminishes” Hallam’s pleasure in reading this is the suggestion, imposed by his autobiographical approach to the poetry, of Shakespeare’s homosexual impulses toward the “fair youth.” Oth-

er writers, notably Oscar Wilde, are not nearly so uncomfortable with this, but in one form or another the autobiographical heresy in readings of the sonnets crops up again and again throughout the nineteenth century. Barbara Herrnstein points out that “among others we have had Mr. W. H. as William Himself, the lady as a Negro courtesan, the rival poet as the Roman Church, and the whole sequence as the record of Shakespeare’s struggle to overcome alcoholism” (V). Such bizarre theories as proliferated in the nineteenth century did much to obscure our approach to the sonnets, but they suggest invaluable insights into the ways the Victorians went about writing sonnets themselves. Writers like Elizabeth Barrett Browning and the Rossettis did in fact look into their hearts and write.

#### IV

One of the paradoxes of Victorian sonnet writing is that while such poets as the Rossettis or Elizabeth Barrett Browning strive to maintain the personal intensity of the romantics, they also return to forms of the sonnet sequence which they evidently consider improvements on their Elizabethan predecessors (see Rees 141-43). But sequences like *The House of Life*, *Monna Innominata*, and *Sonnets From The Portuguese* have been completely transformed by the autobiographical shift of the romantics.

The Victorians, of course, did not have the useful conventions of the Elizabethans available to them (certainly they did not *read* such conventions as we would today), and therefore needed something to replace the thematic structure of the Elizabethan sequences. The replacement they had most readily at their disposal was the presiding and unifying consciousness of the speaker. Such a consciousness was able to gather up and give shape to heterogeneous moments of experience, and the development of such conscious-

ness became indeed the main action of the poetry. Joan Rees has aptly described *The House of Life* as “Rossetti’s journey through his own soul” (138). The transfigured form of the sonnet sequence offered Rossetti what the transfigured epic provided Wordsworth: a more or less structured means of investigating and giving shape to his life’s experiences. The individual sonnets are epiphanic, registering the spots of meaningful time that go to make up the consciousness of the poet. Though this is not a “tight” structure, certainly not as logical and controlled as the structure of *Monna Innominata*, it is still something completely different from the structure of a typical Elizabethan sequence. Structuring a long poem with a series of autobiographical epiphanies is a typical romantic innovation.

Like *The Prelude* or *In Memoriam*, the sonnets of *The House of Life* are the product of many years of work and revision. Though the ultimate form of the sequence has an ordering only hindsight can give, an ordering of true autobiography in fact, the individual sonnets have a local inspiration more like that of individual entries in a diary or journal (see Gusdorf 35). This enables them to attain the artistic wholeness and intensity of the romantic individual sonnet, while functioning at the same time as members of a larger sequence with its own dynamic and form. The larger form, whose broad outline presents a sort of “poet’s progress” from youthful sensuality to a more mature view of life which includes “(1) a willingness to accept one’s own sins of omission, (2) the ability to face death without terror, and (3) the ability to place faith in the final attainment of the ideal after death,” has been amply and fruitfully discussed by Houston A. Baker (1-14). Baker is at pains to suggest that “*The House of Life* transcends the strictly autobiographical in its presentation of a sound idea” (12), and that therefore one ought “to move beyond a strictly autobiographical approach” (n 17). He is referring to such

works as Oswald Doughty's *A Victorian Romantic: Dante Gabriel Rossetti* (London" 1949) where the chief intent of the critic is autobiographical detective work. But while I agree that the poem's ultimate significance must transcend its origins, I believe we go in grave danger of misrepresenting a work of art when we fail to take the real nature of its origins into account. To maintain, as Baker does, "that 'personal sensual experience' in [*The House of Life*] does not mean the experience of Rossetti himself, but rather, the experience of 'the poet,' the speaker" (12), is to impose a fallacious objectivity upon the work. Whatever the objective or "sound" ideas to be derived from Rossetti's work, we must recognize and live with their inherently subjective origin and presentation.

The phases of the sequence which Baker outlines are meant to suggest the development of a personality through a series of significant moments or epiphanies. Unlike the Elizabethans with their conventional situations, the structuring of Dante Rossetti's sequence is psychological. When the Elizabethans presented a stylized, generalized human experience which they cast in conventional, public images and symbols, Rossetti offers private images and symbols which suggest personal experience. This autobiographical mode of presentation in the sonnets gives them what the poets of the nineteenth century almost invariably sought and what distinguishes their poems from the Elizabethan sequences: the intensity of individual lyrics.

Typical in this respect is the beautiful and well known sonnet, "Silent Noon."

Your hands lie open in the long fresh grass,—  
The finger-points look through like rosy blooms:  
Your eyes smile peace. The pasture gleams and glooms

All round our nest, far as the eye can pass,  
Are golden kingcup-fields with silver edge  
Where the cow-parsley skirts the hawthorne-hedge.

Deep in the sun-searched growths the dragon-fly  
Hangs like a blue thread loosened from the sky:—  
So this winged hour is dropped to us from above.  
Oh! clasp we to our hearts, for deathless dower,  
This close-companioned inarticulate hour  
When twofold silence was the song of love.

The poem presents the experience of a sort of epiphany, or spot of time, one of those moments when the veil is torn away and we see into the heart of things. In this case, the epiphany is a glimpse of timelessness brought on by love and suggested by the seeming quietness of a particular noon. The first seven lines act, as it were, to paint the moment in its particulars, the “kingcup-fields,” “cow-parsley” and the rest. This provides us, if we conceive a vertical of time, with the horizontal view of all that makes up the poet’s conscious awareness. The eighth line, clearly the poem’s climax, goes a step beyond the word painting of the first seven to interpretation, an awareness of the moment other than sensuous: “’Tis visible silence, still as the hour-glass.” The insight itself, however, is paradoxical: time as perceived by human consciousness is never really still; whether or not our eyes can make it out, the sands of an hour glass are always on the move. Our only possible timelessness on earth is death. Stephen Spector has concluded, interestingly, that this notion is involved in and underlined by Rossetti’s use of the sonnet form itself, with its inherent structural imbalance suggesting the ineluctable movement of time (54-58). In fact, such a view of human life and love as



“chafing prisoners of time” is quite traditional, harking back, for instance, to central themes in the sonnets of Shakespeare and Michelangelo. And similarly here it is only art, the “moment’s monument,” that can turn a “close-companied inarticulate hour” doomed otherwise to the boneyards of human memory, into a “deathless dower” of even an ironical sort. What is different in Rossetti’s poem is his substitution of personal experience and its accoutrements for the “marble monuments” of convention. Details such as the dragonfly are not merely decorative, but vital constituents of the experience related in the poem. The epiphany in a work of autobiographical inspiration must maintain the integrity of its particulars.

It should not be thought that all of Rossetti’s sonnets are as straightforwardly autobiographical as “Silent Noon” with its model epiphany. Rossetti often has recourse, for instance, to allegorical personifications like Love, Death, Hope, and Life. But even where such figures appear, they do not have the objective, “public” feeling of traditional allegorical figures. Rather they are privately symbolic, like figures in a dream, subject not to convention but the imperatives of the poet’s subconscious mind. In the “Willowwood” sonnets, for instance, we meet a character called “Love” who is no traditional Cupid in spite of such stage props as “wing-feathers” that Rossetti uses to reinforce the cultural overtones.

“Willowwood — I” #49

I sat with Love upon a woodside well,  
Leaning across the water, I and he:  
Nor ever did he speak nor looked at me,  
But touched his lute wherein was audible  
That certain secret thing he had to tell.

Only our mirrored eyes met silently  
In the low wave; and that sound came to be  
The passionate voice I knew; and my tears fell.  
And at their fall, his eyes beneath grew hers;  
And with his foot and with his wing-feathers  
He swept the spring that watered my heart's drouth.  
Then the dark ripples spread to waving hair,  
And as I stooped, her own lips rising there  
Bubbled with brimming kisses at my mouth.

The imagery of this poem suggests more than anything else, and quite vividly, a dream, or rather the beginning of a dream, for this particular vision continues to the length of three more sonnets. Even the title has a dreamlike compression. "Willowwood," of course, is the wood of weeping, the forest of tears. What is especially interesting is the complex suggestion of Narcissism in the poem. The figure of the speaker, Love, and the beloved are subtly confused here, perhaps with the implication that the consciousness of the speaker embraces all the rest. At first the speaker is said to be sitting "with Love upon a woodside well, / Leaning across the water, I and he." They would seem, at least grammatically, to be distinct at this point, but we remember that the speaker is in the pose of Narcissus here, implying rather their identity. When we gaze so into the body of water, the image most likely to greet us is our own. The image is not so simple, however, for Love makes "audible / That certain secret thing he had to tell" (though we could say such things to ourselves), and this in turn comes "to be / The passionate voice I knew." At this point, the image of Love changes to that of a female beloved: "his eyes beneath grew hers; / . . . And as I stooped, her own lips rising there / Bubbled with brimming kisses at my mouth." It seems the sim-

ple dream motif of the speaker kissing his beloved (a lost beloved as we shall later see), but we must remember that the notion of Narcissus continues to govern in some sense throughout the poem. The suggestion, of course, is that the love of the speaker is somehow self-love. Like the young officer in Rilke's "Letzter Abend," the speaker here sees only a mirror image of his beloved, not her own. The myth of Narcissus is very clear about the dangers of such love, and they are suggested by the sonnet.

The next two sonnets of the "Willowwood" series are taken up with Love's song, though interestingly it is "meshed with half-remembrance hard to free," suggesting again the omnipotence of the speaker's Narcissistic consciousness. What love sings is not so much a song as a sort of dream-like Dantean anecdote: in Willowwood is "a dumb throng / . . . one form by every tree / All mournful forms, for each was I or she." These indeed are "the shades of those our days that had no tongue." In the third sonnet, Love addresses "all ye that walk in Willowwood / . . . with hollow faces burning white." These manifestations of vain love ("who so in vain have wooed / Your last hope lost, who so in vain invite / Your lips to that their unforgotten food") are promised nothing but "one lifelong night" before they "again shall see the light." Indeed, a Lethan sleep till death were better than this remembrance. As Rossetti might have remembered Francesca saying: "Nessun maggior dolore / che ricordarsi del tempo felice / nella miseria." Willowwood is such a nightmare of lost love.

"Willowwood — 4" #52

So sang he: and as meeting rose and rose  
Together cling through the wind's wellaway  
Nor change at once, yet near the end of day

The leaves drop loosened where the heartstain glows,—  
So when the song died did the kiss uncloze;  
And her face fell back drowned, and was as gray  
As its gray eyes; and if it ever may  
Meet mine again I know not if Love knows.  
Only I know that I leaned low and drank  
A long draft from the water where she sank,  
Her breath and all her tears and all her soul:  
And as I leaned, I know I felt Love's face  
Pressed on my neck with moan of pity and grace,  
Till both our heads were in his aureole.

The confusion of identity set up in the first of these sonnets rises to a climax here: the speaker, as it were, drinks the very being of his beloved, “Her breath and all her tears and all her soul.” In addition, he grows one with Love so much as to share his aureole, a suggestion perhaps that the difficult experience has proven ultimately beneficial. The element of Narcissism, however, continues to exert its influence on the poem: whatever revelation there is could be and probably is the result of intense introspection, of confrontation with painful memories.

It is here that the importance of recognizing the autobiographical approach comes in. Though certainly different from Elizabethan sonnets, the incident as presented here does have precedents in Dante. As someone like T.S. Eliot would have been the first to point out, however, the presentation of Dante Rossetti's experience in comparison with that of Dante Alighieri is muddled and unclear. Where the author of *Divina Comedia* sought the utmost clarity of image and symbol, the author of *The House of Life* vitiated

his work with what might be considered rather coy expressions of personal feeling. This at least might be the approach of critics who attempt, as Cleanth Brooks does, to view a poem “*sub specie aeternitatis*” (X). The relative overall merits of the two Dantes aside, such an attitude, without taking into account the different historical approaches to the very act of making poetry, cannot help being unfair to the poets of the nineteenth century who conceived of their task in terms of personal expression. It may indeed be possible to argue for Rossetti’s salvation on the grounds that his “I” is really a “persona,” but I think this misses something essential in Rossetti’s approach to the writing of poetry and can grant him at best a partial success. The images of these poems do not aim at clarity or concreteness, except as they suggest the personal expression of personal experience. When the experience is vague or impressionistic, the poems must suggest this too.

Some of the sonnets from the “Change and Fate” section of *The House of Life* have all the characteristics of the sort of “diary” lyric Wordsworth was fond of writing. “Autumn Idleness,” for instance, is filled with minute by minute perceptions of Nature, a sense of the speaker’s consciousness, within time, modulating the images of a poem.

Here dawn today unveiled her magic glass;  
Here noon now gives the thirst and takes the dew;  
Till eve bring rest when other good things pass.  
And here the lost hours the lost hours renew  
While I still lead my shadow o’er the grass,  
Nor know, for longing, that which I should do.

The interest and energy of the poem derive not simply from the images themselves, but from the presence of the poet’s consciousness interacting

with such images. The poetry is precisely in the interaction, the “wooing both ways,” to borrow R. P. Blackmur’s phrase. “The Hill Summit” is another good example of this type of sonnet.

This feast day of the sun, his altar there  
In the broad west has blazed for vesper-song;  
And I have loitered in the vale too long  
And gaze now a belated worshiper.  
Yet may I not forget that I was ’ware,  
So journeying, of his face at intervals  
Transfigured where the fringed horizon falls,—  
A fiery bush with coruscating hair.  
And now that I have climbed and won this height,  
I must tread downward through the sloping shade  
And travel the bewildered tracks till night.  
Yet for this hour I still may here be stayed  
And see the gold air and the silver fade  
And the last bird fly into the last light.

This is an especially interesting poem in that it so thoroughly mixes the personal with the cultural, the speaker’s personal experience with the experience of the race, as suggested in the various religious images. What makes this more than simply the record of one more Wordsworthian nature worshiper out to make a description is the intense consciousness of the poet, the metaphor-maker whose immediate experience we are given. The biblical allusions themselves, while they add to the poem’s diaspora of meaning, do not do so independently of their presence in the poet’s consciousness. It is Rossetti’s mind that brings together Moses and the burning bush and the ef-

fects of the natural sun he has seen today, just as it is T. S. Eliot's peculiar consciousness that yokes together bits of Dante and the commuters one day on London Bridge.

“Barren Spring” offers us another example of this inclusive consciousness used with a further degree of subtlety. The basic notion of the sonnet plays upon one of the oldest conventions of poetry in western Europe. The speaker considers his own inability, for whatever reason, to participate in the general renewal of spring. The cause may be the absence of the beloved, as in many troubadour poems, or the loss of continuity with nature and thus the loss of inspiration, as in poems of Wordsworth and Coleridge, or spiritual and cultural emptiness, as in *The Wasteland*. Whatever the cause of the speaker's “sullen mood,” and his inability to go “a-Maying,” the effect is painfully recorded; and so too with Rossetti.

Once more the changed year's turning wheel returns:  
And as a girl sails balanced in the wind,  
And now before and now again behind  
Stoops as it swoops, with cheek that laughs and burns,—  
So Spring comes merry toward me here, but earns  
No answering smile from me, whose life is twined  
With the dead boughs that winter still must bind,  
And whom today the Spring no more concerns.  
Behold, this crocus is a withering flame;  
This snowdrop, snow; this apple-blossom's part  
To breed the fruit that breeds the serpent's art.  
Nay, for these Spring-flowers, turn thy face from them,  
Nor stay till on the year's last lily-stem

The white cup shrivels round the golden heart.

Style aside, the excellence of this poem, its freshness almost in spite of the subject's archetypal heritage, is the seeming particularity of perception, the perception of one poet on one day. Whether there was ever one such day or not, Rossetti is at pains to present us with "this crocus," "this snowdrop," "this apple-blossom," as if they were but freshly perceived. A comparison of "Barren Spring" with Shakespeare's "That Time of Year" (no. 73) points this up clearly. Shakespeare's yellow leaves, twilight and fire in its embers are clearly archetypal metaphors of human life. Rather than particular impressions or experiences, they represent a summation of human experience, and are thus essentially public, even universal in their implications. Rossetti's images, on the contrary, though they clothe a common human experience, are meaningful only in particular and personal terms. In the nineteenth century, even archetypes must take up their place in time.

## V

Christina Rossetti, in *Monna Innominata*, may be attempting something short of a grand tour through her own soul, but her approach is as confessional as her brother's. Instead of summing up her life's experiences, she records with psychological intensity and sincere feeling the narrower experience of one unhappy love affair. In her preface she claims with charming modesty to be recording mere fanciful experiences, but her real conception of the proper approach to sonnet writing comes in a sly comparison of her own work with the flagrantly autobiographical *Sonnets From The Portuguese*.

Had the Great Poetess of our own day and nation only



been unhappy instead of happy, her circumstances would have invited her to bequeath to us, in lieu of the “Portuguese Sonnets,” an inimitable “*donna innominata*” drawn not from fancy but from feeling, and worthy to occupy a niche beside Beatrice and Laura. (*Works* 58)

This comment has several different functions. It offers, under the guise of a hyperbolic compliment, what is in fact a cogent criticism of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s flouting of the convention of unhappy love. At the same time, however, it suggests a notion of poetry quite Victorian and not at all Elizabethan: that the way for a modern poet to find a place with the immortals was to write sonnets “drawn not from fancy but from feeling.” Thus Mrs. Browning was fated by her life to write, as she did and however unhappily, sonnets of happy love. There is also the suggestion, however subliminal, that Christina Rossetti herself was not so fated, and that any such serious effort as hers would indeed be drawn from feeling.

Unlike her brother, Christina Rossetti seems anxious to protect herself from the spotlight invited by overt autobiography. Indeed, this may reflect in some measure her painful shyness in an age which demanded poetry of confessional intensity, an age which led other poets, notably Tennyson and Browning, to the development of the dramatic monologue.<sup>3</sup> Thus, her sequence, *Monna Innominata* is presented as the fancifully imagined reflections of one of the many “*donne innominate*” whose charms were sung by the medieval poets. It is an effort to give finally the woman’s side, to redress the unfairness of a strictly male viewpoint, which has given us ladies “replendent with charms, but...scant of attractiveness” (*Works* 58). Each of the fourteen sonnets is preceded by an epigraph from Dante and one from Pe-

trarch, as if to reaffirm some sort of relation with the great traditional sequences of the past.

In spite of this effort at concealment, early critics had no hesitation taking a biographical approach to the work. In fact, until quite recently most discussions of *Monna Innominata*, much in the manner of nineteenth century criticism of Shakespeare's sonnets, centered around the identity of the "other" to whom the poems are addressed. Most writers, notably Marya Zaturenska, Dorothy Margaret Stuart, and most recently Georgina Battiscombe, have followed William Rossetti's suggestion that in *Monna Innominata* Christina was in fact "giving expression to her love for Charles Cayley," whose offer of marriage she refused on religious grounds.<sup>4</sup>

The overabundance of strictly biographical treatments has led a critic like Joan Rees, however, to commit the opposite fallacy by treating the poems in terms of their handling of conventions and ignoring their autobiographical mode of presentation. The simple fact that Christina Rossetti's themes are "the common stock of love poetry in all ages (Rees 159) does not preclude their being suggested by, drawn from, and expressive of personal experience. Love itself is "the common stock of love poetry in all ages." What is of more point, what I have been at pains to demonstrate, is that the approach to writing poetry does in fact change from age to age. We should keep in mind the suggestion in Christina's comment on Mrs. Browning that she herself was writing poetry "drawn not from fancy but from feeling." In this she was nothing if not typical of her age.

It is true that a writer like Packer, searching the sonnets for actual biographical evidence, comes up with a lot of sheer silliness, without any real bearing on our final valuation of the poems as works of art. The sixth sonnet

is a good example.

Trust me, I have not earned your dear rebuke,  
I love, as you would have me, God the most;  
Would lose not Him, but you, must one be lost,  
Nor with Lot's wife cast back a faithless look  
Unready to forego what I forsook;  
This say I, having counted up the cost,  
This, though I be the feeblest of God's host,  
The sorriest sheep Christ shepherds with His crook.  
Yet while I love my God the most, I deem  
That I can never love you overmuch;  
I love Him more, so let me love you too;  
Yea, as I apprehend it, love is such  
I cannot love you, if I love not Him,  
I cannot love Him if I love not you.

Packer comments that it may reflect an earlier conversation between Christina and William Bell Scott (her candidate for the role of suitor) about their relationship, which she had broken up in 1858. He may have brought up this fact, and “to this she could have replied that if so, it was not from lack of love” (230). This is surely reductionist, based as it is on a dubious theory about Christina's private life. On the other hand, Rees goes too far in the other direction when she considers the same poem only in terms of philosophical play with the theme of “the relation of human love to claims of a higher order [which] has worried love poets in ages of faith at least from Petrarch onwards” (157). Indeed, her approach leads her very readily to one of those “daring paradoxes” such critics love to find: “Love of God does not exclude

love of the lover but includes it” (157). But Christina Rossetti cannot so easily be turned into an Elizabethan. This is taking the poem too much in abstraction to recognize all the effort she has gone to so that it will seem like deeply felt personal expression. What else is the subtle psychological “backsliding” of the sestet which Rees has noted (157)? The important thing here, the “poetry,” as it were, is not the philosophy but the confrontation of philosophy with personality. This is what pulsates so interestingly through the sequence. To ignore Christina’s “Victorianism,” which we do if we treat her as if she had a twentieth century awareness of the Elizabethan uses of conventions, is to miss her own unique solution to the problem of writing an autobiographical sonnet sequence.

And clearly the tone of the poems is autobiographical in the sense we have been discussing. In spite of the frequent fig leaves plucked from Dante and Petrarch and the archetypal situations which the love affair Christina describes sometimes seems to fit, the situation and feelings in *Monna Innominata* are quite alien to those of any Elizabethan or Italian sequence. The subtle observations and psychology which Christina’s sequence records are as particular and private as anything in *The House of Life*. Unlike the Elizabethans’ and even Dante Rossetti’s sonnets, the sonnets of *Monna Innominata* are not heterogeneous but suggest a definite, tightly constructed plot. Indeed the defined and particular quality of the plot precludes any Elizabethan-style structuring according to conventional situations. And since Christina’s sonnets deal with a more narrow situation than a “journey through the soul,” the broad structuring categories of *The House of Life* will not do either. Christina’s solution, which has all the beauty of a tightly, logically conceived form, is to order her experiences according to the dictates of the sonnet form itself.

It is surprising that critics have not made more of the important subtitle of *Monna Innominata: A Sonnet of Sonnets*. Like the later sequence of twenty-eight sonnets entitled *Later Life: A Double Sonnet of Sonnets*, the full title of *Monna Innominata* suggests that Christina Rossetti consciously structured her sequence as a macro-sonnet, each individual poem fulfilling the logical function of an individual line in a sonnet. As we shall see in going through the poems, this allows for the two broad movements of feeling marked by a “turn” which we expect in a sonnet, while maintaining a sonnet’s general impression of unity. The first eight sonnets (the “octave”) are characterized by a basically optimistic celebration of the speaker’s love. The first three rather naively celebrate the powers of secular love. The next three attempt to reconcile this love with the claims of religious faith. The seventh and eighth sonnets suggest desperate attempts to hold on to love. The “turn” occurs in the ninth sonnet where an insurmountable obstacle to that love is mentioned for the first time. The last six sonnets (the “sestet”) are all concerned in various ways with renunciation and acceptance of the fate of unhappy love. It is into this taut mold that Christina’s alter-ego “donna” has poured the expression of her feelings.

The first sonnet is a breathless celebration of the newly awakened feeling of love and the lover’s blithe dependence on the presence of the beloved:

Come back to me, who wait and watch for you:—  
Or come not yet, for it is over then,  
And long it is before you come again,  
So far between my pleasures are and few.

The speaker displays all the innocent egoism of a youthful lover obsessed completely in the object of her affection:

For one man is my world of all the men  
This wide world holds; O love, my world is you.

The sestet of the sonnet, however, suggests already something of “the pang” that may attend such earthly passion, dependent as it is on requital. John Donne, with the distance of wit, might have written that “Dull sublunary lover’s love / Whose soul is sense / Cannot admit absence,” but Christina, with a more tender feeling, presents the speaker’s subjective mood:

My hope hangs waning, waxing like a moon  
Between the heavenly days on which we meet:  
Ah me, but where are now the songs I sang  
When life was sweet because you called them sweet?

The second sonnet, in what is perhaps a less ambiguous mood of hopeful love, is given over to consideration of the “unrecorded,” unnoticed “first moment of your meeting me.” It would seem that the speaker knew her beloved long before she knew that she was in love with him. She now chides herself for being “so dull to mark the budding of my tree / That would not blossom yet for many a May.” Now she vainly searches her memory to recollect that “day of days. . . that touch, / First touch of hand in hand.” It is worth noting here the private use of seasonal imagery. The use of budding and blossoming as metaphors of youthful love is certainly “the common stock of love poetry,” the familiar vocabulary of many an Elizabethan poet. But unlike Elizabethan poetry, Shakespeare’s sonnets included, the blossoms do not have a generalized, public significance. The budding is “*of my tree*”: its significance is privately perceived and personally expressed. We are not common shareholders of the meaning, but overhear, as it were, the speaker’s own apprehension of it.

Private seasonal images are found also in the third sonnet, which might make an interesting comparison with the “Care-charmer sleep” group of Elizabethan sonnets:

I dream of you, to wake: would that I might  
    Dream of you and not wake but slumber on;  
    Nor find with dreams the dear companion gone,  
As, Summer ended, Summer birds take flight.  
In happy dreams I hold you full in night.  
    I blush again who waking look so wan;  
    Brighter than sunniest day that ever shone,  
In happy dreams your smile makes day of night.  
Thus only in a dream we are at one,  
    Thus only in a dream we give and take  
    The faith that maketh rich who take or give;  
If thus to sleep is sweeter than to wake,  
    To die were surely sweeter than to live,  
Though there be nothing new beneath the sun.

Here, one might think at first, is the old convention of courting sleep so that one might achieve fulfilling love in dreams. Like Astrophil, the speaker is calling on “The baiting place of wit, the balm of woe / The poor man’s wealth, the prisoner’s release,” so that she might, if not Stella’s, at least her own beloved’s “image see.” But Sidney’s jaunty catalogue of Elizabethan paradoxes suggests a very different approach, a very different tone from Christina’s quietly expressed wish to see more of her lover in her dreams. There is nothing of the “brilliant exercise” in the imagery of *Monna Innominata*. A conventional theme is picked up, but it is so personalized as to be

almost unrecognizable as such. There is “nothing new beneath the sun,” as Christina, following *Ecclesiastes*, assures us, but the concerns of lovers are made new by being newly, personally felt and expressed. Indeed she is not far here from the Rilke of *Duineser Elegien* whose lovers renew by reenactment the experiences of all the lovers of the past. This is different, however, from the exercise of a public convention. No Elizabethan working in the “care-charmers” tradition would have taken the “sleep wish,” as Christina does, to its logical conclusion: the “death wish.” This is the extravagant psychological result of her contemplation, and she draws back from it with typical humility in her somewhat playful allusion to *Ecclesiastes*. Her conscience is not lulled.

Indeed the next three sonnets work at creating a more ennobling conception of love capable of being reconciled with her religious faith. The fourth sonnet begins with a playful comparison of their different “loves”:

I loved you first: but afterwards your love,  
Outsoaring mine, sang such a loftier song  
As drowned the friendly cooings of my dove.  
Which owes the other most? My love was long,  
And yours one moment seemed to wax more strong.

But with deeply felt love such comparisons prove ultimately to be odious: “Nay, weights and measures do us both wrong. / For verily love knows not ‘mine’ or ‘thine’. . . / For one is both and both are one in love.” Confident in such love, she addresses him in the fifth sonnet as “my heart’s heart. . . you who are to me / More than myself myself,” and asks that God be with him and keep him “in strong obedience leal and true / To Him whose noble service setteth free.” The reader should note this first, surprisingly late, en-



trance of God in the sequence. It is an effort, completely alien to the Elizabethan temperament, to elevate the almost embarrassingly secular love in the first three sonnets to an acceptable level of piety. For herself, the speaker maps out in typically Victorian fashion a domestic role:

To love you without stint and all I can,  
To-day, to-morrow, world without end;

\* \* \* \* \*

Since woman is the helpmeet made for man.

We have already considered, among other things, the confrontation of philosophy with personality in the sixth sonnet. The nature of this confrontation, its intimate connection with Christina's private concerns should be more clear by now. Rees' paradox, that "love of God does not exclude love of the lover but includes it," is a hard-worn plateau of feeling which the speaker achieves out of *psychological* necessity. It is the culmination of Christina's effort to spiritualize a love first perceived and expressed in secular terms.

The seventh and eighth sonnets bring the movement of the octave to a climax with a somewhat desperate attempt to maintain the equilibrium of the sixth sonnet. In the seventh, Christina proclaims herself and her beloved "happy equals in the flowering land / Of love" that "builds the house on rock and not on sand." In the sestet of the sonnet, however, she recognizes the bravado of this language: "My heart's a coward though my words are brave — / We meet so seldom, yet we surely part / So often." Her only comfort now, a feeble hope perhaps, flapping its tinsel wing, is drawn from her reading of the Bible: "Though jealousy be cruel as the grave, / And death be strong, yet love is strong as death." In the eighth sonnet Christina makes a

last, rather desperate stand for requited love. Interestingly, her inspiration is Esther, who used her feminine wiles to gain the favor of King Ahasuerus and thus to save her people. Esther, a modest virgin devoted to her stepfather, trusts herself to the mysterious working of God's will, and summons the courage to act desperately and uncharacteristically in behalf of that will. It is this courage Christina calls upon:

If I might take my life so in hand,  
And for my love to Love put up my prayer,  
And for love's sake by Love be granted it!

The love that she is granted is not a requited love, however. The ninth sonnet marks the "turn" from happy to unhappy, or better, to unrequited love which will be the principal concern of the final sestet of sonnets.

Thinking of you, and all that was, and all  
That might have been and now can never be,  
I feel your honoured excellence, and see  
Myself unworthy of the happier call:  
For woe is me who walk so apt to fall,  
So apt to shrink afraid, so apt to flee,  
Apt to lie down and die (ah woe is me!)  
Faithless and hopeless turning to the wall.  
And yet not hopeless quite nor faithless quite,  
Because not loveless; love may toil all night,  
But take at morning; wrestle till the break  
Of day, but then wield power with God and man:—  
So take I heart of grace as best I can.  
Ready to spend and be spent for your sake.

If she has lost “the happier call” of requited love, she is still “not hopeless quite nor faithless quite, / Because not loveless.” As Plato was so fond of saying, honor is due not so much to the beloved as to the lover, for the lover has *within himself* the beneficent powers of love. Such a love may indeed “toil all night, / But take at morning.” The allusion in the sestet to Jacob wrestling with the angel is suggestive of the epiphanic quality of the insight gained in the sonnet. Jacob, whatever it is he really wrestled with, faced the depths and came through them: “for I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved” (Genesis 32.30). Christina too has faced what she thought unfaceable and, not unmarked, not unwounded, has come out with her life preserved.

The last five sonnets chart, as it were, the psychology of loss and renunciation. The tenth sonnet, following hard on the “wrestling” of the ninth and suggestive of a natural psychological backsliding, expresses the speaker’s world weariness after her loss:

Time flies, hope flags, life plies a wearied wing;  
Death following hard on life gains ground apace.

Though “faith runs with each” and indeed “outruns the rest,” the speaker no longer looks for happiness in earthly love but in an afterlife:

Let us go fall asleep, dear friend, in peace:  
A little while, and age and sorrow cease;  
A little while, and life reborn annuls  
Loss and decay and death, and all is love.

The speaker is “all air and fire,” leaving as it were her body to the baser elements. This mood is heightened in the beautiful eleventh sonnet.

Many in aftertimes will say of you  
    ‘He loved her’ — while of me what will they say?  
Not that I loved you more than just in play,  
For fashion’s sake as idle women do.  
Even let them prate; who knows not what we knew  
    Of love and parting in exceeding pain,  
    Of parting hopeless here to meet again,  
Hopeless on earth, and heaven is out of view.  
But by my heart of love laid bare to you,  
    My love that you can make not void nor vain,  
Love that foregoes you but to claim anew  
Beyond this passage of the gate of death,  
    I charge you at the Judgment make it plain  
My love of you was life and not a breath.

Here the notion of Platonic love, already suggested earlier, is given full expression. On the strength of a philosophy grounded in personal faith, Christina makes claims for her love, defeated in earthly terms, which yet exceeds the narrow boundaries of mortal life. From the perspective of eternity, her love surely will be justified.<sup>5</sup> In this confident frame of mind, she is able to accept (in the twelfth sonnet) without grudging it someone who might take her place in her lover’s eyes:

If there be any one can take my place  
    And make you happy whom I grieve to grieve,  
    Think not that I can grudge it, but believe  
I do commend you to that nobler grace,  
That readier wit than mine, that sweeter face.

One might reasonably look for irony in this, but if there is any it is subsumed in the overriding power of Christina's unrequited love: "since your riches make me rich, conceive / I too am crowned, while bridal crowns I weave." Her love is selfless, and in this lies her power to overcome adversity:

since the heart is yours that was mine own,  
Your pleasure is my pleasure, right my right,  
Your honourable freedom makes me free,  
And you companioned I am not alone.<sup>6</sup>

The last two sonnets bring the macro-sonnet to its logical conclusion, the thirteenth concerned primarily with the fate of the beloved, the fourteenth with Christina herself. In the thirteenth sonnet, she trusts herself finally to God: "If I could trust mine own self with your fate, / Shall I not rather trust it in God's hand?" After a Job-like catalogue of His qualities, she finds herself seeing through a mirror dimly, with

only love and love's goodwill  
Helpless to help and impotent to do,  
Of understanding dull, of sight most dim.

All she can do now is commend her beloved "back to Him / Whose love your love's capacity can fill." With this she dismisses the beloved, and in the fourteenth sonnet she turns at last to consider her own fate:

Youth gone, and beauty gone if ever there  
Dwelt beauty in so poor a face as this;  
Youth gone and beauty, what remains of bliss?  
I will not bind fresh roses in my hair,  
To shame a cheek at best but little fair,—

Leave youth his roses, who can bear a thorn,—  
I will not seek for blossoms anywhere,  
Except such common flowers as blow with corn.  
Youth gone and beauty gone, what doth remain?  
The longing of a heart pent up forlorn,  
A silent heart whose silence loves and longs;  
The silence of a heart which sang its songs  
While youth and beauty made a summer morn,  
Silence of love that cannot sing again.

In another age this beautiful poem might have been called “A Farewell to Cupid.” But unlike the sonnets of renunciation by Fulke-Greville or Drayton, it does not vanquish its mistress with a conceit or a convention. After the mood of philosophical exultation, she is left finally, her youth and beauty gone the way of all youth and beauty, with her private sorrow: “The longing of a heart pent up forlorn, / A silent heart whose silence loves and longs; . . . Silence of love that cannot sing again.”

The reader should note here the effect Christina Rossetti gains through one of her favorite devices in *Monna Innominata*, the repetition of key words and phrases. Apart from lending a feeling of unity to the individual sonnets and the sequence as a whole, this repetition suggests the hypnotic murmur of a mind talking to itself, which we as readers, taking our cue from Mill, must overhear. The substance of the poetry, its characteristic mode of expression is thus confessional. In this, as we have seen, it is fairly typical of its age. What is not typical is Christina’s way of structuring her sonnet sequence in an age which had effectively lost touch with the conventions of the Elizabethans. The “sonnet of sonnets” or macro-sonnet furnishes her with a

tighter, more logical structure than either the loose conventional sequences of the Elizabethans or her own brother's loosely epiphanic "journey through his own soul." Indeed, the macro-sonnet solves the problem of whether the sonnet should be conceived as an intense individual lyric (the form favored by romantic idolaters of Milton) or the strophic constituent of a much longer work (the form suggested by Elizabethan practice). The individual sonnets of *Monna Innominata*, unlike the romantic sonnets of Wordsworth and Keats or even the individual poems of *The House of Life*, do not stand on their own as individual lyric poems; but neither are they episodic constituents of a long, rambling sequence in the manner of the Elizabethans. Taken together they form an intensely unified lyric whole. And they must be so taken.

Notes

<sup>1</sup> Though Plato doubted the ultimate reality of the world of the senses, he did not doubt our ability to know and make judgments about that world. Though we are playing with mere shadows of reality, we are playing *with* them nonetheless; their existence outside ourselves, however faulty, is accepted without question. (Indeed, some of us like V. Nabokov, who do not much care for “reality,” prefer the cave with its shadows.) Cartesian epistemology, neither Platonic nor Nabokovian, does not allow this.

<sup>2</sup> According to some estimates, the neo-Petrarchan poets are said to have produced about 300,000 examples of the form in the sixteenth century alone (see Lee xix).

<sup>3</sup> Langbaum has argued that the dramatic monologue was in fact conceived “as a reaction against the romantic confessional style” (79).

<sup>4</sup> Quoted by Lona Mark Packer (229) whose 1963 biography created something of a stir by claiming that William was in fact shielding Christina in making this assertion (225). Packer’s own candidate is William Bell Scott, whose marriage to Alice Boyd at the time of Christina Rossetti’s first Penkill visit presented in her opinion a more formidable, more traditional, and less respectable obstacle than any opposition to Cayley’s religious views (226). It should be noted however that more recent critics such as Battiscombe have refused to take Packer’s argument quite seriously. Like the controversy about Shakespeare’s sonnets, it appears that the mysterious identity of Christina’s “suitor” is not easily solvable. The fact that even William considered such an identification necessary, however, is itself an indication of the age’s pre-occupation with autobiographical poetry.



<sup>5</sup> On some other occasion it might be amusing to compare closely this subtle poem with Elizabeth Barrett Browning's often anthologized "How do I love thee? Let me count the ways." One is of sad love, the other of happy; one is the product of a woman of deep faith, the other of a woman whose saints are all "lost"; one is written in a quietly meditative style, the other in a burst of rhetoric. Yet what they have both in common is the conviction that the best poetry springs from the sincere expression of personal feeling, that the way to poetry lies through the self.

<sup>6</sup> The language here might bear comparison with that of the Elizabethans, particularly Donne in *The Holy Sonnets*. Indeed, paradoxes seem a basic religious mode of expression, and Christina's mood here, like Donne's, is steeped in religious feeling. One might note, however, that the personal form of address Donne reserved for his conversations with God is here applied to Christina's beloved. This brings into question whether the sonnets are conceived as actual addresses to the beloved or interior meditations. We remember that according to the notion of the "two audiences," Elizabethan sonnets supposedly addressed to a "lady" were in fact aimed at the same time at a public audience of courtly readers. This double motive may be detected through close observance of the many ironies, poses, and public conventions that inform the Elizabethan texts. Christina's sonnets pose a more difficult problem. The beloved is clearly not a paper figure, and there is no evidence that she is winking at a wider audience at the same time. If they are fancifully addressed to him, then they have the quality of a private meditation, like Donne perhaps, but most unlike Sidney.

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At Home With Generations:  
A Study of the Poetry and Prose of Wendell Berry

The consideration of contemporary American poetry brings immediately to mind such terms as diversity and plenitude, if not indeed, overabundance. Reviewing the many anthologies of the fifties and sixties, one notices not so much an emerging canon of recent poetry as the many new camps of modern poets, often armed, rival, and conflicting. One is tempted to say, paraphrasing Yeats, that the only thing certain of these poets is that they are too many. What is surprising is that so many of these poets were trained at a time when the teaching of poetry, guided by the New Critics, had as much homogeneity as at any time in recent history. It is not an overstatement to say that *Understanding Poetry*, the famous Brooks and Warren textbook, charmed an entire generation of aspiring poets with the theories and predilections (and indeed the prejudices) of the New Criticism. There seemed at last to be something approaching a consensus about how the poetry of the past was to be read, and how the poetry of the future should be written.

What Brooks and Warren called for were individual, “well-made” lyrics, emphasizing paradox and irony, and drawing for inspiration on the Elizabethans by way of Yeats and T.S. Eliot. Such poems were to be “impersonal” and coherent in themselves—that is, apart from any recourse to literary history or some other discipline not properly within the scope of literary study. What one might call the poet’s “public” responsibilities were to be determined solely within the context of such literary study. Brooks and Warren made little secret of their preference for poems whose first ambition was to “work” as poetry, and only then to be of significance to the larger concerns of life. *Understanding Poetry* speaks of the “poem” in terms of a modern, organic trope emphasizing its coherence:

Certainly it is not to be thought of as a group of *mechani-*

*cally* combined elements—meter, rhyme, figurative language, idea, and so on—put together to make a poem as bricks are put together to make a wall. The relationship among the elements in a poem is what is all important; it is not a mechanical relationship but one which is far more intimate and fundamental. If we must compare a poem to the make-up of some physical object it ought not to be to a wall but to something organic like a plant. (16)

Obviously, it is unfair of Robert Bly to describe the New Critics' approach as "the Tate-Ransom nostalgia for jails," an attempt "to construct poetry machines, so that even people with no imagination can write it"(163). But at the same time such comments, here in Bly's typically extreme fashion, are representative of the frustration many of the poets working in the sixties began to feel.

Indeed, much of the poetry of the sixties is to be understood in terms of the various escape routes different poets found from the enchantment of *Understanding Poetry*. Thus, we find the "Beat" poets, such as Ferlinghetti, Ginsberg, and Corso using blatantly "open" forms and reveling in the lifestyle of an "adversary" culture. There is also the "deep imagery" school, poets like Bly, Merwin, Wright, and the later Roethke, flirting with the unconscious via surrealism (especially a variety from Spain and Latin America). One might also instance the so-called "confessional" poets, such as Robert Lowell, Plath, and Berryman, who take the romantic autobiographical impulse to an extreme degree. Even poets such as Merrill, Rich, and Wilbur, who seemed more comfortable than most with the closed, ironic forms of the New Critics, have sought through sequences, long poems, and



*outré* subject matter to break free of the isolation of the well-made poem.

The subject of this essay, Wendell Berry, grows out of the New Criticism also, but he has developed in his own ways. Increasingly, he has come to emphasize in his poetry a sense of history and place, the seeking of roots, a refusal to consider literature apart from the larger concerns of life. Among other things, this humanistic element has given him an interesting “prose side” rare among contemporary poets. At a time when “literary intellectuals” have often retreated from a serious role in the affairs of the world, Berry has remained a moralist with the high aspirations of a Victorian sage: the ambition, with literature as his vehicle, to discover and chart out a decent, sane, meaningful life in a world seemingly indecent, insane, absurd. Indeed, Berry is the kind of poet who finds the creation of good literature concomitant with and inseparable from the creation of a good life.

The invention of such a poetic self, at once vatic and sane, is by no means an easy one. For Berry it has been a matter of strenuous honesty about the self and searching development as a poet and thinker in areas where the fashionable poetics of his youth offered neither guidance nor sway. With the recent publication of *The Collected Poems of Wendell Berry: 1957-1982*, we are able to chart this development for the first time within the confines of a single volume and gain some measure of the magnitude of his struggle and achievement as a poet.

Berry was born on August 5, 1934 in Henry County, Kentucky, and as a boy was taught to farm near the place he has since fixed as his home, Port Royal. He attended the University of Kentucky, where he received an A.B. degree in 1956 and an M.A. one year later. In 1957 he married Tanya Amyx, and in 1958, having received the Wallace Stegner Fellowship, he and his

wife moved to Stanford. This marks the beginning of what one might call Berry's "worldly" period: an extended time during which he led the typically rootless life of a promising urban academic. From 1958 to 1960 Berry remained in California as a fellowship recipient and then a lecturer before a Guggenheim Fellowship allowed him to visit Italy and France in 1961 and 1962. From 1962 to 1964 he taught at New York University, directing the freshman writing program. In 1964, however, he accepted a position on the faculty of the University of Kentucky at Lexington, and a year later he moved with his wife and two children to Lanes Landing Farm, a small piece of land he had bought at Port Royal. This place, with which his family had been associated since the early nineteenth century, has been Berry's home ever since. For a number of years he lived and wrote there while pursuing a successful academic career in Lexington, rising to distinguished professor of English in 1971 and Professor of English in 1973. In 1977 he quit teaching to devote himself to writing and farming. He has come to emphasize more and more his life as a farmer, however, as the dust jacket of his recent volume of essays, *Standing by Words*, will attest: "Wendell Berry lives and farms with his family in Kentucky." Indeed, much of his philosophy is summed up in these words.

## II

Berry's typical themes grow out of his acute sense of the corruption of our culture. It is audible in his prose pieces as early as *The Long-Legged House* (1969) and has been persistently sounded ever since. *The Unsettling of America* (1977), a hard hitting critique of the policies of former Secretary of Agriculture Earl L. Butz, contains some of Berry's clearest articulations of this theme. The dominant spirit of American history, from the conquista-

dors through the whole series of “gold rushes” to the recent conquest of the moon, he finds a “mixture of fantasy and avarice”(3). The people who embodied this spirit, whether they styled themselves “seekers for El Dorado” or “missionaries” or “reachers for the stars,” were actually the victims of a permanent state of dissatisfaction. They were never satisfied with a place on earth, but were always seeking “somewhere farther on”(3)—that is, after having exploited and impoverished the place where they had been.

In a sort of counterpoint to this tendency, however, there has always been another, weaker one according to Berry: “the tendency to stay put, to say, ‘No farther. This is the place.’” This tendency, the older one which characterized the native Indian cultures of America, had the flaw, however, of being “less glamorous, certainly less successful”(4). But even though “the first and greatest American revolution ... was the coming of people who did NOT look upon the land as a homeland”(4), the expanding frontier always left behind a few who did want to stay put.

Exploitation by the dominant group was not limited to the Indians, however. Berry argues that a “consistently operative” law of American history “is that the members of any *established* people or group or community sooner or later become ‘redskins’—that is, they become the designated victims of an utterly ruthless, officially sanctioned and subsidized exploitation”(4). Thus the colonists who exploited the Indians were themselves exploited by imperial governments; the independent farmers who in a sense succeeded them were “exploited by, and recruited into, the the industrial society”(5) to the point of virtual extinction. Indeed, the only alternative to “this destiny of exploitation” was making it “into the class of exploiters” where one remained “so specialized and so ‘mobile’ as to be unconscious of the effects

of one's life or livelihood" (5).

Against these exploiters, whose characteristic type is the modern "strip-miner," Berry sets what he calls "the nurturer," whose model is "the old-fashioned idea or ideal of the farmer"(7). Whereas the exploiter seeks only money and profit, "the nurturer's goal is health—his land's health, his own, his family's, his community's, his country's"(7). The nurturer, unlike the exploiter, does not pose as an "expert"; rather, his "competence" is in "a human order ... that accommodates itself both to other order and to mystery"(8). As we shall see, this notion of the antagonism of exploiter and nurturer informs Berry's ideas of work, poetry, life, and religion. And it animates his development as a creative writer.

A chapter in *The Unsettling of America* entitled "The Body and the Earth" considers the consequences of exploitation for modern society and modern work, "the life of the body in this world"(97). Exploitative contempt for the earth leads naturally to contempt for and exploitation of our bodies, which are "joined inextricably both to the soil and to the bodies of other living creatures"(97). The damaging result of this attitude and the belief in "the specialist system" that accompanies it has been an isolation of the body from the activities and life of the world:

at some point we began to assume that the life of the body would be the business of grocers and medical doctors, who need no interest in the spirit, whereas the life of the spirit would be the business of churches, which have at best only a negative interest in the body. In the same way we began to see nothing wrong with putting the body...to a task that insulated the mind and demeaned the spir-

it.(104)

This divisive attitude brings with it abuse, exploitation, and contempt for “other bodies for the greater good or comfort of our own”(104). In Berry’s conservative though somewhat unorthodox religious view (see Pevear), it is a sin thus to set the soul “against the body, to thrive at the body’s expense”(105). For under these conditions what Berry conceives as “spiritual value” can no longer have a practical or worldly force(105). In opposition to the orthodoxies of both religion and capitalism, Berry maintains that “you cannot devalue the body and value the soul—or value anything else....The world is seen and dealt with [under this view], not as an ecological community, but as a stock exchange, the ethics of which are based on the tragically misnamed ‘law of the jungle’...a basic fallacy of modern culture”(105). The law of competition thus reigns and results in “sexual division” (making nurture “the exclusive concern of women”(113)), “the dismemberment of the household” (“the isolation of sexuality” through “the lore of sexual romance and capitalist economics”(117)), and the abstraction of work from any meaningful relation to the earth.

Indeed, Berry has written often on the joyless activity of modern work. Through increasing specialization and a loss of contact with the soil that feeds us, our work has become increasingly sterile, technological, and lacking in significant human contact. In *The Gift of Good Land* (1981), contemplating the appeal of two modern advertisements, Berry writes of

the widespread, and still spreading, assumption that we somehow have the right to be set free from anything whatsoever that we “hate” or don’t want to do. According to this view, what we want to be set free from are the

natural conditions of the world and the necessary work of human life.... Implicit in all this is the desire to be free from the “hassles” of mortality, to be “safe” from the life cycle.(184)

But life and work outside the life cycle are neither pleasurable, nor interesting, nor, in an essential sense, practical. As Berry puts it, “when people begin to ‘hate’ the life cycle and to try to live outside it and to escape its responsibilities, then the corpses begin to pile up and get into the wrong places”(186). As a society we pay the high price of sterility and pollution, for “the only real way...to escape the hassles of earthly life—is to die”(185).

Berry is hopeful, however, that a life-giving sense of work is at least marginally recoverable through the actions of individuals, those who have “turned off the road that leads to ‘Midland City, U.S.A.’ [a futuristic projection of life in 2001]. They are the home gardeners, the homesteaders, the city people who have returned to farming, the people of all kinds who have learned to do pleasing and necessary work with their hands”(180). They are the people who have learned, as Berry puts it in *The Unsettling of America*, that “the ‘drudgery’ of growing one’s own food...is not drudgery at all.(If we make the growing of food a drudgery, which is what ‘agribusiness’ does make of it, then we also make a drudgery of eating and of living.) It is...a sacrament, as eating is also, by which we enact and understand our oneness with the Creation, the conviviality of one body with all bodies”(138). By realizing this, we can restore “the connections [that] have been broken by the fragmentation and isolation of work,” and recover a “good work” which “*is* living, and a way of living” and “is one of the forms and acts of love”(138,139).

Berry's practical and many-sided notion of "fidelity" plays an important role in maintaining the cultural continuity of the body and the soil. According to Berry, "a purposeless virtue is a contradiction in terms" (*Unsettling of America* 121), and thus fidelity, like any other virtue, must have a practical basis. In the context of marriage, for instance, fidelity should not be seen as "a grim, literal duty enforced only by willpower" (120), but the provider of a responsible use of sexual energy, "the necessary discipline of sexuality" (122), without which "irresponsible sexuality would undermine any possibility of culture" (122). Fidelity unites a man and woman not only with themselves but with the community around them. The responsibility it entails is thus a "sexual responsibility toward all others" (*Unsettling of America* 122), and indeed a responsibility toward the natural order which encloses the community of men. This suggests the analogous forms of fidelity to the household and one's place in the world:

Fidelity to human order...if it is fully responsible, implies fidelity also to natural order. Fidelity to human order makes devotion possible. Fidelity to natural order preserves the possibility of choice, the possibility of the renewal of devotion.... One who returns home—to one's marriage and household and place in the world—desiring anew what was previously chosen, is neither the world's stranger nor its prisoner, but is at once in place and free. (130,131)

This notion of marital fidelity and its analogues, centered in the paradox of the last phrase, is of great importance in Berry's life and poetry. In retrospect, the central act of his life seems to have been his decision to leave his

teaching post in New York and return to Kentucky. This has allowed him, as he puts it in “A Native Hill” (1969), to grow “more alive and more conscious than [he] had ever been” (*Recollected Essays* 79) and to experience the paradoxical joy fidelity brings: “the possibility of moments when what we have chosen and what we desire are the same” (*Unsettling of America* 122).

Berry’s philosophy has an unusual coherence: his ideas about a variety of topics generally considered the domain of specialists (e.g. agriculture, religion, sexuality and marriage, poetry) all have their basis in a harmonious principle of man’s place in the world. In *Standing by Words* (1983), he describes this philosophy as “a system of nested systems: the individual human within the family within the community within agriculture within nature”(46). This “updated, ecological version of the Great Chain of Being”(46,47) is kept in a very delicate balance, however, dependent on the disciplined submission of each system to the next larger one. The discipline, or rather disciplines involved here are the fibers of human culture and “must be deliberately made, remembered, taught, learned, and practiced”(47). In our society, the system of systems is in a virtual state of disintegration because of a reversal of the hierarchy, which Berry compares to the Greek notion of *hubris*. Modern man, like Milton’s Satan, is guilty “of attempting to rise and take power above [his] proper place”(47). In doing so he falls victim to specializations of various sorts as the connecting disciplines of the system of systems “degenerate into professions, professions into careers”(47). Thus our specialized “external” accountings (such as the report of two agricultural writers applauding the transformation of the dairy cow from a “family companion animal” to an “appropriate manufacturing unit of the twentieth century”(44)), by upsetting the hierarchies, fail “to consider



all the necessary considerations”(47)—that is, other than those of greed. The accounting of the two farm “experts,” for instance, ignores “the claims of family, community, and nature” and leaves “the outer circle [nature]... “under the control of simple greed”(48).

Berry outlines three kinds of interests involved in the system of systems: “ontogenetic,” “phylogenetic,” and “ecogenetic,” which represent respectively self-interest at the center, humanistic interest reaching through family and community into agriculture, and “the interest of the whole ‘household’ in which life is lived”(48). The special vulnerability of the system of systems is “that the higher interests can be controlled or exploited by the lower interests”(48) through a willful reversal of the necessary hierarchies. It is here that religion has its place in the scheme of things. Left to his own ignorance or devices, man has the brute power to distort and thus disrupt the “earthly” elements of the system of systems. Like the aether of the medieval imagination, religion encloses the system of systems “within mystery, in which some truth can be known, but never all truth”(49). Standing protectively above and outside the ecocentric part of the hierarchy, it provides an “interest of some kind above the ecocentric”(49), beyond the willful and ignorant reach of man. According to Berry, “the practical use of religion...is to keep the accounting in as large a context as possible....Religion forces the accountant to reckon with mystery”(49). This insures that any “answers” will be subject to the human limits of humility and restraint, which are essential conditions of man’s place in the world. Thus “a reliable account is personal at the beginning and religious at the end”(50,51); it associates man in a properly respectful way with the larger structures and the ultimate mystery surrounding him.

Berry maintains that “this kind of accounting gives us the great structures of poetry—as in Homer, Dante, and Milton”(51). And in what is perhaps a *raison d’etre* for his own work, Berry writes that in our day “ecological insight proposes again a poetry with the power to imagine the lives of animals and plants and streams and stones. And this imagining is eminently propri- etous, fitting to the claims and privileges of the great household”(51). Thus it is possible to find life interesting even without “nuclear powerplants or ‘agri-industries’ or space adventures,” the “big technological solu- tions”(51). As he does so often in his writing about farming, Berry opposes what he calls “the elaborations of elegance” to the less practical and more glamorous “elaborations of power”(51). He applies the antidote of a “nur- turer” to the poison of exploitation. Against the technological fantasies of R. Buckminster Fuller, which cannot stand by their words because they lack any firm sense of man’s special place in the universe (Berry compares them to the boasts of Milton’s Satan (57)), Berry sets his own religious sense of man’s place and security in the world around him.

One of the most important ingredients of Berry’s sense of man’s place in the world, indeed of his religion, is his acceptance of death. As Speer Mor- gan has demonstrated, Berry’s writing about death has moved increasingly away from abstract confrontation with an “enemy” toward acceptance of death as a part of the whole of life(“Wendell Berry: A Fatal Singing”). Ac- cording to Morgan, “Berry is learning to ‘conquer’ the opponent by cooper- ating with it fully;...he learns to “‘oppose’ death with such grace that he dances with it”(873). Certainly his recent elegies, such as the “Requiem” and “Elegy” for Owen Flood in *The Wheel* (1982), exhibit impressive “grace” and mature depth of feeling we do not find so readily in his earlier attempts in this genre. But putting detailed considerations of the poetry aside



(*Poems 111-112*)

Indeed, this is a spiritual discipline of the life of a farmer, of life maintained in contact with the land. The ground is broken, we remember, for burial as for planting. For Berry, this fact has more than the force of simple metaphor. Marriage to the land, fidelity to a place in the world, involves necessarily the acceptance of death. It is an ineluctable part of accepting one's place in the "system of systems." And it is, for Berry, the condition of our salvation.

In *The Unsettling of America* he quotes a farmer as saying that "without death and rot there can be no new life"(193). This echoes, he notes, a principle "as old and exalted as the Bible: 'Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit'"(193). Always heterodox, Berry often harmonizes biblical quotations like this with passages from other very different cultures. In an earlier essay "Discipline and Hope"(1972), for instance, he quotes from a medicine rite of the Winnebago Indians: "Our father has ordained that my body shall fall to pieces. I am earth. Our father has ordained that there should be death, lest otherwise there be too many people and not enough food for them"(*Recollected Essays* 198). This passage, which recognizes that "if there is to be having there must also be giving up"(198), is typical of Berry's cyclical sense of time as opposed to the linear vision of time favored by traditional Christianity. And here too Berry matches it with a passage from the Bible:

Because death is inescapable, a biological and ecological necessity, its acceptance becomes a spiritual obligation, the only means of making life whole: "Whosoever shall seek to save his life shall lose it; and whosoever shall lose his life shall preserve it." (*Recollected Essays* 199)

Indeed, it is in Berry's favoring of the cyclical vision of time that much of the lack of orthodoxy that so incenses Richard Pevear lies. Pevear objects to these lines on the grounds that Berry does not feel constrained by their specifically Christian reference, and accuses Berry of making "a 'religion' of his cause"(346). This judgment is rather narrow-minded, however, based seemingly on the notion that official Christianity can have a "fee simple" ownership of its texts and has a right to censor unorthodox interpretations of those texts. Berry is conservative, but he is not a backward-looking dreamer like Miniver Cheevy. Very much a man of our troubled century, he has never pretended to the orthodoxy of official religion. (One should add that he has never pretended to any sort of radical *chic* either.) Indeed, he has argued against official religion's disdain for the body as something ultimately corruptive of man's respect for nature. And we have seen that he prefers the cyclical notion of time held typically by "primitive" religions to the linear vision of time enshrined in Christian dogma. In this latter preference, one might add, Berry has much in common with many poets, mythological scholars, and religious thinkers of our century (including T.S. Eliot — the poet, if not the religious thinker) who grew up in the shade of *The Golden Bough*. But the core of Berry's thought is nonetheless profoundly religious, profoundly respectful of the ultimate mystery of the universe. Like E.F. Schumacher, Berry draws for inspiration on the texts and practices of many religions that have helped sustain man in a permanent and symbiotic relation with the world around him, and fights against all those tendencies in our culture, even some rooted in religious theory, which undermine this relation.

### III

In effect, Berry's first principle is respect for nature, the systems of sys-

tems enclosed in the mystery of creation, and this underlies even his theory of poetry. *Standing by Words* contains the most complete exposition of Berry's ideas on language and poetry and their relation to the rest of his philosophy. Modern poetry, like virtually everything else in modern life, is a victim of the tendency toward specialization. Like any other "specialist," the modern poet "withdraws from responsibility for everything not comprehended by his specialty" (*Standing by Words* 4). Berry notes that certain poets of our century, such as Yeats, MacDairmid, and Pound, have sought "larger responsibilities" of one sort or another, but he argues that "it remains true that the poet is isolated and specialized and that the old union of beauty, goodness, and truth is broken" (5). The very familiarity of this statement suggests how deeply it has penetrated our romantic, modern, and post-modern conceptions of the poetic craft. For Berry, the problem stems from the old doctrine "of the primacy of language and the primacy of poetry" (7). The specialized poets have made their art into a kind of "religion based not on what they have in common with other people, but on what they *do* that sets them apart" (7). A poem conceived in this way does not seek to make connections with the outside world or with readers. Similarly, it is not "an adventure into any [outside] reality or mystery" (7). What it does seek is merely the "self in words, the making of a word-world in which the word-self may be at home" (7). In place of the Aristotelian notion of the poet as a "mirror of nature," we now have poets for whom the world is simply "the poet's mirror" (8). According to Berry, this explains much of the "personal terror and suffering and fear of death" in modern poetry, for a world of mere words "gives to one's own suffering and death the force of cataclysm" (8).

Berry firmly believes, however, that the real "subject of poetry is not words, it is the world, which poets have in common with other people" (8).

This enjoins even the most spiritual of poets (among whom Berry classes Yeats) “to turn outward”(8). Berry compares “putting exclusive emphasis upon a world of words” to organized religion’s “putting exclusive emphasis upon heaven”(9). Both abet the degradation of the world and their respective disciplines, for “renunciation of the world may sustain religious or poetic fervor for a while, but sooner or later it becomes suicidal”(9). Indeed, the exclusive emphasis on language has a very negative effect on what Berry calls literacy in general, for the writer, freed from the requirement to experience something of life and the world, becomes a mere tinkerer with words. Berry mentions with some scorn, for instance, the presumption of John Dean III that he could be a writer simply because he enjoyed playing Scrabble(9). A more responsible view “would see words as fulcrums across which intelligence must endlessly be weighed against experience”(9). Berry has little patience even with such generally well regarded writers as Mark Strand, Adrienne Rich, and William Matthews, who seem either to eschew all traditional forms, or to court a form of chaos (10-12). According to Berry, such fashionable “formlessness is... neither civilized nor natural. It is a peculiarly human evil, without analogue in nature, caused by the failures of civilization: inattention, irresponsibility, carelessness, ignorance of consequence. It is the result of the misuse of power”(12). Although not a Marxist, Berry seems close at times to such critics as Raymond Williams (see Steven Weiland) and Terry Eagleton in insisting on a public role for literature, and if not its submission to a politicized “solidarity,” at least its acceptance of fidelity to the world and the community of men which are its proper subject and audience. Berry’s insistence on a public role for literature is not a new idea. Indeed, it has an almost Victorian flavor. What is new is the way Berry wields such an idea in the mid twentieth century. It is part of a reaction against the “well-

made” poetry of the fifties, which tended, among other things to be politely, decorously apolitical. Such reactions were fairly common among poets of the sixties (one thinks, for instance, of the “protest poetry” of Bly), but Berry is unique in the extent to which he develops his idea theoretically and raises it above the level of mere protest.

According to Berry, two important elements of recent poetry’s withdrawal from a public role are its lack of song, “a force opposed to specialty and to isolation”(17), and its “estrangement from storytelling”(17). The modern poet who sings only to himself (i.e., does not really sing at all in an important sense) lapses “diffidently into a ‘not overly excited discourse’ on the subject of isolation, guilt, suffering, death, and oblivion —the self-exploiting autobiography of disconnected sensibility”(16). Similarly, when poets like Galway Kinnell speak “of the suppression of narrative as a goal... it is indicative of a serious lack of interest, first, in action, and second, in *responsible* action”(18-19). This is very important to Berry, for losing “sight of the possibility of right or responsible action”(19) is the cause, he feels, of the present malaise “in our art and in our lives”(19). According to Berry, much of recent poetry, like “the other specialized disciplines of our era,” has been nurtured on and in turn has “fostered... a grievous division between life and work”(21) which we must do our best to balance and repair, even while respecting the necessary “tension between them”(22). As Berry puts it, “the *use* of life to perfect work is an evil of the specialized intellect. It makes of the most humane of disciplines an exploitive industry”(22).

#### IV

Like his growth as a philosopher and critic, Berry’s development as a poet has been continual and impressive. The earliest poems are earnest but



rather “literary” in the accepted fashion of the 1950’s and early 1960’s, a time when most young American poets were bred on the “New Criticism” as encountered in *Understanding Poetry* and its imitators. Indeed, Berry credits *Understanding Poetry*, the text in one of his freshman classes, with having “taught [him] to read” (Letter 19 April 1986). It is a debt he still does not disown, though his own poetry has since moved beyond the strictly literary. Like so many other poets of his time however, Berry began with generally “well-made” lyrics, local in their effects and isolated in their independence. The poems written during his sojourn away from Kentucky are also very much poems of “exile,” ironic worlds of words to protect the writer’s sensibility from the hostile and alien environment of the city:

In the empty lot—a place  
not natural, but wild—among  
the trash of human absence,  
the slough and shamble  
of the city’s seasons, a few  
old locusts bloom. (“The Wild,”  
*Poems 19*)

The poet-speaker is very much the stranger here bearing witness to the degradation of the modern industrial world:

Washed into the doorway  
by the wake of the traffic,  
he wears humanity  
like a third-hand shirt  
—blackened with enough  
of Manhattan’s dirt to sprout

a tree, or poison one.  
His empty hand has led him  
where he has come to.  
Our differences claim us.  
He holds out his hand,  
in need of all that's mine.  
("The Guest,"

*Poems 23)*

Indeed, Berry has never "outgrown" the theme of the evils of the modern world. But he was not long content to express himself in the manner of such poems as "The Wild" and "The Guest."

For one thing, after his return to Kentucky, urban poetry faded almost completely from Berry's work. Ironical and ineffectual protest against the conditions of industrialism gave way to a more active interest in and appreciation of the beauties of the country and, increasingly, the farm life of his rural home. In this emphasis on farm life, as Speer Morgan has suggested, Berry is to be distinguished from both the English Romantics and the American Transcendentalists, who were more interested in contemplating wild nature than in considering the all too familiar "rootedness and 'drudgery' of an occupation like farming"(868). (Indeed concern with active use of the land lies at the root of Berry's differences with the Sierra Club.) Berry himself has commented on the fallacy of the Romantic's "wish to escape into nature," which is really only "a poetic way of wishing to be spirit"(*Standing by Words* 168). According to Berry, such a wish actually suggests the poet's alienation from nature and The Great Chain of Being, for only when "poets began to feel exiled from nature ... did they begin to envy skylarks, [or] wish to fade into the forest with nightingales"(167). The traditional alternative

has been rather to live with animals within the hierarchy of nature, wishing neither to be animals nor gods (167-168).

The life of the farm became so important for Berry's poetry because it offered images not of nature emptied of humans, but of humans living in nature in their proper place in the hierarchy of nature, the system of systems. With the exception of a brief period in the late 1960's of writing "protest poetry" based on what he now considers a misguided belief that such protest would enlarge poetry's "effective range and influence" (*Standing by Words* 4), Berry has devoted himself in his poetry to consideration of the history and rural life of his farm.<sup>1</sup>

In following thus his own way home, Berry has made his poetry increasingly free of the literary commonplaces of our age, and ever richer in its metaphoric reference. As Michael Hamburger has noted, "all his work in verse and prose is sustained by a pervasive vision, as much ethical as aesthetic" (70). In the later poems especially, Berry's themes and metaphors recall the entire range of his philosophy on the level of personally felt experience. In the last volume of the *Collected Poems*, *The Wheel* (1982), these elements are woven together with stunning intricacy and the accurate perceptiveness of an "eye that hath kept watch o'er man's mortality." To see this more clearly, we will now consider in detail one of these themes, the theme of death, as Berry has developed it over the course of his career. Berry's poems about death are particularly important because they gather up so many of his central themes. Concern with death, for instance, involves concern with the dead and thus concern with history and place. One of Berry's most important metaphors involves the linking of past and future generations through their common working of the land. As we remember, Berry has

found his greatest joy in returning to farmland settled and worked by his forbears, and this return has focused his interest in farming and local history. Much of his farm writing, as well as his poetry, involves contemplating the “elegant” methods of the old farmers, his literal and spiritual ancestors. And, of course, farming provides Berry with the central metaphor of the cycle of life and death.

Berry’s writings about death are prominent throughout his work, though the treatment differs interestingly in his earlier and his later poems. *The Broken Ground* (1964), for instance, exhibits something approaching an obsession with death, but for the most part it is death experienced and dealt with in abstract terms. Although the poems are youthfully vigorous and promising, they are still very much aware of “literary” antecedents. For example, “A Man Walking and Singing” includes an almost Rilkean personification of the speaker’s death:

We take form within our death, the figures  
emerging like shadows in fire.

Who is it? speaking to me of death’s beauty.

I think it is my own black angel, as near me  
as my flesh. I am never divided from his darkness,  
his face the black mask of my face. My eyes  
live in his black eye-holes. On his black wings  
I rise to sing...

\*       \*       \*       \*       \*

I know they know as surely as I live my death  
exists, and has my shape.

*(Poems 11-12)*

One might almost wonder if this does not attribute to the speaker's "own suffering and death the force of cataclysm." There is certainly something youthful and "literary" about it. One should note, for instance, the Eliotic cadences with their "dying falls," and the frequent withholding of the caesura (in Eliot's best Elizabethan manner) until just before the end of the line. There is also the rather Eliotic imagery of the city streets through which the speaker passes, singing and imagining lovers embracing in a room above. Indeed, Berry is not ashamed of the early debt. "Eliot," he now writes, "was pretty much *the* poet for me and my teachers and friends in my college years" (Letter 19 April 1986). And perhaps there is also something of Wallace Stevens in the metaphoric and imaginative power attributed to the "singing" here.<sup>2</sup>

But to the sound of his passing  
he sings. It is a kind of triumph  
that he grieves—thinking  
of the white lilacs in bloom,  
profuse, fragrant, white  
in excess of all seasonal need,  
  
and of the mockingbird's crooked  
arrogant notes, hooking him to the sky  
as though no flight  
or dying could equal him  
at his momentary song.

*(Poems 13-14)*

As in much youthful poetry, the poet here is intent on effects of lyric beauty, and seems largely unconscious of the extravagance of his tone. Indeed, the poem is rather beautiful and certainly earnest, but its cosmopolitan, urban inspiration does not belong to Berry in the sense that the subjects provided by rural Kentucky do.

Another poem in *The Broken Ground*, the “Elegy” for his paternal grandfather, Pryor Thomas Berry, shows Berry working toward a more comfortable and characteristic vein. This poem, placed first in the collection, inaugurates Berry’s more mature approach to the theme, for it considers death, implicitly at least, in terms of farming and the seasonal death and rebirth of the crops. As we remember, the title of this volume is really a fairly complex pun suggesting at once burial, the plowing up of fields for planting, and even the breaking of new “literary ground” as Berry’s first book of poems. The imagery in the poem, however, is still relatively abstract and reminiscent of a great deal of poetry from the late fifties and early sixties. The reader should note, for instance, the free verse and the delicate touches of surreal imagery that are reminiscent of the early Bly.

All day our eyes could find no resting place.  
Over a flood of snow sight came back  
Empty to the mind. The sun  
In a shutter of clouds, light  
Staggered down the fall of snow.  
All circling surfaces of earth were white.  
No shape or shadow moved the flight  
Of winter birds. Snow held the earth its silence.  
We could pick no birdsong from the wind.

At nightfall our father turned his eyes away.  
It was the storm of silence shook out his ghost.  
(*Poems 3*)

Again, this poem is beautiful but somewhat conventionally lyrical in its emphasis on local effects of imagery, the heated expression of syntactically disconnected personal impressions. The snowy landscape, however, offers the poem whatever unity it can, as well as the ironic contrast of its “light” with the “darkness” of the death it shrouds:

                  he only wakes  
Who is unshapen in a night of snow.  
His shadow in the shadow of the earth  
Moves the dark to wholeness.  
(*Poems 3*)

Here is an embryonic form of the light/dark paradox that plays an important role in much of Berry’s poetry about death, suggesting mystery beyond human comprehension and hinting at the possibility of some form of resurrection. As the “Elegy” progresses, the farm metaphor takes shape, though fitfully and by hints. Berry speaks, for instance, of adorning “the shuck of him / With flowers as for a bridal” (4). The word “shuck,” used here for the body, suggests a pod or husk containing the seeds of future life.

Indeed, there is something of the traditional elegy here, with funeral “strewings,” burning lamps, even what seems an appropriate response of nature to the event, the snowstorm. The language has a proprietous, at times even a quaint stateliness (“Snow held the earth its silence”), suggesting an acquaintance with Elizabethan habits of diction and syntax. And there is also

the implication that death shall bring forth sweetness and new life, like the golden bees of Virgil's *Georgics* that swarmed from the bodies of eight sacrificed cattle (see Speer Morgan 869). The landscape, however, is not Arcadian. It is the farm country that in more and more detail will take on a dominant role in Berry's poetry, as in his life. Here it is suggested by the bleak winter landscape and the "winter rain" that "breaks the corners / Of our father's house, quickens / On the downslope to noise" (*Poems* 4). On a metaphorical level, the ethos of farming is suggested by the "shuck" of the body and in one of the final lines: "The church heals our father in" (5). The word "heal," of course, has the implications of restoration and cure, with roots going back to the Germanic "hailaz," meaning whole. Like "shuck" therefore, it implies some hope of a resurrection. More specifically, "healing in" is a farming and gardening expression meaning to lay a plant in contact with the earth from which it will gain some sustenance before planting. The hope in "Elegy" is still only implicit in some of the language, but the language of farming, inaugurated here, will lead Berry to increasingly firm assertions of such hope.

The consideration of death in terms of farming is much expanded in Berry's second book of poems, *Openings* (1969). Again the title puns on what might be "openings" for planting, for graves, and indeed for literary development. A set of "Three Elegiac Poems" for Harry Erdman Perry, Berry's maternal grandfather, develops the metaphor suggested in the Pryor Berry elegy in greater detail. The first poem is in the form of a prayer that Perry be freed into death from "hospital and doctor, / the manners and odors of strange places, / the dispassionate skills of experts," indeed from all the torture chamber apparatus of modern medical technology with its "tubes and needles" and "public corridors" (49). If the hospital offers "the possibility



of life without / possibility of joy, let him give it up” (50); death, to Berry, is the naturally joyous and preferred ending of a life. Thus the speaker asks that Perry be allowed “to die in one of the old rooms / of his living, no stranger near him” (50), and that

the final

time and light of his life’s place be  
last seen before his eyes’ slow  
opening in the earth. (50)

This way, the dying man, “like one familiar with way” (50), will go into the “furrowed” hill over which he lived and will become a part of the sustenance of the future life of the land. Very explicitly here, the “furrows” of planting are equated with the “furrow” of the grave.

The second poem in the set shifts from the subjunctive of the first poem’s “prayer” to the dramatic present tense. From the speaker’s personal point of view, it presents the scene of the old man’s dying.

I stand at the cistern in front of the old barn  
in the darkness, in the dead of winter,  
the night strangely warm, the wind blowing,  
rattling an unlatched door.  
I draw the cold water up out of the ground, and drink.

At the house the light is still waiting.  
An old man I’ve loved all my life is dying  
in his bed there. He is going  
slowly down from himself.

In final obedience to his life, he follows  
his body out of our knowing.  
Only his hands, quiet on the sheet, keep  
a painful resemblance to what they no longer are. (50)

The poem interestingly contrasts the “normal” activity of the speaker drinking well water near the farm with the extraordinary event taking place “at the house.” But though the event is extraordinary, nature does not go sympathetically awry as it would in a classical elegy; the death is ordained and natural: “In final obedience to his life, he follows / his body out of our knowing.” Death is a mysterious but natural metamorphosis, after which the dying man simply and quietly passes “out of our knowing.” What disturbs the speaker is not so much the act of dying as the “painful resemblance” of the hands “to what they no longer are,” that is, the living flesh.

The third poem, with its tone of praising acceptance, corresponds to the “apotheosis” of the classical elegy:

He goes free of the earth.  
The sun of his last day sets  
clear in the sweetness of his liberty.

The earth recovers from his dying,  
the hallow of his life remaining  
in all his death leaves.

Radiances know him. Grown lighter  
than breath, he is set free  
in our remembering. Grown brighter

than vision, he goes dark  
into the life of the hill  
that holds his peace.

He's hidden among all that is,  
and cannot be lost. (51)

This is Berry in one of his more mystical moments, and yet his claims for “apotheosis” are still relatively cautious, tempered with the realism of farm life. Though the dead man has “grown brighter / than vision,” he still must go paradoxically “dark / into the life of the hill / that holds his peace.” This may not satisfy the orthodox yearnings of Pevear for a resurrection in Christ, but it does offer Berry the consolation that because the dead man is “hidden among all that is,” he “cannot be lost.” The corn of wheat that falls into the ground and dies may be reasonably expected to bring forth much fruit.

In *Farming: A Hand Book* (1970), the relation of death and farming becomes even more explicit. We learn, for instance, that “the man born to farming. . . enters into death / yearly, and comes back rejoicing” (*Poems* 103). A poem called “The Stone” considers the effort required to clear a stony hillside in preparation for farming. But the stones, with their “long lying” in the dark of the earth, have a “music” now, and have given Berry the “fatal singing / I have carried with me out of that day” (103). They have taught him “the weariness that loves the ground” and for which he now prepares “a fitting silence” (104). The poems of *Farming: A Hand Book*, many of which describe Berry’s reclaiming and revival of an old farm, are filled with the sense of man’s impermanence and his “bondage to the ground” (106). But there is also a mystical effort to come to terms with death, as it were, “to know the dark” by going dark and finding “that the dark too

blooms and sings, / and is traveled by dark feet and dark wings” (107). The effort is to accept, as Berry puts it in “Enriching the Earth,” that

After death, willing or not, the body serves,  
entering the earth. And so what was heaviest  
and most mute is at last raised up into song. (110)

Another poem, “Song in a Year of Catastrophe,” speaks of a voice that haunted the speaker, warning him to harden himself and “be ready.” To do this, the speaker was told to

Live close  
to the ground. Learn the darkness.  
Gather round you all  
the things that you love, name  
their names, prepare to lose them. (117)

The threat of death is constant and everywhere, and the only solace is to accept death as one accepts one’s place in nature. The speaker’s response to the admonitions above was to put his hands “into the ground, and they took root / and grew into a season’s harvest” (117). Finally, when the voice ordered the speaker to “die / into what the earth requires of you,” he

let go all holds then, and sank  
like a hopeless swimmer into the earth,  
and at last came fully into the ease  
and the joy of that place,  
all my lost ones returning. (118)

The poem is a sort of personal allegory on the theme articulated in “Disci-

pline and Hope” not long afterward: the acceptance of death is “a spiritual obligation, the only means of making life whole.” Berry does not so much “dance” with death as grasp hands with it in the darkness of the earth. Indeed, the image of putting his hand into the darkness of the ground recurs frequently in Berry’s poetry. In “The Current,” for instance, a complex poem about “marriage” with a place and the subtle relations of the generations involved in that place, the marriage is made by a man’s “having put his hand into the ground / seeding there what he hopes will outlast him” (119). The man thus becomes the “descendent” of all those who once worked this land, even the “old tribespeople” bending

in the sun, digging with sticks, the forest opening  
to receive their hills of corn, squash, and beans,  
their lodges and graves, and closing again. (119)

He is part of the “current” of their lives and the life of the land which flows

to him through the earth  
flows past him, and he sees one descended from him,  
a young man who has reached into the ground,  
his hand held in the dark as by a hand. (119)

The hope of the nurturer against the impermanence of mortal life is in this mystical connection *through the land* with the generations of the past and future. What remains, permanent in its cycles, is the land itself, the natural order.

Indeed, maintaining a connection between the past and the future is for Berry the spiritual obligation of the nurturer, the means of keeping one’s place in the system of systems, the only means of mitigating the sting of

death. A poem entitled “At a Country Funeral” from *The Country of Marriage* (1973) develops this theme in detail. It involves a comparison of the old funeral practices of the area, what Berry calls “the usages of old neighborhood,” with the typically specialized practices of the modern funeral with the artificial atmosphere of “soft / lights and hothouse flowers, the expensive / solemnity of experts, notes of a polite musician” (158). What Berry sees as an important difference is that death today is so often a passing away from the land; it does not maintain the vital connection between past and future.

They came, once in time,  
in simple loyalty to their dead, and returned  
to the world. The fields and the work  
remained to be returned to. Now the entrance  
of one of the old ones into the Rock  
too often means a lifework perished from the land  
without inheritor, and the field goes wild  
and the house sits and stares. Or it passes  
at cash value into the hands of strangers. (158)

The “essential topography” borne on the tongues of old men seems “doomed to die,” though “our memory of ourselves, hard earned, / is one of the land’s seeds” (158-159). Berry argues rather that

What we owe the future  
is not a new start, for we can only begin  
with what has happened. We owe the future  
the past, the long knowledge  
that is the potency of time to come.  
That makes of a man’s grave a rich furrow. (159)

Only in this way, by maintaining the current of the generations, can we avoid making death into “chaos and darkness, / the terrible ground of the only possible / new start” (159).

Interesting as it is theoretically, “At a Country Funeral” is somewhat too abstract and didactic to be completely moving as elegiac poetry; its argumentative tone is too close to what Berry has accomplished more efficiently in prose. In his most recent book, however, Berry has written what is perhaps the best elegiac poetry of his career. *The Wheel* (1982) refers by its title to the “wheel of Life” of eastern religion. It suggests by means of a poetic symbol Berry’s favorite theme of the recurring life cycle and the cyclical notion of time so important in his religion. In an epigraph to the book, Berry quotes Sir Albert Howard, author of *The Soil and Health: A Study of Organic Agriculture*:

It needs a more refined perception to recognize throughout this stupendous wealth of varying shapes and forms the principle of stability. Yet the principle dominates. It dominates by means of an ever-recurring cycle. . . repeating itself silently and ceaselessly. . . . This cycle is constituted of the successive and repeated processes of birth, growth, maturity, death, and decay.

An eastern religion calls this cycle the Wheel of Life and no better name could be given to it. The revolutions of this Wheel never falter and are perfect. Death supersedes life and life rises again from what is dead and decayed. (231)

Berry divides *The Wheel* into six parts, as it were, six different spokes. The

first part consists of three elegies for his friend Owen Flood. The second part includes a series of six poems reckoning Berry's desolation, the contemplation of one "well acquainted now / among the dead" (246). The third part is made up entirely of four love poems to Tanya, written in Berry's characteristically elegiac tone. The fourth part considers what Berry calls "The Gift of Gravity," and consists of two longer poems on the transience of human life, with the river as the overriding metaphor. In the fifth part, a group of six poems, the metaphor shifts to the "dance" of life, the Wheel of Life considered as a dance involving both the dead and the new and future generations. The sixth part contains a single poem, "In Rain," in which Berry considers the "path I follow" and the serene, accepting "marriage to place" which this involves.

Easily the most powerful poems in *The Wheel* are those written in memory of Owen Flood, "Requiem," "Elegy," and "Rising." The most formal of these, corresponding to the rhetorical first section of the "Three Elegiac Poems" for Harry Erdman Perry, is "Requiem." But this formality of tone acts in a kind of counterpoint to the firm, informal image of the farmer at his work:

We will see no more  
the mown grass fallen behind him  
on the still ridges before night,  
or hear him laughing in the crop rows,  
or know the order of his delight. (233)

Whatever incongruity there is here is typical of the risk-taking in Berry's more mature work. Even the most "literary" poems grow naturally now from Berry's experience of the world and aim at contact with that world, fi-



delity to it and the community of men. These are a farmer's elegies, and they celebrate a way of life Berry has loved as much as they lament the passing from that life of his loved ones:

Though the green fields are my delight,  
elegy is my fate. I have come to be  
survivor of many and of much  
that I love ...

\*       \*       \*       \*

I have left the safe shore  
where magnificence of art  
could suffice my heart. (233)

With an almost Yeatsian austerity, the poem reaches out to the world to rhyme the particular and the cosmic, one man's fate and the fate of all into the acceptance of life and place in the world which alone promises serenity:

In the day of his work  
when the grace of the world  
was upon him, he made his way,  
not turning back or looking aside,  
light in his stride.

Now may the grace of death  
be upon him, his spirit blessed  
in the deep song of the world  
and the stars turning, the seasons  
returning, and long rest. (233)

Like Wordsworth's "A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal," Berry's "Requiem"

ends with a wide, spindrift, cosmic gaze that fixes the subject's life and death in the perspective of eternity.

The "Elegy" that follows, however, is a deeply personal, interior poem that does not yield up its human point of view. Ironically enough, the poem, cast in the form of a Dantean narrative, makes large claims in terms of literary antecedents. It begins with the typical Berry paradox that

To be at home on its native ground  
the mind must go down below its horizon,  
descend below the lightfall  
on ridge and steep and valley floor  
to receive the lives of the dead. It must wake  
in their sleep, who wake in its dreams. (234)

This stanza sets off an extended dream vision which forms the basis of the narrative. Berry is walking "on the rock road between / creek and woods in the fall of the year" (234). He hears first "the cries / of little birds" and only "then the beat of old footsteps" (234). At the moment of mystical vision, as Berry puts it,

my sight was changed.

I passed through the lens of darkness  
as through a furrow, and the dead  
gathered to meet me. (234)

It is interesting to see again the old metaphor of the grave as a furrow in farming. In the dream vision of "Elegy," however, the speaker is able to cross into the world of the dead and talk with them in the manner of a

Homeric hero or Dante. This is indeed a literary device with many antecedent examples (apart from the classical epics, one might instance Dante Rossetti's "Willowwood" sonnets and T. S. Eliot's famous encounter with the "dead master" in "Little Gidding"<sup>3</sup>). But Berry's poem exercises this tradition with wonderful naturalness and daring simplicity. The dead whom the speaker meets are not symbols or allegorical figures, but members of his family and close friends who "wonder at the lines in my face, / the white hairs sprinkled on my head" (234). There are first of all his grandparents, "a tall old man leaning / upon a cane ... knowledge of long labor in his eyes," and "an old woman, a saver / of little things, whose lonely grief / was the first I knew" (234). These are followed by others of Berry's "teachers ... who once bore / the substance of our common ground" (235). Rather like the carved Chinamen in Yeats's "Lapis Lazuli," Berry describes their dread as having been somehow transfigured: "Their eyes, having grieved all grief, were clear" (235).

At this point, the beginning of the second part of the poem, Berry recognizes his old friend Owen Flood, who died in the early spring of 1974, "standing aside, alone, / weariness in his shoulders, his eyes / bewildered yet with the newness / of his death" (235). Handing him a "clod of earth" from "a certain well-known field" (235), Berry begins a restrained colloquial dialogue with the dead man which laces the remainder of the narrative. The clod of earth is a sort of talisman enabling the conversation like the blood in Homer's *Odyssey*. But Berry's is an appropriately homely talisman, and similarly the language is simple and natural, touching with a kind of philosophical humor on the subject of death:

"Wendell, this is not a place

for you and me.” And then he grinned;  
we recognized his stubbornness—  
it was his principle to doubt  
all ease of satisfaction.

“The crops are in the barn,” I said,  
“the morning frost has come to the fields,  
and I have turned back to accept,  
if I can, what none of us could prevent.”  
(235)

Couched in this homely conversation of two farmers is the essence of Berry’s philosophy of death: acceptance of it as part of the natural scheme of things. It is interesting that the language of the poem, unlike the more forthright statements of Berry’s prose, confesses some doubt (“if I can...”) about the possibility of acceptance, the human frailty of the poet confronting what is ultimately unknowable. Berry’s doubt is “answered” not with abstract assertion, but the felt experience of the narrative.

Owen Flood, Berry’s old mentor, appears now to have

cast off  
his own confusion, and assumed  
for one last time, in one last kindness,  
the duty of the older man. (235)

This “duty” is to demonstrate for Berry, as he once demonstrated the techniques and joys of nurture, the equally natural acceptance of one’s fate in death. To this end, he and Berry do what Dante through the mouth of Francesca suggested was so painful: recall their happy times in time of sad-

ness. Yet as Owen Flood will demonstrate, the time of death need not be one of unmitigated sadness. Indeed, the mood of the poem remains serene rather than miserable.

We stood on a height,  
woods above us, and below  
on the half-mowed slope we saw ourselves  
as we once were: a young man mowing,  
a boy grubbing with an axe.

\* \* \* \*

We made it [the old field] new in the heat haze  
of that midsummer: he, proud  
of the ground intelligence clarified,  
and I, proud in his praise.

“I wish,” I said, “that we could be  
back in that good time again.”

“We are back there again, today  
and always. Where else would we be?”

He smiled, looked at me, and I knew  
it was my mind he led me through. (236)

The larger memory of mankind consists in the interlinking memories of the generations, in the connections that we make and maintain with the past and the future. This theme, which, we have seen, is so prominent in Berry’s writings, is once more poignantly suggested here. And how typical of Berry that it should involve here the memory of daily work, indeed the kind of thing some people would consider “drudgery.” But of course it is with such

“drudgery” that “we enact and understand our oneness with the Creation.” The narrative continues now with a number of episodes like this, as Owen Flood moves Berry

through all the fields of our lives,  
preparations, plantings, harvests,  
crews joking at the row ends,  
the water jug passing like a kiss.

He spoke of our history passing through us,  
the way our families’ generations  
overlap, the great teaching  
coming down by deed of companionship... (237)

The encounter with and contemplation of death is actually the contemplation of life itself, of which death is a natural part. Berry tells us that Owen Flood’s “passion” was “to be true / to the condition of the Fall — / to live by the sweat of his face, to eat / his bread, assured that the cost was paid” (237). This, as we have seen, is Berry’s highest compliment.

The fifth section of the poem deals with “the time of [Owen Flood’s] pain,” when in spite of “the sweet world” about him, “his strength failed / before the light” (238). This is one of the most moving passages, as Berry for the first time senses mortal weakness in a man whose strength he had always taken for granted:

Again, in the sun  
of his last harvest, I heard him say:  
“Do you want to take this row,  
and let me get out of your way?”

I saw the world ahead of him then  
for the first time, and I saw it  
as he already had seen it,  
himself gone from it. It was a sight  
I could not see and not weep. (238)

This sudden, often untimely fading of strength, lies at the very center of our wondering about death, and is perhaps what to the human imagination is most tragic about it. Berry the philosopher knows what to say next about it, but Berry the poet in the grip of his vision cannot help pausing to weep the tragedy of the human condition. Owen Flood himself does not weep. In the sixth section there is yet another touching vignette of the two men together, looking over the fields and seeing

the years of care that place wore,  
for his story lay upon it, a bloom,  
a blessing. (238)

It is the summer's end, and their conversation turns to "death and obligation, / the brevity of things and men" (238-239). At this moment of heavily moving words and heavy thoughts, Owen Flood is not bitter, but filled with the wonder of nature and of life:

We hushed.  
And then that man who bore his death  
in him, and knew it, quietly said:  
"Well. It's a fascinating world,  
after all." (239)

We are a long way here from the literary posturings of "A Man Walking and

Singing.” Owen Flood delivers his formerly words with a perfect naturalness and simplicity. Indeed, the whole poem moves us with the sort of difficult simplicity that we find only in the mature works of certain masters; it is Berry’s version of a *Heiligidankgesang*.

In the very hour he died, I told him,  
before he knew his death, the thought  
of years to come had moved me  
like a call. I thought of healing,  
health, friendship going on,  
the generations gathering, our good times  
reaching one best time of all. (239)

In the final sections of the poem, they return among the dead, and Berry has a vision of the essential unity in life *and* death of all the generations, even those to come.<sup>4</sup>

Again the host of the dead  
encircled us, as in a dance.  
And I was aware now of the unborn  
moving among them. (240)

Berry’s “teacher” speaks one more time, reminding him that “joy contains, survives its cost” (240). And as he speaks, it is Berry’s “gift” to hear the “song in the Creation:”

In its changes and returns  
his life was passing into life.  
That moment, earth and song and mind,  
the living and the dead, were one. (240)



At the end, Owen Flood, “completed in his rest,” drops the earth Berry had given him, and waves the living man, “inheritor of what I mourned,... back toward the light of day” (141).

Berry’s haunting by Owen Flood is not yet over, however. There is another poem in the sequence entitled “Rising” and dedicated to Owen Flood’s son Kevin. The poem offers a more detailed memory of Owen Flood in the days of his prime as Berry’s model of a farmer. Again, it is a poem that does not make the “suppression of narrative” a goal. It begins with an anecdote of a young Berry working with Owen Flood in the harvest after having rather foolishly “danced until nearly / time to get up” (241). The harvest does not wait for young men with hangovers, however, and Berry must work “half lame / with weariness. . . dizzy, half blind, bitter / with sweat in the hot light” (241). Owen Flood, however, taking “no notice” of Berry’s distress, goes on ahead, “assuming / that I would follow,” and leading Berry

through long rows  
of misery, moving like a dancer  
ahead of me, so elated  
he was, and able, filled  
with desire for the ground’s growth. (241)

As Berry puts it, “my own head / uttered his judgment, even / his laughter” (241). Owen Flood’s only comment is gentle and laconic: “That social life don’t get / down the row, does it, boy” (242). The anecdote springs to life, full voiced and full of a kind of joy, the way our pleasant memories of the dead may spring to life again once we have come to terms with the primal tragedy of their death. Berry has done this through the visionary meeting of “Elegy,” and now Owen Flood may live again in his memories, and these

may be a gift, as the dedication of “Rising” suggests, to the future generation.

The anecdote also brings up the theme of the generations subtly linked by the human activity of living and working together in one place. This represents in microcosm the heritage of the land itself, which has always been an important element of Berry’s writing. From Owen Flood Berry learns to work not “by will” but “by desire,” making what might seem an “ordeal” into “order / and grace, ideal and real” (242). The conjunction of Berry’s “awkward boyhood” with “the time of [Owen Flood’s] mastery,” troubles the younger man “to become / what I had not thought to be” (242). Thus the disciplines of the system of systems are “made, remembered, taught, learned, and practiced,” passing from one generation to the next. Owen Flood teaches Berry the role of the “cyclical” man at home and in place, the nurturer who stands in opposition to the constant “traveler,” the exploiter of the land:

The boy must learn the man  
whose life does not travel  
along any road, toward  
any other place,  
but is a journey back and forth  
in rows, and in the rounds  
of years. His journey’s end  
is no place of ease, but the farm  
itself, the place day labor  
starts from, journeys in,  
returns to: the fields

whose past and potency are one. (242)

In such a way, time past and time future may indeed both be contained in time present; and one may indeed experience “moments when what we have chosen and what we desire are the same.” In *The Unsettling of America*, Berry quoted with approval Thomas Hardy’s poem about the farmer, the “man harrowing clods” who “will go onward the same / Though Dynasties pass” (14); here he eulogizes Owen Flood in similar terms:

The man at dawn  
in spring of the year,  
going to the fields,  
visionary of seed and desire,  
is timeless as a star. (242-243)

These lines form the emotional center of Berry’s poem, and perhaps his work as a whole. Here Berry’s gaze rises from the particular toward the universal, “personal at the beginning and religious at the end.” And this movement of his vision suggests why what we have seen is “not the story of a life,” but “the story of lives, knit together / overlapping in succession, rising / again from grave after grave” (243). But the memories of living men are the keepers of this mystery, this “severe gift” we “keep / as part of ourselves” when “like graves, we heal over” (243). As Berry puts it:

There is a grave, too, in each  
survivor. By it, the dead one lives.  
He enters us, a broken blade,  
sharp, clear as a lens or mirror.

And he comes into us helpless, tender

as the newborn enter the world. (243)

In such a way, “the dead become the intelligence of life” (243).

Berry ends his poem “Rising” with as deeply felt an “apotheosis” as we are likely to encounter in contemporary American poetry, and in it he sums up much of his attitude toward death and life. Indeed, the mature version of Berry’s song of death transforms itself into a song of life “rhyming” flesh with flesh and generation with generation.

But if a man’s life  
continues in another man,  
then the flesh will rhyme  
its part in immortal song.  
By absence, he comes again.

There is a kinship of the fields  
that gives to the living the breath  
of the dead. The earth  
opened in the spring, opens  
in all springs. Nameless,  
ancient, many lived, we reach  
through ages with the seed. (244)

This is an attitude which has been hard won throughout Berry’s career, offering neither glibness of orthodoxy nor glibness of despair. It is an attitude, as he would have it, proprietous and secure in man’s place in the system of systems and the ultimate mystery surrounding it. The earth that opened one spring for Owen Flood opens in all springs to embrace the dead and to bring forth new life. Owen Flood’s death was, as Berry would have his own, the

good death of a farmer, a nurturer “reaching through ages.”

With each year, Wendell Berry seems to claim a more secure and a more significant position among contemporary American poets. From his fairly common beginnings as one of a generation of poets trained in the precepts of the New Criticism, he has pursued his own “path,” as he calls it, with uncommon intellectual rigour and poetic sensitivity. Our age is not known for its thoughtful optimists, and many poets, faced with death (not to mention the threat of nuclear devastation) in a time of weak religious faith, have fallen into sterility or despair. Berry, however, over the course of his career, has come to terms with death and made his acceptance of death central to a general philosophy of affirmation. As we have seen, acceptance of death means for him acceptance of man’s proper place in the system of systems, and brings with it both humility and serenity. It is the condition under which human love, fidelity, and the perpetuation of the community of men on earth may be possible.

Notes

<sup>1</sup> Roberts French once described Berry's poems as "pastorals of withdrawal" ("From Maine to Kentucky" 473), commenting that Berry "preaches incessantly at us" and that "one soon has enough of it" (473). These remarks are far from just. Berry's return to country life can hardly be called a withdrawal from reality, for in fact it brings him regularly into intimate contact with the hardest realities nature has to offer. Edwin Fussell writing in a pressurized airplane somewhere over California is much more withdrawn from the reality of life on earth, as indeed so many of us are who live the climate-controlled lives of the modern industrial world. And one might add that the hysterical avoidance of anything which even approximates "preaching" is itself a form of withdrawal from any role in the real affairs of the world. The poet-specialist, under such a view, must confine himself to the masturbatory manipulation of words without regard for audience or even the public meanings of his words. And yet, as Berry might argue, this narrow view of the poetic function invalidates much of the greatest poetry ever written. Indeed, Berry has never invited the rest of us home to his farm. As he puts it in one of the poems of *A Part* (1980): "In the labor of the fields / longer than a man's life / I am at home. Don't come with me. / You stay home too" (199).

<sup>2</sup> While Wallace Stevens was never a great influence, Berry has commented that a recording of Stevens reading "The Idea of Order at Key West" was a "revelation" when he first listened to it at Stanford in 1958. About Stevens he now writes: "I don't want to write that way, but I'm glad he did" (Letter 19 April 1986).

<sup>3</sup> Berry writes that Eliot's "*Quartets* impress me more and more every time I

read them” (Letter 19 April 1986).

<sup>4</sup> Berry has identified the Homeric “underworld” in this poem with “the valley of the shadow of death,” the place, as he puts it, “where loss and grief seem to take you”(Letter 10 July 1986). He returns to this theme in the final poem of *The Wheel*, “Returning,” where he speaks of the “ground / of which dead men / and women I have loved / are part, as they / are part of me”(268).

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A Controlling Sympathy:  
The Style of Irony in Joyce's "The Dead"

The plot of James Joyce's "The Dead," on the surface at least, is rather uneventful. Kate and Julia Morkan, two elderly sisters who live with their spinster niece, are holding their annual Christmas dance. Their married nephew, Gabriel Conroy, attends with his wife, and as is his wont on such occasions, delivers a rather unexceptional after-dinner speech. Among the guests is a tenor, Bartell D'Arcy, who sings after much good natured prodding a ballad that affects Gabriel's wife Gretta strangely. After the party, as they walk back in the snow to their hotel room, Gabriel experiences feelings of great passion for his wife. When he approaches her in the hotel room, however, she breaks into tears, and informs him about a former lover she had known when she lived in the country, a young boy who had died, as she believes, for her; the tenor's song had reminded her of the lad. All of Gabriel's complacent assumptions about his own life are in a moment torn down, and yet he responds eventually with "generous tears" of understanding and creature feeling. As the snow continues to fall alike on the living and the dead, Gabriel undergoes an epiphany, a moment of sublime understanding.

A number of critics have maintained that Joyce was depicting symbolically a society of the "living dead." Bernard Benstock, for instance, writes that Joyce's story is chiefly concerned with "those who remain alive, but fail to live: the disillusioned, the self-destructive, the blighted and wasted lives" (149). Hugh Kenner goes so far as to describe "The Dead" as a "definition of living death" (*Dublin's Joyce* 62).<sup>1</sup> All the characters, according to such a view, are left exposed to the merciless blasts of their author's irony. The Misses Morkan and their niece affect a sham gentility, the grandchildren of a "glue-boiler." The various guests, too, are pretentious and phoney. Gabriel himself, with his pompous sense of dignity and superiority, is shown up; his words ring hollow, and even the emotional certainties upon which he

has maintained the comfortable stability of his life are undermined. He is now middle-aged and his wife is no longer beautiful. On top of it all, he learns that for all these years she has not shared his own feelings, but has kept locked in her heart the image of another, younger, untouchably more romantic lover, a young man who has taken the Sophoclean precaution of dying young. Beside this romantic sacrifice, Gabriel's emotional outpourings must surely seem to be "only all palaver"(178).

Against such a view, I would argue that Joyce had a more generous conception of his characters. This is not to say that he does not "detect" them in the limitations of their humanity, that there is not irony at play here, but simply that the irony is gentle and embracing. I have borrowed the word "detect" from Denis Donoghue, who maintains in a splendid book, *The Ordinary Universe*, that Joyce failed to "detect" his character Stephen Dedalus in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, and that at least in this respect, Joyce's novel is inferior to a book like the *The Great Gatsby* where the characters are "detected" by their author(66-67). While this failure of detection can be convincingly maintained of *Portrait of the Artist* (perhaps because of the autobiographical origin of that book), it is precisely the accurate detection of character that renders not only "The Dead" but all the stories in *Dubliners* successful.<sup>2</sup>

Detection, however, does not necessarily entail the sort of withering irony that a critic like Hugh Kenner imputes both to *Portrait of the Artist* and *Dubliners*(*Dublin's Joyce*). It is not within my province to consider the later novel in detail, but I think it is demonstrable that we are meant to sympathize with Gabriel to a considerable degree. Most of the narrative, as we shall see, is given to his perspective. Furthermore, it can be argued that

though his consciousness at the end of the story must be expected to undergo extensive revision, this need not be for the worse. Joyce has been at pains to show us that Gabriel's complacent self which was destroyed was not really worth his keeping. And we should not suppose that his life with Gretta is at an end; she will, indeed, at some time in the future wake up, and they will have the opportunity, for the first time, to reestablish their relationship on the firmer ground of full understanding. If we insist too much on seeing "the Dead" of the story as "the living dead" characters in it, we make the mistake of replacing a metaphysical vision of great subtlety with what is essentially a clichéd moral vision of bourgeoisie vacuity. A detailed consideration of the text should convince us of the complexity of its vision.

What Vladimir Nabokov said of *Madame Bovary* furnishes us with a good approach to all fiction written in the tradition of that book: "Stylistically it is prose doing what poetry is supposed to do" (125). Any reader of "The Dead" should begin by taking account of the textual density of the work. Though conventional and modest enough in comparison with such a production as *Finnegan's Wake*, "The Dead" is nonetheless richly rewarding. From the first line of the story, the language of "The Dead" begins manipulating our assumptions about its characters, their society, and their fates in such a way as to contribute to the wonderfully subtle climax.

We learn first of all that "Lily, the caretaker's daughter, was *literally* run off her feet." (italics mine) As Hugh Kenner points out in his recent book, *Joyce's Voices*, whatever else one might say about Lily, she was not *literally* run off her feet (15). This is an instance, typical of Joyce according to Kenner, where the language of the narrative takes on some of the coloring of the character's own idiolect. This is most likely the sort of thing Lily would have

said about herself, had someone taken the trouble to ask her. It is also a subtle indication of social position in a story where concern for social distinction provides a great deal of the imaginative life.

In the same paragraph we are introduced in the breathlessly busy way typical of Lily to “Miss Kate” and “Miss Julia,” who, having converted the upstairs bathroom into a “ladies’ dressing-room,” were to be seen there “gossiping and laughing and fussing, walking after each other to the head of the stairs, peering down over the bannisters and calling down to Lily to ask her who had come.” The grammar of the sentence, with its string of participles, suggests already something of the exciting holiday activity. The detail of the makeshift “ladies’ dressing-room” indicates the extraordinary nature of the day’s events, and also places the “Misses Morkan” socially: they are of the genteel, middle class, able to employ a servant but not prepared on a regular basis for entertaining. Lily, of course, thinks of them politely as “Miss Kate” and “Miss Julia,” and is convinced that the women guests are “ladies.” We should not necessarily take Lily’s control of the narrative, however, as constituting a scathing attack on the pretensions of the bourgeoisie.

In the next paragraph, control of the narrative slips to Kate and Julia; it is their idiolect, and not the young servant girl’s, which gives us: “For years and years [the annual dance] had gone off in splendid style, as long as anyone could remember; ever since Kate and Julia, after the death of their brother Pat, had left the house in Stoney Batter and taken Mary Jane, their only niece, to live with them....That was a good thirty years ago if it was a day”(175-76). This helps to develop our overall sense of them, and gives us also some sense of their ages. Thirty years ago, at least, their niece was “a little girl in short clothes.” Now she is “the main prop of the household,”

and of course of an age to make her a prime candidate for spinsterhood. There has also been an evident decline in their standard of living since the time of the house in Stoney Batter when Pat, apparently, was the main prop of the household. The reader should note that Mary Jane and her aunts often act the part of servants to their wealthy students from Kingstown and Dalkey.

As the point of perception shifts to Mary Jane, we learn also to distinguish between her elderly aunts, for though Julia, while “quite grey, was still the leading soprano in Adam and Eve’s,” Kate was “too feeble to go about much” and was now reduced to giving music lessons to beginners. Ironically, it is Aunt Julia whose ill health and impending death will first be hinted at and later insisted on. All this introduces a feeling of impending doom which comes gradually to dominate the story. The shift of perception to “the three mistresses” enables Joyce to introduce the main character, Gabriel Conroy, familiarly as “Gabriel” before Lily introduces him formally as “Mr. Conroy,” a formality he likes to keep up. Our knowing him first as “Gabriel,” the dutiful married nephew who could be counted upon in an emergency (for instance, to control a drunken guest like Freddie Malins), assures us that there is a more human, less austere, and less exceptional side to him than he likes to put out. Not everything shall be as it appears.

At this point Gabriel and his wife make their entrance, greeted politely by Lily as Mr. and Mrs. Conroy. They seem the typical bourgeois couple to whom nothing especially eventful ever happens. Gabriel is witty and colloquial, explaining that they are late because “my wife here take three mortal hours to dress herself”(177). (As some critics have noted, this may be taken as an early suggestion of the theme of death. See Kenneth Burke 410) To Aunt Kate, he says: “Here I am right as the mail”(177). There is nothing ex-

traordinary about all this, but it indicates Gabriel's security and self-satisfaction. Perhaps the only odd thing is that Gretta, his wife, will hardly strike us as the type who habitually spends "three mortal hours to dress herself"; she is too open and natural for us to imagine her being that vain.

A significant detail is the mention of Gabriel's goloshes. In Ireland where there is very little snow, goloshes are even now somewhat rare; in Joyce's day Guttapercha goloshes were rarer still, "the latest things" from the continent. Though Gabriel makes no big deal about them, they would have struck people as rather fussy or extravagant. Indeed a little later on, Gretta chides Gabriel about them.

—Goloshes! said Mrs. Conroy. That's the latest. Whenever it's wet underfoot I must put on my goloshes. Tonight even, he wanted me to put them on, but I wouldn't. The next thing he'll buy me will be a diving suit.

Gabriel laughed nervously and patted his tie reassuringly, while Aunt Kate nearly doubled herself, so heartily did she enjoy the joke. The smile soon faded from Aunt Julia's face and her mirthless eyes were directed towards her nephew's face. After a pause she asked:

—And what are goloshes, Gabriel?

—Goloshes, Julia! exclaimed her sister. Goodness me, don't you know what goloshes are? You wear them over your ... over your boots, Gretta, isn't it?

—Yes, said Mrs. Conroy. Guttapercha things. We both have a pair now. Gabriel says everyone wears them on the



Continent.

—O, on the Continent, murmured Aunt Julia, nodding her head slowly.

Gabriel knitted his brows and said, as if he were slightly angered:

—It's nothing very wonderful, but Gretta thinks it very funny because she says the word reminds her of Christy Minstrels.(180-81)

In this scene, Joyce begins to employ a gentle irony against the pretensions of his characters. Gabriel is shown to be of a higher level of culture and awareness than his aunts, but also to be rather stuffy and even a bit of a prig. The natural Gretta makes fun of his cosmopolitan pretensions, which upsets him, as we feel, more than it ought. The reader should notice that whenever Gabriel feels uncomfortable he escapes into an outward gesture of some sort, such as patting his necktie, or flicking his boots. These gestures act rather like emotional circuit-breakers when a situation becomes too hot. And many situations do, for we see that in contrast to Gretta, Gabriel is extremely self-conscious, so much so that his awareness of other people is obscured and his interaction with them hindered. He cannot easily laugh at even a friendly joke made at his own expense. In contrast to Aunt Kate, who doubles over with laughter, or Gretta herself who laughs naturally, Gabriel laughs “nervously.” With all his self-conscious posturing, he has trouble acting naturally and frequently fails, as here, to produce the desired effect.

We have already noticed this in his scene with Lily. He tries to be condescending (in the old sense) and falls flat. Perhaps this is because again he is more full of himself than observant. He can notice that she speaks with a less

cultured accent than he, but he has no real empathy for her, or understanding of her reaction to him. Indeed, it is thoughtless of him to ask a girl of her low station if she still attends school. He can only compound his offense in a rather smug, bourgeois way by assuming that if she is no longer in school, she must be about to hear wedding bells. Lily answers him sharply: “The men that is now is only all palaver and what they can get out of you.” The remark is significant in that it subtly introduces a main theme of the story: the real or imagined superiority of the past to the present, of the dead to the feeble living, who are all words. Though not a rake, Gabriel will soon find himself in a similar position in relation to his wife’s former lover, a man of mere words to a man of action. Gabriel’s extreme self-consciousness leads him now, as later with Miss Ivors and finally with Gretta, to failure. Typically, he escapes from Lily through the outward action of flicking his boots,<sup>3</sup> and further distances himself from her by forcing her to accept his charity. This action affirms his social superiority and the sense of security this confers on him. As Allen Tate notes, “from [this] moment, we know Gabriel Conroy ... we have had him rendered”(405).

It is interesting that Joyce chooses this rather awkward moment to give us our first, uncomfortable physical description of Gabriel. It is too intimate an exposure for the dignified figure Gabriel would like to cut:

He was a stout, tallish young man. The high colour of his cheeks pushed upwards even to his forehead, where it scattered itself in a few formless patches of pale red; and on his hairless face there scintillated restlessly the polished lenses and the bright gilt rims of the glasses which screened his delicate and restless eyes. His glossy black

hair was parted in the middle and brushed in a long curve behind his ears where it curled slightly beneath the groove left by his hat.(178)

One can imagine what Gabriel's discomfort would be if he found himself so closely scrutinized. In fact, Gabriel does not and cannot see himself with anything like this honesty until the final scene when he is alone in the hotel room with Gretta and glimpses himself in the mirror. What he then sees, and with an almost metaphysical insight that conveys both physical and spiritual implications at once, is the somewhat unpleasant figure we have been given so early on. It may be, indeed, that any such close scrutiny of a human being tends by the nature of it to reduce him comically, to render him grotesque. From the beginning, Joyce commits such sensuous detail to a strategy of controlling our view of Gabriel; we are meant to recognize, before he does, his unheroic proportions. This is not, however, a completely merciless exposure. We are encouraged, within these limits, to sympathize with Gabriel. For most of the story Gabriel is in charge of the narrative, and it is through his perceptions that most of the other characters are exposed. It is only that we are not to take him at his own evaluation of himself, and Joyce's subtle control of narrative perspective assures this.

To see this, one has only to compare the description of Gabriel with one a few pages later of Freddie Malins, who on this occasion is enjoying what is perhaps his final drinking bout before undergoing the drinking cure at the Trappist monastery at Mount Melleray. Freddie is engagingly more jovial than Gabriel, but he is subjected to even harsher scrutiny.

Gabriel could be seen piloting Freddie Malins across the

landing. The latter, a young man of about forty, was of Gabriel's size and build, with very round shoulders. His face was fleshy and pallid, touched with colour only at the thick hanging lobes of his ears and at the wide wings of his nose. He had coarse features, a blunt nose, a convex and receding brow, tumid and protruded lips. His heavy-lidded eyes and the disorder of his scanty hair made him look sleepy.(184)

Certainly here is a description to make Gabriel seem quite attractive by comparison, but this is not necessarily the effect. We do not mind the evident grotesqueness of Freddie Malins quite so much, perhaps because he affects the low role of the clown, while Gabriel asserts his own dignity and will aspire to the role of the romantic lead. Unlike Gabriel, Freddie Malins is un-self-conscious, "laughing heartily in high key." Through this he exercises claims to participation in a comic spirit which renders him somewhat immune to our censure. A number of the minor characters (Mr. Browne, for instance, whose face wrinkles with mirth as he pours himself glasses of whiskey) are similarly redeemed through acceptance of festivity. They are more comic than ridiculous.

The character of Gretta Conroy is more complex, in fact the most mysterious in the story. Unlike her husband, she does not control the narrative perspective at all in the early part of the story, and therefore, we get very little of her interior life, either directly or by implication. Of course, this is because Joyce wants to heighten his climax by locking the reader into Gabriel's ignorance. But it makes what little information we do get subtle, interesting, and significant.

We see her first as nothing out of the ordinary, but good natured and pleasantly unaffected in comparison with Gabriel. Soon, however, while Mary Jane is playing the piano, we learn in a sort of interior monologue of Gabriel's that his mother, who had high aspirations for her son, had once disparaged Gretta as being "country cute."

A shadow passed over his face as he remembered her sullen opposition to his marriage. Some slighting phrases she had used still rankled in his memory; she had once spoken of Gretta as being country cute and that was not true of Gretta at all. It was Gretta who had nursed her during all her last long illness in their house at Monkstown.(187)

It is interesting that although the narrative, through Gabriel's idiolect, specifically denies his mother's assertion, we are inclined rather to believe it. It is our first inkling of something in her past, at least of some aspect of her which Gabriel refuses to recognize. "Country cute," perhaps, has connotations not unlike those of Hamlet's "country matters." The hint of an unbri-dled sexuality will also turn up later when Gretta speaks of walking with Michael Furey "the way they do in the country"(221).

However strenuously Gabriel would like to deny it, Gretta's "country-ness" is insisted upon. It is prominent in the scene of his confrontation with the Irish nationalist, Miss Ivors. Both she and Gabriel are academics and colleagues, but we learn that Gabriel is what she calls a "West Briton," or sympathizer with England, while she is a strong nationalist, rather like a fictionalized Maud Gonne. Miss Ivors, however, can hardly be said to "dwell in lover's eyes." Joyce describes her in a-sexual terms: "She was a frank-man-

nered, talkative young lady, with a freckled face and prominent brown eyes. She did not wear a low-cut bodice and the large brooch which was fixed in the front of her collar bore on it an Irish device”(187). She is hardly an attractive character in comparison with Gretta, but she is the perfect foil for Gabriel’s affected cosmopolitanism. After duly upbraiding Gabriel for publishing literary reviews in the pro-British *Daily Express*, she invites him to make an excursion to the west of Ireland.

—It would be splendid for Gretta too if she’d come.

She’s from Connacht, isn’t she?

—Her people are, said Gabriel shortly.

\* \* \* \* \*

—Well, we usually go to France or Belgium or perhaps Germany, said Gabriel awkwardly.

—And why do you go to France and Belgium, said Miss Ivors, instead of visiting your own land?(189)

Miss Ivors continues to press Gabriel until he comes out with “I’m sick of my own country, sick of it!” Once again, he has failed socially because of his lack of insight into other people. Of particular interest is his attempt, in harmony with his own deracination, to separate Gretta from “her people,” and her roots in the country and the past. In his imagination he would remake his wife in the mold of himself. That Gabriel is deluded we learn not long after this when Gretta, contrary to his expectation, expresses enthusiasm about the idea of visiting Galway, her provincial hometown in Connacht.

It is, of course, no coincidence that the country in the west of Ireland is associated with Gretta’s past and comes to be associated with the past itself,

and thus death. An easy step connects the journey to the west of Ireland with the journey to death, which is traditionally associated with the west. The connection is made explicit in the final paragraph of the story:

The time had come for him to set out on his journey westward. Yes, the newspapers were right: snow was general all over Ireland. It was falling on every part of the dark central plain, on the treeless hills, falling softly on the Bog of Allen and, further westward, softly falling into the dark mutinous Shannon waves. It was falling too on every part of the lonely churchyard on the hill where Michael Furey lay buried. It lay thickly drifted on the crooked crosses and headstones, on the spears of the little gate, on the barren thorns. His soul swooned slowly as he heard the snow falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead.(223-24)

The passage is remarkable, among other things, in that it is full of archetypal images of death: the journey westward, “the dark mutinous Shannon waves,” the graveyard, the crosses, “the barren thorns” (these last, like the crosses, suggesting central Christian images), and finally the snow itself, suggesting the unifying consciousness of the essential inseparableness of the living and the dead. And, of course, central among the dead is Michael Furey, the representative of the past who defeats Gabriel’s very conception of himself.

The notion that the living suffer in comparison with the dead, the present with the past, has been well prepared for us. The reader will remember Lily’s

angry retort: “The men that is now is only all palaver and what they can get out of you.” On a comic level, this sums up a central theme of the story. Another important variation on the theme is the dinner conversation about opera singers.

Mary Jane led the table back to the legitimate opera. One of her students had given her a pass for *Mignon*. Of course it was very fine, she said but it made her think of poor Georgina Burns. Mr. Browne could go back farther still, to the old Italian companies that used to come to Dublin-Tietjens, Ilma de Murzka, Campaini, the great Trebelli, Giuglini, Ravelli, Aramburo. Those were the days, he said, when there was something like singing to be heard in Dublin. He told too of how the top galley of the old Royal used to be packed night after night, of how one night an Italian tenor had sung five encores to *Let Me Like a Soldier Fall*, introducing a high C every time, and of how the galley boys would sometimes in their enthusiasm unyoke the horses from the carriage of some great *prima donna* and pull her themselves through the streets to her hotel. Why did they never play the grand old operas now, he asked, *Dinorah*, *Lucrezia Borgia*? Because they could not get the voices to sing them: that was why.

—Oh, well, said Mr. Bartell D’Arcy, I presume there are as good singers today as there were then.

—Where are they? asked Mr. Browne defiantly.

—In London, Paris, Milan, said Mr. Bartell D’Arcy warmly. I suppose Caruso, for example is quite as good, if



not better than any of the men you have mentioned.

—Maybe so, said Mr. Browne. But I may tell you I doubt it strongly.

—Oh, I'd give anything to hear Caruso sing, said Mary Jane.

—For me, said Aunt Kate, who had been picking a bone, there was only one tenor. To please me, I mean. But I suppose none of you ever heard of him.

—Who was he, Miss Morkan? asked Mr. Bartell D'Arcy politely.

—His name, said Aunt Kate, was Parkinson. I heard him when he was in his prime and I think he had then the purest tenor voice that ever was put into a man's throat.

—Strange, said Mr. Bartell D'Arcy. I never even heard of him.

—Yes, yes, Miss Morkan is right, said Mr. Browne. I remember hearing of old Parkinson but he's too far back for me.

—A beautiful, pure, sweet, mellow English tenor, said Aunt Kate with enthusiasm.(198-200)

In an age when Caruso has assumed the inviolable mantel of legend (who in our time would go so far as to compare, say, Pavarotti quite favorably with him?), it is amusing to hear the resistance of Mr. Browne and some others to any recognition of Caruso as the equal of the likes of Trebelli or Giuglini, now quite forgotten. In fact, only Mary Jane and the “modern” singer Bartell D'Arcy will go so far as to praise Caruso. Aunt Kate suggests her own preference for a man completely unknown and perhaps even fictional.

The point, of course, is that to the characters in this story (as we shall see, including Gretta), the memory of the dead completely overshadows any effort of the living. The reader should keep in mind the fact that Michael Furey was himself a singer of the old time.

The idea of the past overwhelming the present also makes an appearance on the level of abstract banality in Gabriel's speech.

—Ladies and Gentlemen.

—A new generation is growing up in our midst, a generation actuated by new ideas and new principles. It is serious and enthusiastic for these new ideas and its enthusiasm, even when it is misdirected, is, I believe, in the main sincere. But we are living in a sceptical and, if I may use the phrase, a thought-tormented age: and sometimes I fear that this new generation, educated or hyper-educated as it is, will lack those qualities of humanity, of hospitality, of kindly humour which belonged to an older day. Listening tonight to the names of all those great singers of the past it seemed to me, I must confess, that we were living in a less spacious age. Those days might, without exaggeration, be called spacious days: and if they are gone beyond recall let us hope, at least, that in gatherings such as this we shall still speak of them with pride and affection, still cherish in our hearts the memory of those dead and gone great ones whose fame the world will not willingly let die.(203)

The irony of this speech, is that Gabriel has no idea of the effect his own

conventional pleasantries about the past have on Gretta. Although we too, locked in Gabriel's perception, do not suspect it, a speech about "those dead and gone great ones whose fame the world will not willingly let die" can only remind Gretta of the great romantic love of her life, Michael Furey. The scene, in fact, typifies Gabriel's lack of intuitive sympathy with other people, including his wife.

Gabriel is socially mistaken or inept on many levels: his failure with Lily, the controversy with Miss Ivors, the inappropriate speech, where, among other absurdities, he calls his aunts and cousin "the Three Graces of the Dublin musical world"(204). One night also instance the famous "Distant Music" passage.

Gabriel had not gone to the door with the others. He was in a dark part of the hall gazing up the staircase. A woman was standing near the top of the first flight, in the shadow also. He could not see her face but he could see the terra-cotta and salmon-pink panels of her skirt which the shadow made appear black and white. It was his wife. She was leaning on the banisters, listening to something. Gabriel was surprised at her stillness and strained his ear to listen also. But he could hear little save the noise of laughter and dispute on the front steps, a few chords struck on the piano and a few notes of a man's voice singing.

He stood still in the gloom of the hall, trying to catch the air that the voice was singing and gazing up at his wife. There was grace and mystery in her attitude as if

she were a symbol of something. He asked himself what is a woman standing on the stairs in the shadow, listening to distant music, a symbol of. If he were a painter he would paint her in that attitude. Her blue felt hat would show off the bronze of her hair against the darkness and the dark panels of her skirt would show off the light ones. *Distant Music* he would call the picture if he were a painter.(209-10)

Even in a private moment contemplating his wife, Gabriel cannot give up the pose. He insists on viewing her “as if she were a symbol of something.” He affects, at precisely the wrong moment, an artificial, “aesthetic” relation to Gretta. In fact, she is at this moment engrossed in the folk song being sung by Bartell D’Arcy, which as it turns out, was one sung also by Michael Furey.

O the rain falls on my heavy locks  
And the dew wets my skin,  
My babe likes cold. . .(210)

Gabriel, of course, misinterprets his wife’s passionate response to this as a longing to respond to him. Actually, the lyrics suggest Michael Furey standing under a tree in the rain on the last night before Gretta was to leave, the night when he told her he no longer wished to live.

Indeed, the song may suggest even more than that. Later on, when she confesses her affair with Michael Furey, Gretta remarks: “I was great with him at that time”(220). It may be possible to infer from this an unwanted pregnancy, which would supply a sufficient motive for Gretta’s family’s sep-

arating her from Michael Furey and shipping her off to a convent, a traditional dumping ground for such cases. Gretta's having been pregnant would also go some distance towards explaining the strange depth of her passion for the young boy, and indeed it would increase the depth of Gabriel's humiliation.

We should not be too hard on Gabriel, however. Certainly a great deal of irony has by now been pointed at him; he has been indeed "a ludicrous figure, acting as a penny-boy for his aunts, a nervous, well-meaning sentimentalist, orating at vulgarians and idealizing his own clownish lusts, the pitiable fatuous fellow he had caught a glimpse of in the mirror"(220). Yet since the time of the speech, at least, we have begun to see him as a more genial, human character than we were allowed to see previously. The anecdote he tells about Patrick Morkan and his horse is unpretentious and amusing, and the passion he feels for Gretta on the way home, though perhaps banal and even a bit fatuous, is genuine, attractive, and moving. The wine, perhaps, has broken his pretension and inhibition. Whatever the cause, the effect is to endear Gabriel to the reader in a way we had not expected. It is only at this point that he is humiliated with the bizarre *anagnorisis* and *peripeteia* of the final scene in the hotel room.

This seems to be Joyce's deliberate strategy. As C.C. Loomis points out, "if the reader identifies himself unreservedly with Gabriel in the first ninety percent of the story, he will lose that critical insight into him which is necessary for full apprehension of his vision ... [and] he is liable to miss those very shortcomings which make the vision meaningful"(149). The shortcomings, as we have seen, are fairly obvious. The exact nature of the "vision" has been much debated. David Daiches, for instance, who views the story

positively, treats Gabriel's epiphany in aesthetic terms. Daiches notes that "the indifferent acceptance of life as something revolving not round the artist's ego but on its independent axis is for Joyce the ideal aesthetic attitude"(82), and goes on to say that "The Dead" is a "fable" illustrating this view(82). Florence Walzl, in an interesting essay summarizing the major criticism, argues that the way one reads the ending of "The Dead" seems to depend on whether one views it as the culminating story in *Dubliners* or an independent work(424-25). Thus, critics like Hugh Kenner and Brewster Ghiselin, who treat "The Dead" as part of the whole book of stories and emphasize certain "unifying" themes, tend to see it as a summation of negativism; Gabriel's vision is one of "identification with the dead"(Walzl 424). In Kenner's phrase, Gabriel finds at the end of the story that his "proper medium" (*Dublin's Joyce* 64) is death. On the other hand, critics like Daiches, Kenneth Burke, and Allen Tate, who view the story as an entity in itself, see the final vision as "a rebirth experience"(Walzl 443). Walzl herself believes that Joyce deliberately imposed on his work "a pattern of ambivalent symbols and a great final ambiguity"(443).

Indeed, the circumstances of publication seem to have dictated to Joyce the logic of this solution. He began writing some of the stories in *Dubliners* before leaving Ireland in 1904, and he completed an early version of the volume in 1906. Walzl notes that the letter so many of the negative critics cite, in which Joyce claims that he chose the Dublin setting because that city seemed to him the "centre of paralysis," was written in May 1906, well before the composition of "The Dead"(425). Thus "The Dead" seems to have been an afterthought reflecting not merely Joyce's growing experience and maturity, but his changing attitude as well. Despite the natural attraction of seeking unifying themes, we should be careful not to bind "The Dead" by

the strictures the other stories impose upon themselves. As S.L. Goldberg argues, “The Dead’s” “deeply felt conviction, its originality, its complex yet assured ironies, its humility before life, place it apart from the rest of *Dubliners*. Fine as they are, the other stories stand judged by this”(46). Because of this, we should feel free to follow the story through its epiphany toward its greater depths of understanding. Gabriel’s longing at one point to extricate himself from the situation of the party and walk alone in the snow need not be, as Kenner suggests (as much as anything by analogy with earlier stories) “a longing for ... death”( *Dublin’s Joyce* 68). Just as easily, the longing could be for a higher form of selflessness, the moral parallel of Daiches “aesthetic ideal,” which has very strong roots in Christian tradition, and indeed should not involve the death wish. Kenneth Burke, we should remember, sees the snow as “the *mythic image*, in the world of conditions, standing for the transcendence above the conditioned”(415-16).

Finally, if we do not conclude, with Hugh Kenner, that Joyce took a malicious delight in the ironic exposure of his character, we should seek in the humbling of Gabriel’s pride some spiritual preparation for the “epiphany” which in the final pages he achieves. This insight is a profound one: the essential unity and equality of all mankind in death. It is an insight which gathers up and defeats all the social or political pretensions with which we have become familiar in the story.

Generous tears filled Gabriel’s eyes. He had never felt like that himself towards any woman, but he knew that such a feeling must be love. The tears gathered more thickly in his eyes and in the partial darkness he imagined he saw the form of a young man standing under a drip-

ping tree. Other forms were near. His soul had approached that region where dwell the vast hosts of the dead. He was conscious of, but could not apprehend, their wayward and flickering existence. His own identity was fading out into a grey impalpable world: the solid world itself, which these dead had one time reared and lived in, was dissolving and dwindling.(223)

Homer Obed Brown, following Ellman, speaks of Gabriel's insight at the end of the story in terms of "the death of egoism"(99). And what seems to be the emotive image of Calvary supports and strengthens this: Gabriel's old and bankrupt sense of self dies so that a new and finer one may be born. If we are disposed to translate a secular tale into the familiar terminology of Christianity, "the form of a young man standing under a dripping tree" does seem very like a figure of Christ, and Gabriel's fading identity very like those rare things, Christian selflessness and humility. And the approach to these is mediated by Gabriel's hard earned, very human love, "the word known to all men" which according to Richard Ellman informs Joyce's masterpiece, *Ulysses*, and proves, in Ellman's phrase, "the closest we can come to paradise"(*New York Times Book Review* 37). Far from culminating "the centre of paralysis" depicted in Joyce's earliest stories, "The Dead" points the way toward the great comedy of life in his mature fiction.



Notes

<sup>1</sup> One might add to these names those of James R. Baker and Lionel Trilling. Baker, comparing Joyce and Ibsen, sees the stories in *Dubliners* including “The Dead” as sharing a “common pattern ... Dublin is the realm of the living-dead, paralysis exists on every level of experience and at every stage of life”(67). Trilling, perhaps echoing his own concerns, writes that “Gabriel Conroy’s plight, his sense that he has been overtaken by death-in-life, is shared by many in our time”(156). Both these writers, however, Trilling genially and Baker somewhat less so, impose on Joyce the coloring of outside concerns, fitting him to the mold of Ibsen or an “adversary” literature.

<sup>2</sup> Of course “The Dead” is also “autobiographical” in the sense that Joyce based his characters on people he knew, his family, friends, and himself, but no character has the special personal relevance of Stephen Dedalus, originally conceived as “Stephen Hero,” and only later subjected to distancing irony in *Portrait of the Artist* and *Ulysses*. Ellman believes that while Gretta is fairly obviously based on Nora Barnacle, and the Misses Morkan on Joyce’s own great-aunts, the character of Gabriel is actually a composite of Joyce himself, his father John Joyce, and a friend named Constantine Curran, whose brother was a priest like Gabriel’s brother Constantine (*James Joyce* 1959). Harry Levin describes Gabriel as “a Stephen Dedalus who stayed on to teach school and write occasional reviews” (42). That fact that Gabriel is only partially autobiographical can explain both Joyce’s sympathy for and detection of his character in “The Dead.”

<sup>3</sup> The flicking of snow from Gabriel’s boots has also been seen by critics like Allen Tate (408) and Kenneth Burke (410) as an early suggestion of death, the first appearance of the snow symbolism that comes gradually to domi-

nate the story.

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