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FICTION

ESSAYS

"Fate was my permanent foe": Providential Coincidence in *Villette*

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In *Villette*, the last of Charlotte Brontë's novels published in her lifetime, the orphaned Lucy Snowe goes out into the world to earn her living. As another novel in which a young woman without family, and economically "de-classed," attempts to establish an independent personal and social identity, *Villette* follows *Jane Eyre*. On many levels, Lucy's narrative replicates Jane's story of a young, solitary female looking for a way into the social structure at a level she feels she deserves. In Ruth Parkin-Gounelas's words, the plots in both *Jane Eyre* and *Villette* function "to allow the central protagonist to undergo a cataclysmic transformation in status—after a series of carefully planned and strategically-timed developments" (55); in his perceptive introduction to the later novel, Tony Tanner could be speaking of *Jane Eyre* as well when he declares *Villette* to be "a study in how a human being attempts to constitute herself in a society largely indifferent to her needs" (10).

In both novels, coincidence is the strategy by which unfold these "strategically-timed developments," which effect different transformations of social status for each of the protagonists. In *Jane Eyre*, the events that transform Jane's status, by bringing her back into the station she has felt herself suited for all along, hinge on a largely inexplicable coincidence—Jane's serendipitous discovery of cousins—and a consequent inheritance of wealth. Coincidences in many novels reacquaint the protagonists with the station or family or wealth of which they have been deprived: in Jane's life, such re-acquaintance occurs. Ultimately, though, in *Jane Eyre*, the personal struggle of the protagonist misses being a strong statement of independence because the novel sublimates the struggle to a conclusion of assimilation, and Jane is folded back into the same structured and constricted, conventional community that has displaced her originally.

Villette, however, challenges Jane's story, and in the rewrite—as Lucy's tale—takes the heroine off the well-worn path of social convention. Lucy's ultimately non-conforming thoughts and actions stand in stark contrast to the British community's prescripts, and she forges an identity not contingent on the social conventions of the British community in Villette, Labassecour—the fictionalized Brussels, Belgium—and not dependent on Fate's intervention.

For what could be chastised as her unconventionality in traveling to a foreign landscape, Lucy tries to shift blame onto the abstract Fate and Providence. First, Lucy claims that Fate and Providence direct her removal

from England. When she reaches what Thomas Vargish calls a "plateau of resigned isolation" (73) in the tedium of taking care of an invalid, Fate and Providence take away her livelihood: the invalid dies. Lucy acknowledges that she "had wanted to compromise with Fate: to escape occasional great agonies by submitting to a whole life of privation and small pains" (97). To such a compromise, she believes, "Fate would not be so pacified; nor would Providence sanction this shrinking sloth and cowardly indolence" (97).

Second, after arriving in Villette, Lucy loses her way to an inn while evading two stalkers and finds herself at Madame Beck's *Pensionnat de Demoiselles*, a girls' school where, Lucy claims, Providence says to her, "Stop here, this is *your* inn" (126). Lucy continues to credit a personified Fate who "took me in her strong hand; mastered my will; directed my actions: I rang the doorbell" (126). Lucy, however, soon says that "Fate was my permanent foe, never to be conciliated" (229) because Lucy comes to see what we come to understand, that although in *Villette* there is coincidence, often a tool of Providence, the device does not serve Lucy with the same sort of providential dispensation that rescues Jane.

While in *Jane Eyre* coincidence is revealed in an arbitrary and surprising moment, in *Villette* the uncanny coincidence, the reappearance of the several British characters on the foreign terrain, is not quite so inexplicably startling or abrupt. The evidence of the coincidence in which the entire text is grounded is revealed when Lucy collapses after the long vacation and is taken to La Terrasse, the foreign home of the Brettons. Various minor coincidences have occurred that lead up to the larger coincidence: Dr. John's aid to Lucy when she arrives in Villette; Lucy and Dr. John's co-service at the pensionnat; Dr. John's serendipitous appearance following Lucy's collapse. These several coincidences are presented with a narrative sleight-of-hand that engages our sense of surprise and disguises the prominence of the underlying, even thematic, coincidence—the re-association of the British friends and relatives who come together to develop the British community on foreign terrain. In this community, the dispensation of good fortune takes place, manipulated and directed within the same type of coincidental trajectories that, in *Jane Eyre*, reach across countries and continents to accommodate the protagonist's desire for wealth and family; in *Villette*, however, the coincidences bring Lucy into the path of the wheel of good fortune but then avoid her, moving around or beyond her in order to facilitate the social and economic improvement of other characters, such as Dr. John/Graham and Polly/Paulina. Lucy, *voyeur extraordinaire* who comments on the lives of others, can only stand by as others displace her within the dispensation process generated by coincidence, with not only her vocal complaints about her solitude but also her role of observer reinforcing our awareness of her as socially non-privileged.

Failing to accommodate her with economic or social gain, coincidence calls attention to Lucy's non-conformation to the communal standard. By bringing together the British main characters in the foreign "little town" of Villette, coincidence provides a paradigm for the British ethnocentric consciousness as enabled by community. The coincidence makes a blatant claim for the far-reaching, unseverable ties that protect, even insulate, the English from their foreign environment; an Englishwoman, even a solitary one such as Lucy, is always connected to co-members of what Benedict Anderson calls the "imagined political community" (6) even on foreign soil, more than she is to any other nationality or race. Coincidence in *Villette*, nevertheless, serves to distinguish Lucy as substantially different from others in the British community.

Although the formal function of coincidence as it relates the protagonist to the community is strikingly different in these two of Brontë's novels, the ideological implications of the device are similar. The difference in application paradoxically substantiates a reading of coincidence as a prevailing, generic strategy of authority, because while in *Jane Eyre* the conventional function of the device goes unchallenged, in *Villette* its function is implicitly resisted: Lucy is, for the most part, excluded from its conventional beneficence. And it can be argued that it is not until a device is resisted that its previously unnoticed, unrecognized, or unchallenged strength can be perceived or measured.

It is debatable whether Brontë intended to resist coincidence's conventionality in this novel; nevertheless, some intent to challenge prescriptive tradition compelled her to rewrite, as Lucy Snowe, the conventional and quite revered protagonist of *Jane Eyre*, for which the author had been lauded. In her March 22, 1853, letter to her longtime friend Ellen Nussey, Brontë writes, "As to the character of 'Lucy Snowe' my intention from the first was that she should not occupy the pedestal to which 'Jane Eyre' was raised by some injudicious admirers. She is where I meant her to be, and where no charge of self-laudation can touch her" (Wise, Letter 834). About the ending, which has Lucy's love interest perhaps lost at sea, Brontë writes to her editor that it "was designed that every reader should settle the catastrophe for himself, according to the quality of his disposition, the tender or remorseless impulse of his nature: Drowning and Matrimony are the fearful alternatives." The merciful reader, Brontë continues, would have Paul drown; the cruel-hearted would "impale him on the second horn of the dilemma, marrying him with ruth or compunction to that—person—that—that—individual—'Lucy Snowe'" (Wise, Letter 837). *Villette*'s non-traditional and ambiguous conclusion, which leaves Paul's fate unresolved and has an unmarried Lucy Snowe running her own business in the foreign city of Villette, substantiates the quarrel Brontë's contemporaries would have with

this novel and its protagonist: nineteenth-century reviewer Anne Moxley chastised *Villette* for presenting a female impersonation "without the feminine element, . . . self-reliant, contemptuous of prescriptive decorum" (207), Moxley's adjective "prescriptive" replete with its attendant meanings of precedently customary and therapeutically medicinal.

In a novel wherein coincidence establishes the community in and against which the protagonist measures her identity and finds it wanting, the major coincidence itself is, oddly enough, never remarked; however, Lucy does twice mention "coincidence." As paradigms for Lucy's ultimate exclusion from the beneficence of the major coincidence, the two events she labels coincidence reinforce the idea of the device as a strategy that accommodates a nationalistic construction of identity that relies on communal prescripts. They also direct our attention to the function of coincidence in the novel as it primarily serves someone else's interests, not Lucy's, as she moves further and further away from British communal values.

As if acknowledging that the device will not serve her, Lucy objectively discusses "coincidence" in her opening paragraph, where, connecting coincidence with someone else's story, she both illuminates the device's dispassionate distance from her own story and demonstrates her exclusion, because of her challenge to convention, from the symbolic Bretton/Briton community. She begins her narrative by idly wondering if the Bretton family was responsible for the place-name of Bretton, the town where they have lived for generations, or if the co-occurrence of identical names is by "coincidence." Her reflection—"whether by coincidence, or because some remote ancestor had been a personage of sufficient importance to leave his name to his neighborhood, I know not" (61)—suggests that, even in her autobiographically-styled retrospective, she does not have access to the reality behind what may be called coincidence. Significantly, Lucy associates the masculine possessive pronoun with both patrilineal name and with the town, revealing the ideological, traditional underpinning of patrilineal space, at the same time that she sets herself apart as different, challenging patronymic practice by suggesting coincidental naming, which would actually limit or dismiss patriarchal control over space.

In the other instance of what Lucy perceives as coincidence, she confronts her exclusion from its ramifications. In the town of Villette, relaxing in a garden retreat at the pensionnat where she works, she is startled by a box, a casket, dropping at her feet and momentarily considers that she might be the recipient of a *billet-doux*. But the lovenote inside the casket is not only not to her, but describes her as "*une véritable, bégueule Britannique à ce que vous dites—espèce de monstre, brusque et rude comme un vieux caporal de grenadiers, et revêche comme une religieuse*" (178). In editor Mark Lilly's translation, Lucy is "a veritable British prude from what you

say—a kind of monster, sharp and harsh like an old grenadier corporal, and as awkward as a nun" (603, n. 4).

After Dr. John (Lucy has not yet revealed to us that he is in fact the Graham Bretton from her past) hurries into the garden to find the box and its message, Lucy wonders, "How was it that Dr. John, if he had not been accessory to the dropping of that casket into the garden, should have known that it was dropped, and appeared so promptly on the spot to seek it?" (187). Trying unsuccessfully to summon the courage to ask Dr. John to, in her words, "explain this coincidence" (187), Lucy hears him give the portress an explanation: standing in the building with the person who threw the box, the doctor suspects the message might compromise the reputation of a young lady he believes to be innocent and refined, and he intercepts it.

Lucy gets some satisfaction at hearing of Dr. John's only peripheral involvement in a situation that contains the personal attack on Lucy's character, but the satisfaction is mitigated by her awareness that she is an outsider to the implications of what she presumptively styles a "coincidence." Both Dr. John's lack of awareness of Lucy's feelings for him and Madame Beck's mistaken assumption that Lucy is a party to a romantic *tête-à-tête* with the doctor establish for her the truth of what the anonymous letter-writer has implied, that she is the site of a tumultuous identity conflict. Aware that, ironically, she has not been compromised while wishing she could be, Lucy articulates her conflict: "Yet as the laugh died, a kind of wrath smote me, and then bitterness followed: . . . I never had felt so strange and contradictory an inward tumult as I felt for an hour that evening: soreness and laughter, and fire, and grief, shared my heart between them" (186-87).

The geographical site of each of these minor "coincidences" enhances the conflict exposed by the contradiction between Lucy's prescribed identity and her desires. In the first instance, the reflective Lucy recalls her British surroundings dispassionately from a distance of many years, acknowledging patriarchal power and linking it to the Brettons. In the second instance, she recalls her resentment at being excluded in the foreign town from romance with the man she has recognized as a Bretton. She is, then, the site of such identity conflict as the letter-writer implies: Lucy's being called "monster," "grenadier corporal," and "nun," in its combination of insults questioning her humanity, her passivity and femininity, and her religious orientation, implies her failure to conform to British traditions of class, gender, and theology.

These two minor coincidences, if we take Lucy's word that they are coincidences, can help us to understand how the basic coincidence—the bringing together of all the British characters who have become, as Mrs. Bretton calls it, an "English clan in Villette" (355)—is of primary importance. Especially when we look at it in terms of Lucy's exclusion, the clan's re-establishment is important in showing the development of a separate identity

for this character Brontë cast as unconventional and sometimes unlikable, a Briton-yet-sometimes-Other in the foreign environment. Using *Jane Eyre* as a touchstone for coincidence's serendipity, we can see that as a woman who cannot count on an economically secure life of dependent domesticity, Lucy in her independence poses a challenge that shows her to be less deserving than the eponymous Jane Eyre of coincidentally-manipulated reward in an arena walled in by social strictures.

In many novels, the large and uncanny coincidence that provides help for the protagonist comes at a time when that character experiences a "breakdown," either physical, mental, or both, and is rescued in some fashion. Lucy's story is not one of the exceptions to this rule. After Lucy understands that Dr. John is not interested in her, she falls ill, and her collapsing on the steps of the Catholic church allows Dr. John to rescue her. Volume Two of the novel opens with Lucy bedridden at La Terrasse, the foreign home of the Brettons, and at this point Lucy reveals to her readers what she has known all along: the Dr. John for whom she has feelings is the Graham Bretton from her childhood, and his mother is her godmother.

Unlike the coincidence in *Jane Eyre* that brings the protagonist family, money, and social power, this coincidence in *Villette* fails to assign Lucy an improved monetary value or to re-empower her socially: the entire middle of the novel demonstrates clearly and painfully to Lucy that she has insufficient value to interest Graham, even though he is now aware of their shared childhood. But although the coincidental regrouping of the British acquaintances, including Mr. Home and his daughter Paulina, does not apparently serve Lucy's immediate economic interest, its neglect of her does serve her emotional development, after a fashion. By neglecting her in the dispensation of good fortune, coincidence keeps her grounded, reminding her that the independence sought and tentatively earned in the first volume is what her future holds. Lucy values her independence to such an extent that she refuses Mr. Home's offer of three times her teaching salary to be companion to his daughter, Paulina, who does actually profit from the coincidence, going on to marry Graham. By placing her within the expatriate British community and then denying her the advantages thereof, coincidence situates Lucy so as to facilitate a fundamental aspect of her character, her independence.

The mere fact, however, that she has exhibited that independence by traveling alone, with no prospects, to a foreign country, makes Lucy a target for such reviewers as Moxley, who warns that "a restless heart and vagrant imagination, though owned by woman, can have no sympathy or true insight into the really feminine nature" (208). Moxley's castigation of the restlessness and vagrancy of female desire can be projected as a larger theme of insularity required against continental contamination; the warning is also a subtext to

Lucy's creed—to remain English—which Lucy herself, however, does not follow particularly well in her movement toward self-sufficiency.

By not commandeering the beneficence of coincidence for its protagonist, thus leaving her at the mercy of her own earnings, the sometimes bitter *Villette* becomes a much darker social comment than the sometimes saccharine *Jane Eyre*, foiling the traditional autobiographical contract of quest and self-definition within the boundaries of a socially acceptable structure. Its ending, however, poses new possibilities for the socially inferior, economically-distressed female protagonist when she is transplanted to a foreign terrain. Jane accesses family, money, and matrimony, albeit serendipitously, and thereby re-enters a recognized and revered class hig within the social structure. Lucy merely survives, and coincidence does n help her improve significantly in station or wealth. Thus, *Villette* ambiguous ending, leaving the reader without full knowledge of whether Lu achieves matrimonial success, can be read as a more realistic treatment of t more-often-than-not economically unrelieved plight of the governess "clas Terry Eagleton says of *Villette*'s ambiguity that it is "appropriate to book's continually double-edged attitude to the question of secure settleme . . . [T]he conclusion remains calculatedly unresolved, underlining the delig of domestic settlement at the same time as it protests against the bl unreality of such an ending" (73).

In *Jane Eyre*, the tentative feminist hope for independenc suppressed at the end by Jane's reduction to a wifely heroine and helpm In *Villette*, the limited achievement of independence is only partially coe into silence by the hints of what the public would demand as resolutio marriage. The independence is never fully articulated, recognize acknowledged, yet it is only fair to say that in her revised use of coinci and its ramifications, Charlotte Brontë does challenge prescriptive trad

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town where I grew up just inside the 1830 Choctaw Cession Line. Most of the townspeople were born there, except those like my mother (now ninety-four) and like Rebecca Boyd. Both women had moved there when they married, Rebecca Boyd having learned storytelling as a child in the early 1900s. My mother asked around, then told me where Rebecca's husband lived. From him I learned of Beka's death and that I could come back tomorrow. The next day I brought him a pack of cigarettes, the *nan isht aiokpachi* (token of respect) I should have brought the day before, and we began to reminisce. Had he been Choctaw like Rebecca, chances are he would not have spoken of the dead. But Mr. Boyd seemed eager and inquisitive as if he were the interviewer, asking what I recalled of Beka, her voice, what she would say when, how she always did this, and never did that. Sitting outside to get the breeze from the south, we talked again the next day, and again on my subsequent visits home. Gradually there emerged from the details a pattern to the four-voiced, four-part stories with at least one sleep between each telling. The rationing of information showed me the value of a time lapse of at least one day, for as I took notes and talked and wrote and slept and thought about these *anoli talbal tuklo* (two-basket stories), more came back to me. In time I systematically arranged the details into descriptions which Mr. Boyd would confirm . . . or would remind me what I had forgotten. A logic governing the structure emerged as I began to perceive the educational principles guiding this process designed not only to entertain while preserving history, but also to pass on knowledge and to train sensory awareness, memory, observation, a sense of humor, judgment and the ability to speculate upon logical consequences for the future.

And the metaphor in the name became clear. The Choctaw weave a doublewall basket. Two doublewall baskets have four walls; the two-basket story has four versions. Each version requires a different teller who faces a different direction to reinforce the different point of view. The first teller emphasizes sensory impressions; the second, historical background; and the hird, comic elements. The last storyteller, chosen from among those listening o the earlier versions, must not have participated in nor witnessed any of the tory's events, and is therefore unable to rely on previous knowledge or rsthand experience. The last teller must depend upon listening skills, emory, and judgment in order to recap significant points from the first thre ersions and conclude with a forecast.

Rebecca Boyd had made her voice sound different as she told eac first three versions. The child-voiced first teller faced east because " tters to the rising sun "is" the physical world, its colors, shapes, and cestry and precipitating events were important to the second tel ed the other side of "what is" where the sun sleeps, dreaming ." The third teller, chosen by the listeners for a sense of humo

need to cultivate one, faced the home of the south wind. It did not matter whether it was blowing in from the Gulf, tickling the nose, "making you laugh," Beka would say, "when you'd rather be frowning." The fourth teller had to tell what was important in the first three stories strictly from having listened to the storytelling rather than from having seen or done. The fourth teller faced the North Star, visible or not, for guidance to synthesize and prophesy, though in the migration legend, direction came from a walking stick, not a star. I was unable to get Mr. Boyd to clarify the pairing of synthesis and prophecy, but he was clear that the accumulation of detail was calculated to strengthen impact.

Aware that variation is a given in an oral culture, we hear the two-basket design in *The Sound and the Fury* with its four storytellers and four perspectives: (1) what is, (2) what was, (3) what's funny, (4) the whole, including what will be. The story is told four times. Dates in lieu of titles on the four sections show the time lapse of at least one sleep between each telling. Questioned about the dates' significance, in *Faulkner in the University*, Faulkner denied "writing any symbolism of the Passion Week. . . . I'm sure it was quite instinctive that I picked out Easter" (68). Cultural bias influences whether the dates draw our attention to the time lapse, to Christian holy days, to the chronological disorder, or to the fact that the Compsons' story is told in perfect two-basket order beginning with Benjy's "what is."

Benjy is in the moment the day before Easter, hanging onto a wrought iron fence looking out through the "curling flower spaces" watching Luster "hunting in the grass by the flower tree" (3). Benjy is all sensory impression in the white glare of sunlight, the light important. The light is how we learn that we have moved inside the house. The light changes. It is firelight jumping to the diamonds on Mother's hand. Benjy loves light, and he loves rain—on the roof, against the glass, pelting leaves. Benjy loves the smell of "bright cold," and he loves Caddy, the sister who always "smelled like leaves" (5).

Section two is dated eighteen years earlier than the other three sections. The day of Quentin's suicide is listened to from inside his consciousness, watch ticking in his pocket, remembered voices in his head. Twenty-year-old Quentin's voice sounds like an old man's as his memory takes us back even further, to the riverbank with his sister "lying in the water her head on the sand spit the water flowing about her hips" (94). Quentin's view of "what was" balances on the other side of Benjy's "what is."

Jason's comical comeuppance is section three. It is on Good Friday that whiny-voiced Jason tells the joke on himself, and part of what makes this sad story funny is that Jason, desperately in need of a sense of humor, fails to see the humor. We laugh not with, but at him: humorless Jason taking

himself so seriously, chasing around town after his niece, keeping his sister from her daughter, threatening to rent Benjy to a sideshow, tormenting Luster with show tickets, investing in the stock market in 1928.

Faulkner, neither participant nor witness, tells section four in omniscient voice. He recaps "the whole," having listened to the fictional storytellers created in his own imagination. Jason's loss is discovered, his niece has escaped, and Benjy is in church with Dilsey. Though we get no prophecy from Faulkner's lips on Easter Sunday, it is clear that in the omniscient view Dilsey is the future.

Sixteen years after the original 1929 printing of *The Sound and the Fury*, Faulkner added an appendix, which takes us back to 1833. It was a time the stars broke loose and flew across the sky of the Indians' world so shaken by treaties of removal. The appendix extends the whole picture, finally says the word *castration*, answers the incest question, and laughs again at Jason "robbed not only of his thievings but his savings too, and by his own victim . . . [so he] couldn't even go to the police; . . . [and he] didn't dare pursue the girl himself because he might catch her and she would talk" (214). Looking into the future at Jason's lack of possible redress and having seen his past cruelties add to readers' satisfaction at seeing him as cheater cheated, an illustration of how meaning builds as detail accumulates. The perspectives of present-focused Benjy, past-focused Quentin, self-focused Jason, and omniscient Faulkner make two balanced structures. But Benjy's voice is so original and so powerful that it outweighs the accumulation of detail in subsequent voices, making the design toward intensity work in reverse. What design? said Faulkner in interviews, introductions, taped classes at the University of Virginia, and international lectures. In response to a question posed in his 1955 "Interviews in Japan," Faulkner said, "I wrote that same story [*The Sound and the Fury*] four times. None of them were right, but I had anguished so much that I could not throw any of it away and start over, so I printed it in the four sections. That was not a deliberate *tour de force* at all, the book just grew that way" (147). Quite a coincidence that out of failure to get it right, the book just grew the Choctaw way, made to endure so that matters of importance might not be lost with the next Chickasaw or Creek raiding party. With enough storytelling-listeners, identity can hang on through the Trail of Tears when the meteor shower of 1833 signified a world so broken that even the stars shook loose.

Before 1833 Faulkner's North Mississippi was Chickasaw territory. He rarely visited central or southern Mississippi, where it was generally held that he would never amount to much except a writer of dirty books who was giving the state a bad name. But he had opportunity to hear Choctaw stories the year he lived in New Orleans' French Quarter. Faulkner walked the Quarter and listened to peoples' stories; the evidence exists in his short pieces

published in *The Double Dealer* and in the Sunday feature section of the New Orleans *Times-Picayune* in 1925. Some of these sketches explore motifs that would be developed in *The Sound and the Fury*. His apartment in what is now Pirate's Alley was less than two blocks from the French Market, where in 1925 Choctaw basket sellers and storytellers set up among the vegetable stalls. Their descendants still live in the area off Canal just outside the Quarter, where in 1925 the Choctaw would have frequented the little neighborhood club on Franklin (renamed Crozat), where Faulkner liked to listen to Georgia Boy Boyd play his jazz clarinet.

As a native Mississippian who reads and rereads Faulkner for the pleasure of falling under his spell, I willingly suspend analysis. But when Faulkner critic Malcolm Cowley places horsepower on a grocery scale (as quoted in my first paragraph), old memories stir. Rebecca Boyd's words roll in "like summer thunder," and I find that I am facing east in response to that familiar structure woven with only the cane's shiny sides showing. The teacher in me searches for direction to synthesize, to balance the whole, to integrate form with content, and I focus finally on that which is invisible in the teaching art. As a former resident (fourteen years) of South Louisiana who still can taste the richness of the cultural mix and hear the easy interchange among the arts, I understand how ideas could work through Faulkner like the classics he "swallowed whole" and found in his consciousness ten years later "in a series of delayed repercussions like summer thunder" ("An Introduction" 708-09). Working to codify the Choctaw storytelling structure and curious if Faulkner borrowed, appropriated, refashioned, dreamed, imagined, consciously adapted, or fell backward into his use of it, I research print, people, and my own memory. And when I find that, like Faulkner's "delayed repercussions," I knew more than I knew, I can believe that Faulkner believed that he wrote *The Sound and the Fury* without a plan, the book that made him, the book that just grew into the shape of two doublewall Choctaw baskets.

An expanded version (entitled "William Faulkner's Two Basket Stories") includes indebtedness to the Choctaw for multiple storytellers in *Absalom, Absalom!* It will appear in *Songs of the Reconstructing South: Building Literary Louisiana 1865-1945*, edited by Suzanne D. Green and Lisa Abney, Greenwood Publishing Group (due in 2001).

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The Shavian Gospel as Revealed in *The Adventures of the Black Girl in Her Search for God*

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I recently read Leslie Marmon Silko's *Gardens in the Dunes,* an American novel in which the scenes set in England adopt the tone and content concerns that characterize much of English literature. One particular character, Aunt Bronwyn, with her fascination with pre-Christian deities, especially the goddesses, echoes the search for meaningful religious imagery that has characterized much of the literature of England in both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. My first thought, as I read Silko, was of D. H. Lawrence's observation in *Apocalypse* that Christianity was a religion of confirmed male power in which "the doctrine of love even at its best was an evasion" (14) designed to deceive the good and moral people into acceptance. Lawrence, picking up threads that can be found in William Blake, Percy Shelley, Elizabeth Barrett, Matthew Arnold, Thomas Hardy, and William James called for "a return to the cosmos," through a reinvestigation of the great range of religious responses that existed before the triumph of Christianity in the West (31). Before Lawrence, Swinburne, with the vitriol of a Lawrence, had predicted a similar return to pre-Christian religious metaphors in his "Hymn to Proserpine," but of more interest to this discussion was the 1877 publication of Madame Blavatsky's *Isis Unveiled*, which was responsible for transporting the heterodox religious ideas of the Theosophists from upstate New York to London society (Campbell 28-31). Henry Olcott, the first president of the Theosophical Society defined the group's mission as the study of "the primeval source of all religions" with the goal of demonstrating to Christians "the pagan origins of many of their most sacred idols and most cherished dogmas," including "the doctrine of love," which had given Christianity an attractive human face. Tied in with the Theosophist's concern with religious thought was an attempt to reconcile religion with modern science, especially in the light of Darwin's demonstration of evolutionary theory (Campbell 29).

It is not too surprising that George Bernard Shaw would embrace some of the ideas of the Theosophists. Like the Theosophists, to use the words of Andrew Sanders, "Shaw presupposes that history can be illuminating, that the present can be vigorously reforming, and that the future (whether Darwinistically determined or not) will be exciting rather than exacting" (478). His early plays, *The Philanderer, Mrs. Warren's Profession* and *Widowers' Houses,* embraced women's issues in defiance of the established conventions with a confident sense of unorthodox—that is to say,

essentially pagan—moral propriety, which drew the attention of the Lord Chamberlain's censors (Sanders 479). Perhaps the most Theosophical of Shaw's literary productions is *The Adventures of the Black Girl in Her Search for God.* Shaw wrote this novella in 1932 while traveling in South Africa. He himself thought of it as "a Gospel of Shawianity" which represented the compilation of four decades of meditation on man's relationship to man, to God, and to the universe leading ultimately to the conclusion, to quote Sidney Albert, that "God is a female deity, 'the mother of us all'" (*Quintessential).* In terms of practical advice, the novella returns to a source used in Shaw's 1897 play *Candida: A Mystery* to proclaim the wisdom of Voltaire's pragmatic moral advice that we cultivate our own gardens.

Shaw's novella begins with an unsympathetic portrait of a missionary, a small white English woman, "a born apostle of love," who has decided, after jilting six clergymen, one of whom committed suicide, to come to Africa to teach the heathens to "love Christ and adore the cross" (7). Her star pupil, the unnamed black girl, proves to be a challenging convert who asks many questions about absolute power and the nature of evil that are beyond the missionary's ability to answer without inventing answers on the spot, so the black girl arms herself with a knobkerry and "strode off into the African forest in search of God" [Figure 1] (8). The first being she meets who claims to be God is a strong black man, who, claiming to be all-powerful, demands her fear, her subservience and her favorite child as a human sacrifice, much as God demanded that Abraham sacrifice his favorite child, Isaac (*Genesis* 22). The black girl tells this Old Testament style "God" that she is no "ninny to believe such nonsense" and attacks him with her knobkerry [Figure 2]. The "god" immediately disappears, and mysteriously the first pages of the Bible the missionary had given her crumble into dust (8-11). Like the Theosophists, the black girl has begun to reject what Madame Blavatsky called the "extra-cosmic and anthropomorphic God, who is but the gigantic shadow of *man*, and not of man at his best" (*Key*, sec. 5).

Because Shaw believed that the Bible itself is evidence that the human conception of God's nature has evolved over the centuries (60), the next "God" the black girl encounters is the God of Job. The black girl engages this entity in a debate on the nature of creation, but she is unsatisfied with his self-serving responses and raises her knobkerry. Once again, the "God" disappears, and more pages of her Bible disintegrate into dust (11-14). The next person she meets in the forest is a young man, Koheleth, the preacher in *Ecclesiastes*, who tries to convince her that there is no God, no afterlife, and that she should just enjoy the pleasures of the present, becoming a "bad woman" if that pleases her (14-18). The black girl tells Koheleth that her thinking about God has evolved because he has taught her that "to know

God is to be God" (16), or in the words of Madame Blavatsky, she has learned that "the inner man is the only God we can have cognizance of" (*Key*, sec. 5). The next person she meets in the forest is the minor prophet Micah the Morasthite, the last of the Old Testament characters in the novella. Micah tells her of a third conception of God who dispenses justice and shows mercy, but when she asks him how an ordinary person who is not a "baas" should conduct her life, Micah lets out a fearful roar designed to terrify those who do not "walk humbly" with the prophet (18-19). This demonstration, however, does not convince the black girl, who continues her search for God.

Leaving Micah, she meets a myopic scientist [Figure 3], a vivisectionist who spends his time scientifically proving ideas that are already common knowledge. The scientist denies the existence of the soul because he has not been able to physically locate a soul in any of his experiments. The black girl insists that the existence of the soul is self-evident, a fundamental principle of Theosophism (*Key,* sec. 5), and then goes on to point out that, instead of a log, the scientist is sitting on a crocodile. Terrified, the scientist jumps into a nearby tree, where he encounters a serpent, which, again, he cannot see until the girl points it out to him (20-24). All of the elements present in this scene are references to Theosophy. The subtitle of Madame Blavatsky's two-volume theological work, *The Secret Doctrine,* is "The Synthesis of Science, Religion, and Philosophy," and Section X of Book One, entitled "Tree, Serpent, and Crocodile Worship," discusses the way in which contemporary religious beliefs have been influenced by Ophite beliefs, Hindu *Nagas,* Egyptian crocodile worship, and the idea of the tree of life. The black girl leaves the scientist to ponder her demonstration not only that the soul exists but that God, too, is self-evident in nature. The scientist, however, is too committed to his scientific method to actually consider the evidence the black girl has presented him (24).

The title page illustration [Figure 1] reflects a fact about the black girl's belief in God (she is shown turning her back on the image of Christ crucified) that the text does not reveal until the ideas of God presented in the Old Testament have been rejected by the black girl in her search for the true God. The missionary had tried to teach the black girl to "adore the cross" (7) because, according to Shaw, she "found in the horrors of the crucifixion the same strange joy she had found in breaking her own heart and those of her lovers" (24). The black girl, however, thought it was "a great pity that Jesus had not died peacefully and painlessly and naturally, full of years of wisdom protecting his granddaughters [of whom the black girl believes he should have at least 20] against the selfishness and violence of their parents" (24-25), for her own father had beat her before she became strong enough to stop him with her knobkerry (27).

In a discussion with a conjurer whose image in the text resembles

many familiar portrayals of Jesus, she accepts the symbolism of the communion ceremony, for it symbolizes the presence of God within her body, but she insists that if the fatherly nature of God is a metaphor, she would prefer a God who acted more like her mother who looked out for her than a God like her father who beat her (26-27). The conjurer tells her that God is love, but the black girl has not forgotten her questions about the problem of evil, which must sometimes be dealt with violently. She rejects the conception of love as an abstraction and insists that the concept has meaning only when it is considered concretely as a personal matter. Rejecting the simplification that God is love as a ruse, she lectures the conjurer: "We need the help of one another's bodies and the help of one another's minds; but our souls need to be alone with God; and when people come loving you and wanting your soul as well as your mind and body, you cry 'Keep your distance: I belong to myself, not to you'" (29-30). The black girl's position reflects that of Madame Blavatsky that the Christian teachings of "boundless love of humanity, charity, forgiveness of injury" and "forgetfulness of self" were designed to delude the good and frustrate religious reformers (*Key,* sec. 5). According to Madame Blavatsky, Christianity's refusal to tell the truth about its belief system to all of its initiates resulted in "three clashing forms of the Christian Church and the 300 sects in Protestant England alone" (*Key,* sec. 5). Shaw makes this same comment when he has the black girl meet a group of men, each professing to be carrying the true church on his back [Figure 4] (30).

At this point the black girl meets a group of white people who appear to be interested in solving the world's problems and in defining a viable conception of God for the twentieth century, but they are so self-involved in the details of belief and their own issues of power and control that they have lost direction. Many of the beliefs they profess are those of the Theosophists, but, at this point, Shaw is separating himself from the doctrinal disputes of his contemporary Theosophists (32-41). As an artist, Shaw has the black girl investigate the power of images, such as those of Christ or Buddha or of African totems, to inspire and reinforce religious belief [Figure 5]. He does this without neglecting to consider the Islamic position, which is given credence by the Christian missionary at the beginning of the story, that images have the power to lead people into idolatry and error (42-50). In her discussion with an Arab gentleman who finds women troublesome but still wants the black girl to become one of his wives, the black girl decides that images can mislead and that she will never find God where men are talking about women, or women about men (52).

In the final section of the novella, Shaw takes the black girl into a garden, where she meets the wisdom of a Candide who is digging for God in his garden. He tends his garden for God's glory (54; Voltaire 143); he feeds

people and leads a very practical life. He advises the black girl to marry a reluctant Irish Socialist and to raise a family. The gardener tells her, using the story of Jupiter and Semele, that we are not meant to experience the full presence of God, for that knowledge would drive us mad. God, however, is always by our side helping us as we tend our own gardens (54). The story ends with the black girl happy and content with her husband and children. Through her work and her example she has discovered God's kingdom on earth, and she is at peace, for "by that time her strengthened mind had taken her far beyond the stage at which there is any fun in smashing idols with her knobkerry" (58).

Neither in the novella nor in his afterword to *The Adventures of the Black Girl in Her Search for God* does Shaw mention Theosophy despite the obvious influence of Madame Blavatsky's teachings in the text and his personal association with Annie Besant, a noted Feminist and a member of the Fabian Society before she became Madame Blavatsky's successor as the leader of the Theosophical movement (Campbell 101-03; Spartacus). This subtlety was perhaps wise, for the popular conception of the Theosophists in England associated them with occult charlatans, and the Theosophical Society itself was divided by schism over doctrinal issues. Indeed, a judge in India had publicly accused Mrs. Besant of deviating from common honesty in her testimony in a custody battle over the young Krishnamurti in 1914 (Campbell 121-22). Instead, Shaw chose to talk about how the Bible documents the fact that the human perception of God has evolved over time (70-71). Shaw's concern is that the tradition of accepting the King James version of the Bible as the word of God, despite some of its obvious errors in translation (61-62) (errors which Madame Blavatsky pointed out in *The Secret Doctrine*), has led to the institutionalization of harsh Old Testament attitudes that conflict with many of the teachings of Jesus in the New Testament. He also argues, like Lawrence, that the teachings of the modern church represent a pseudo-Christianity (73), which combined with technology, contemporary events, and modern skepticism, has made the Bible appear to be irrelevant to many people (66) even though the Bible remains an important source of inspiration (67). Shaw ends his afterword by calling for a reasoned re-evaluation of religious beliefs. He advises his readers to rediscover the historical Jesus and the historical Mohammed to find out what these men were doing in the context of the time in which they lived and to emulate them in advancing the continuing evolution of the culture's perception of the nature of God. In any event, Shaw's popular little book issued at Christmas time in 1932 (my copy of the first edition is the sixth printing in the month of December) is perhaps the best literary presentation of the Theosophical position in twentieth-century British literature's ongoing investigation of the role of religious belief in modern society.

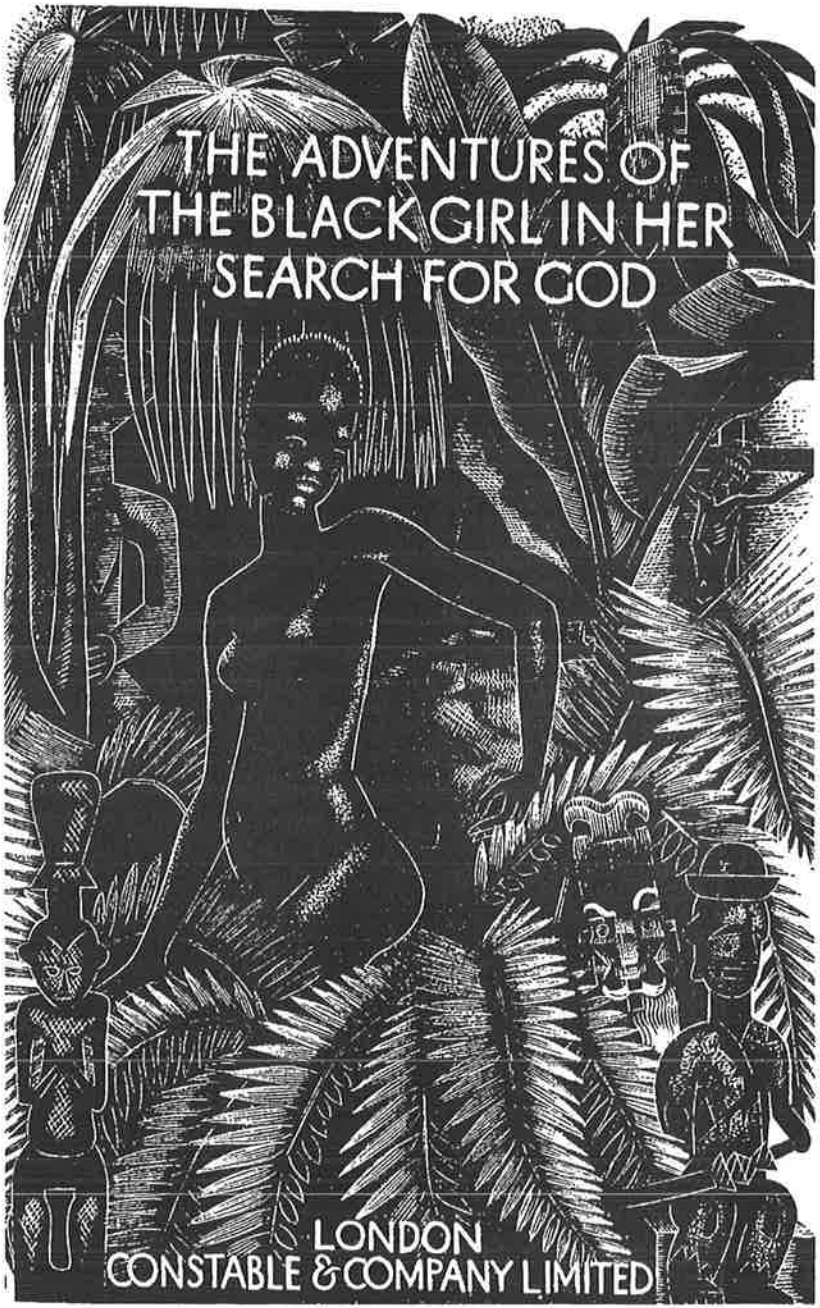

Figure 1

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Figure 2

Figure 3

Figure 4

Figure 5

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Language as an Isolating Factor in the Fiction of Paul Bowles

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Paul Bowles presents a "complete epitome of the moral chaos of today's world" (Caponi, *Conversations* 68) by examining the profound anguish and despair that man encounters while trying to secure an autonomous identity. Through his fiction, Bowles presents the dismal state of society left by the breakdown of moral codes during World War II. The characters in his fiction feel isolated from the world because of the new logic ordered by events such as Hiroshima and the Holocaust. Bowles's fiction presents the absurdity of man's condition and the futility and helplessness of a society removed from itself.

In Bowles's fiction, the characters are unable to communicate. According to Gabriel Marcel, people are "alienated from each other—unable to make contact. The world is broken up, and a real community is impossible" (96). Since language is a product of society, man is unable to reach freedom because of the extensive correlation of signs and referents. Aware of this inescapable trap, Bowles's characters attempt to break down the structure of language and emphasize its inability to serve as a means of communication.

In *Let It Come Down*, the existential hero, Nelson Dyar, is a banker from New York who moves to Tangier in order to transform his life. Dyar is aware that he is spiritually and emotionally empty. He attempts to establish an autonomous self by relocating to Tangier. Early in the novel, it becomes apparent that establishing an identity is an arduous mission. Bowles frequently captures the isolation of man in his fiction by allowing his characters the opportunity to attempt escape. Many characters in Bowles's fiction journey into an unfamiliar land; however, none of them are able to escape the cage erected by society. His characters fail to establish autonomous identities and realize that, even in distant lands, they are trapped by the principles of society. As Mitzi Hamovitch points out, the language that Paul Bowles uses to describe Dyar confirms Dyar's sense of isolation (441). In *Let It Come Down*, the omniscient narrator admits that Dyar suffers from "a progressive paralysis" and is trapped in the "stationariness of existence" (21). Dyar feels isolated from society and from his own life. He feels anonymous even to himself.

Other characters in the novel are aware of Dyar's disconnectedness. Daisy tells him, "You have an empty life. No pattern. And nothing in you to give you any purpose" (34). Dyar knows that he must act in order to survive. According to existential doctrine, man makes himself. As Jean Paul Sartre states in *Being and Nothingness,* a human is "nothing more than the

ensemble of his acts, nothing else than his life" (38). Dyar is aware of the importance of freedom and action. He believes that hope for survival lies in the development of a relationship. Dyar is looking for someone else to confirm his existence.

When Dyar meets Hadija, a young Moroccan prostitute, he attempts to establish a meaningful relationship with her. He desires to reach out to her as a person: "He would have liked to tell her in his own way how lovely he thought she was, and why he thought so, and to make her understand how much more he wanted from her than she was used to having men want" (96). Dyar exhibits existential characteristics in his relationship with Hadija. He wants to express his love for her, but at the same time he admits that she matters little to him by saying that she is "not a real person." He refers to her as a "toy" and insists that nothing she does will ever matter (93).

Besides struggling with his conflicting opinions of Hadija, Dyar also falls into the existential trap of communication. Language is a fundamental structure of society, and Dyar feels trapped by the limitations of language. He believes that the inability of language to serve as a means of communication forces him to remain isolated. During a picnic with Hadija, Dyar attempts to express his feelings:

> "I've got something to tell you."
>
> "What?" she asked ingenuously, settling back, her great eyes wide.
>
> "This." He kissed her. "I love you." His open lips touched hers all the way around as he said the words.
>
> Hadija did not seem surprised to hear it. "Again?" she said, smiling.
>
> "Huh?"
>
> "You love me again now? This time quick one, yes? This time take few minutes. No take pants off. Then we go Hotel Metropole." (101)

Dyar fails in his attempt to create a meaningful relationship. Hadija mistakes his emotional love for sexual desire. Although he participates in conversations that induce generalizations and universals and experiences relationships that provide physical pleasure, Dyar is unable to communicate his desire for a meaningful relationship with another person. He remains isolated because language fails him.

Even after numerous attempts to secure an autonomous self, Dyar remains a product of society. He tells Daisy, "Just look around you. There never was any mass production to compare with the one that turns out human beings—all the same model, year after year. . . . There's only one person in the world, and we're all it" (35). Dyar fails every time he tries to confirm his existence through independent action. He realizes that he is "stuck. It was

not in him to make things happen" (162).

The futility of rebelling against society is illustrated by the necessity of language. Attempts to break down language are futile because both spoken and unspoken thoughts are expressed in language. Man can never escape the boundaries of society because an extensive system of signs and referents has been established in all societies. Man can escape the society that relies on his native language but not the language itself. Therefore, he remains both connected to and isolated from society. Bowles presents a pessimistic view of the efficiency of language. By doing so, he illustrates the isolation of man not only in foreign cultures but in native societies as well. Dyar has reached the point of complete isolation. He reminds himself that "he must not let himself be fooled into believing that he could communicate with them. No one would hear him if he should try to communicate" (127).

Unable to escape the isolation constructed by society, Dyar attempts to lose himself. He realizes that he is a victim and desires to escape that status. Dyar recognizes that his objective must be to "escape from his cage, to discover the way out of the fly-trap, to strike the chord inside himself which would liberate those qualities capable of transforming him from a victim to a winner" (65). As the language suggests, the only way Dyar can cease to be a victim is to cease being himself. Dyar attempts this change by performing uncharacteristic actions. He steals money, goes into hiding, uses drugs, and kills Thami. According to Wendy Lesser, the murder of Thami is significant because Dyar not only breaks social rules by committing murder but also extends his goal of social violation by killing without reason a person who has helped him (403).

Before murdering Thami, Dyar mutters, "Many Mabel damn. Daddy lamb. Lolly dibble up-man. Olly little Dan" (284). He is attempting to break with society one final time. By eliminating the structure of language, Dyar believes that he can be free. Unfortunately, it is not that easy. Since all thoughts are in the form of language, it is impossible to separate one's self from society without losing the ability to think. Ignoring the structure of language does not help Dyar because Thami is lying beside him and can hear every word he says, however fragmented these words may be. In a desperate attempt to free himself from society's cage, Dyar plunges a nail into Thami's ear. Thami can no longer hear the words that Dyar says. By using the nail on Thami instead of on the broken door, Dyar reveals that the "horror of existence" (237) lies in being made an object by someone else. Dyar fortifies the elimination of societal barriers on his life, leaving him free for the first time.

Like Dyar in *Let It Come Down,* Kit and Port, characters in *The Sheltering Sky*, venture into a foreign land. Kit and Port are desperately trying to make an emotional connection with one another. They are

interdependent but emotionally disconnected. While both of them desire a connection, they also fear it. This complex desire is a common trait of existential characters. Port and Kit are struggling to find meaning in their lives. They are not only separated from each other but also seem disconnected from life around them. Port says, "We've never managed, either one of us, to get all the way into life. We're hanging on to the outside for all we're worth, convinced we're going to fall off at the next bump" (14). The realization of uninvolvement in their own lives forces characters to take an existential journey into the realms of their own identities and desires.

Port and Kit, like Dyar, travel to North Africa. Early in the novel, it becomes apparent that Kit tries to impose order on her life through an "elaborate system of omens and portents" (Caponi, *Paul Bowles* 25). Before the death of Port, Kit remains unaware of her disconnectedness, and, until his illness, Port fails to recognize the degree to which he is isolated. Throughout the novel, the characters deal with remoteness by searching for a means of communicating with one another. The vulnerability of language is illustrated by characters that focus on the emotions that words fail to express, instead of on the words themselves. This technique is used in Bowles's description of Eric, who listens to Port "as if he placed very little importance on the words that were said and was trying instead to read between the lines of the conversation to discover what the other really meant" (259).

During his illness, Port struggles with the difficulty of conveying emotions for the first time. He gains a new consciousness before his death and becomes aware of the "implications of his passivity" (Caponi, *Paul Bowles* 28). He attempts to explain these emotions to Kit but fears that language will force him to remain isolated because there are no words to describe his emotions: "They flowed out through his mouth, and he was never sure whether they had been resolved in the right words. Words were much more alive and more difficult to handle, now" (221). In the cases of both Dyar and Port, "disillusionment of familiar notions about self and world precedes diminishment of linguistic ability" (Rainwater 240).

After the death of her husband, Kit ventures into the Sahara alone. According to R. D. Laing, relationships of any kind are a threat to the self's identity, and, therefore, withdrawal is an effort to preserve being (121). Kit desires a new freedom. She wants to be free of social constraints and responsibility. During her journey, Kit is raped and forced to marry. Before long, Kit dismisses rational thought and relies on her sensual nature alone for survival (Pounds 48). She has resorted to an unconscious state similar to that of Dyar in *Let It Come Down* and the Professor in "A Distant Episode." She rejects thought, and, therefore, she suppresses language, the ruling structure of society. Her journey to self-discovery, as with most of Bowles's characters, fails because there is no self to discover. The essence of being is thought, and

thought is language. Language is the fundamental structure of society and attempting to escape that structure leads to disaster.

When Kit divorces sanity by rejecting thought, the return of language causes her defenses to crumble. When she runs into a French man on the streets, she realizes that the words are "coming back, and inside the wrappings of the words there would be thoughts lying there" (302). She attempts to halt the return of language and thought. She is aware that language brings thought, and if thoughts return, "life would be painful" (302). Breaking from society is a fundamental dilemma in existential literature. Characters who attempt to establish an autonomous self may not only be isolated from society but also isolated from rational awareness.

In "A Distant Episode," an isolated man is once more the existential hero. The protagonist is a linguistics professor who becomes the victim of the Reguibat while traveling in Morocco. He is fluent in Moghrebi, but his knowledge of the language does little to allow him to be a member of the community. Although he has been studying the language for years, his only personal contact with a native speaker is with a man he knew for only three days ten years earlier. The inability of the Professor to form relationships with natives during his studies and previous trips to Morocco illustrates his failure to take an active role in his life. He naively believes that he is accepted and involved in Moroccan life. However, that is not the case. According to Rainwater, the Professor "imposes his own cultural assumptions upon the enigmatical social system of the desert inhabitants" (263). This puts the Professor in danger because he believes that he can communicate merely by knowing the language. While attempting to immerse himself in the culture the Professor fails to realize that he is viewed as an outsider. In many of Bowles's stories, the characters switch language mid-conversation. This is done not only when assuming the native tongue of a stranger but also when a native refuses to answer in his own language to a Westerner. Many natives, especially in "A Distant Episode," resent the Professor's attempt to capture their language. Bowles illustrates this phenomenon early in the story with a conversation between the chauffeur and the Professor:

> "Vous êtes geologue?"
>
> "A Geologist? Ah, no! I'm a linguist."
>
> "There are no languages here. Only dialects."
>
> "Exactly. I'm making a survey of variations on Moghrebi."
>
> The chauffeur was scornful. "Keep going south," he said. "You'll find some languages you never heard before."
>
> (39)

Bowles provides subtle hints throughout his fiction that are intended to prepare the reader for the usually shocking denouements in his work.

Bowles builds up the hostility towards the Professor by making his conversations with the *qaouaji* fallible. For example, when the Professor asks the *qaouaji* in Moghrebi about the whereabouts of Hassan Ramani, the *qaouaji* answers in "bad French" (40) rather than in his native tongue. By refusing to answer in his native tongue, the *qaouaji* subtly warns the Professor of the dangers he faces in attempting to cross cultural barriers and integrate himself into another society.

When the Professor asks the *qaouaji* where he can buy boxes made of camel udders, the *qaouaji* answers scornfully, "We do not buy those here" (40). The Professor fails to notice that this answer is intended to remind him that he is an outsider; instead, he sees it as a quest for money. Once the Professor convinces the *qaouaji* to take him to find the boxes, an existential journey of self-discovery begins. As with most of Bowles's characters, the Professor's journey into the unfamiliar leads to irreparable damage.

When the Professor ventures down the cliff, the Reguibat, a group of criminals, ambush and torture him. After the Professor is captured, the use of language in "A Distant Episode" illustrates the ties between communication, existence, and society. When the Reguibat violently cut out the linguistics Professor's tongue, the Professor concentrates on the word "operation." The Professor kept the word "going through his mind; it calmed his terror somewhat as he sank back into darkness" (45). The word "operation" is significant because of the sign and referent relationship of the word in English. By thinking of the mutilation by the Reguibat as an operation, the Professor is able to maintain his sanity because he can logically deduce an explanation for the pain. Unfortunately, in the case of the Professor, the sign and referent are not consistent with the action. This is a warning of the ultimate ill fate of the Professor not at the hands of the Reguibat, but at the hands of his naïve faith in the structure of society.

When the Professor loses his tongue, he also loses his notions about the value of language. The Professor loses his ability to think because he has lost language. He resorts to making "a series of fearful growling noises" (46). He remains unconscious about his existence for many months. His inability to exist without the structures of society defining his life presents an essential existential element. Although man must strive for freedom because existence precedes essence, true freedom is an impossibility because man is born into a world too structured to break down. When the Professor becomes aware of language again, "the words penetrated" (47). However, with the return of language and consciousness comes pain. Even though Bowles's characters desire complete freedom from the influences of the civilized world, language gives meaning to existence. With the rediscovery of words, the Professor is reborn with a new awareness of the strange world he has been living in. The return of language is followed by the simultaneous return of

rational awareness. The Professor in "A Distant Episode," like Kit Moresby in *The Sheltering Sky*, is forced to choose between the "meaninglessness of an unconscious existence and the pain that accompanies awareness" (Caponi, *Paul Bowles* 22).

Like the Professor in "A Distant Episode," Pastor Dowe in "Pastor Dowe of Tacate" is troubled by his existence as an outsider. He believes that mastery of the native dialect will provide him with the ability to communicate and to participate in the lives of the Indians. He journeys into the sacred temples of the Indians and returns connected with them but separated from himself. Pastor Dowe is an American missionary who attempts to convert the Indians of Tacate in South America to Christianity. Although he arrives confident of his ability to convert the Indians, after his first sermon he has "the sensation of having communicated absolutely nothing to them" (137). In order to get the natives to attend his sermons, Pastor Dowe plays "Crazy Rhythm" on the phonograph. Even though the Indians desire the music, Pastor Dowe still imposes American pop culture on the tribe. He takes the focus off of an ontological message and places it on the ability of products to provide a false value for existence.

When the Indians tire of the music, they ask Pastor Dowe to hand out salt at the gatherings. At this point, it has become obvious that Pastor Dowe no longer controls the activities taking place at his own sermons. Frustrated with the behavior of the Indians at his sermons, Pastor Dowe seeks the advice of Nicolas, an influential man in the village. While speaking with Nicolas about the behavior of the Indians, Pastor Dowe learns that Hachakyum is not the only meaning for God. When Pastor Dowe attempts to explain to Nicolas that Don Jesucristo, like Hachakyum, created all things, he is quickly corrected.

> Nicolas frowned. "No!" he cried. "That is not true!" Hachakyum did not make everyone. He did not make you. He did not make guns or Don Jesucristo. Many things He did not make!"
>
> The pastor shut his eyes a moment, seeking strength. "Good," he said at last in a patient voice. "Who made the other things? Who made me? Please tell me."
>
> Nicolas did not hesitate. "Metzabok."
>
> "But who is Metzabok?" cried the pastor, letting an outraged note show in his voice. The word for God he had always known only as Hachakyum.
>
> "Metzabok makes all things that do not belong here."
>
> (139)

After talking with Nicolas, Pastor Dowe becomes aware of the absurdity of existence. He is disturbed by the realization that he is "wholly

alone in this distant place, alone in his struggle to bring the truth to its people. He consoled himself by recalling that it is only in each man's own consciousness that the isolation exists; objectively man is always a part of something" (140). While walking through the village, two natives invite Pastor Dowe to join them on a canoe ride down the river. He is apprehensive but goes. Pastor Dowe, regretting that he agreed to join the men, says to himself, "God is always with me" (148). To his surprise, he begins to feel as if he is out of God's jurisdiction. He repeats his affirmation, but "the formula had no effect" (148). When the Pastor ponders what his beliefs would be if he were a native, he becomes frightened by the role of chance in something as important as religion.

The natives take Pastor Dowe to a temple and force him to pray to Metzabok in the tongue of the natives. After this experience, Pastor Dowe takes a new approach to his sermons. He substitutes their gods for Christ. Pastor Dowe replaces biblical names with the names of local deities and locations. This act impresses the natives so much that an Indian offers his daughter Marta, a seven-year-old girl, to Pastor Dowe as a wife. Pastor Dowe is appalled and unable to explain his objections about the marriage to the Indians. Frustrated with the limitations of language, Pastor Dowe exclaims, "Everything I say is transformed on the way to them into something else" (153). Language contributes to isolation because it is not complex enough to express the array of emotions and beliefs held by many people.

After trying to explain his objections to Mateo, Pastor Dowe gives up and says, "You don't understand anything! I can't talk to you! I don't want to talk to you!" (154). Pastor Dowe is a typical existential character. He originally lives in the shelter of a structured society but discovers that the structure of society is absurd. He is unable to understand the actions of the natives, and they fail to understand him. He realizes that religion alone cannot gain the attention of the Indians, so he resorts to breaking down his own system of beliefs by allowing dancing music at sermons and by praying to and preaching about Indian gods. He searches for confirmation of his identity in both native and foreign societies but fails to find it.

According to Rainwater, "While attempting to achieve some static and painless state of being, Bowles's characters attempt to transcend social and psychological boundaries and often discover themselves reduced to states of inarticulate madness" (263). The structure of society serves as an impossible obstacle for existential characters to overcome. As Jean Jacques Rousseau states in *The Social Contract*, "man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains" (33). The regulations of civilized society restrict natural impulses and prevent people from realizing their true natures. Language is the most vital and simultaneously the most limiting element of civilization.

Through the depiction of his characters, Paul Bowles exhibits the

impossibility of complete freedom. His characters attempt to free themselves from the constraints of the civilized world but remain caged by the regulations of society. His characters feel like outsiders even when alone. They are bored with life and believe that they do not fully exist. In order to break free from their disconnected existences, Bowles's characters attempt to break down the structure of society. However, this attempt never works because as Heidegger notes, "man encounters the world in relation to others. The equipment of the world takes its character from those among whom one exists. Even when a person is alone, his being is still a being with others" (102). Since language and existence are inextricably linked, the loss of the structure of language results in the loss of being, leaving Bowles's characters detached from rational awareness and conscious existence.

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Angela Carter's Oriental Venus: Myth and Metaphysics in "The Loves of Lady Purple"

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One may count among the enduring qualities of British writer Angela Carter's fiction its brilliant and delightful resistance to literary categorization. Recent scholars such as Beate Neumeier (1996) and Robbie Goh (1999), for example, provide informative, detailed analyses of postmodernist narrative techniques and themes in Carter's fiction, including tendencies toward the Gothic. Others, such as Shirley Peterson (1996) and Magali Cornier Michael (1996), focus upon an array of feminist concerns in Carter's work. Still others offer productive discussions of Carter's unconventional handling of traditional fictional genres, particularly the shorter forms. One among this latter group, Alison Lee (1997) extols Carter's paradoxical employment in her fiction of "the very ideas, genres, and truths it seeks to criticize" (14). Lee's observations are prompted by a long list of scholars whose work, like that of Ellen Cronan Rose (1986), examines Carter's fiction among a proliferation of iconoclastic retellings of traditional fairy tales by women writers. Regardless of their varying assessments, most of these scholars agree on one point: Carter's fiction challenges orthodox ideas and narrative techniques and does so with sharp skepticism and penetrating humor. Classical mythology, of course, underlies fairy tale, and Carter's fiction fulgurates with unsettling insight into this most profound manifestation of the human psyche in its ongoing interaction with culture.

In her first collection of short fiction, *Fireworks: Nine Profane Pieces* (1974), Carter professed a preference for writing tales rather than short stories. In her view, tales are less pretentious, more trustworthy than short stories because tales decipher "everyday experience through a system of imagery derived from subterranean areas behind everyday experience" (133). Carter claimed a particular affinity for Poe's Gothic tales: "fabulous narratives that deal directly with the imagery of the unconscious," examine "the externalized self" and exaggerate character and events "beyond reality, to become symbols, ideas, passions." In their bold challenge of "the perennial human desire to believe the word as fact" and their dismissal of "the value systems of our institutions," Carter felt these tales serve "a single moral function—that of provoking unease" (132-33).

Such provocation lies at the heart of "The Loves of Lady Purple," Carter's Gothic tale of the symbiotic relationship between an itinerant puppet master, who styles himself an Asiatic Professor, and Lady Purple, the life-size marionette featured in his show. Dressed always in "deep, dark, slumbrous

colors—profound pinks, crimson and the vibrating purple with which she was synonymous, a purple the color of blood in a love suicide" (20), Lady Purple has the highly stylized look of a once lovely geisha grown decidedly decadent: chalk-white though supple leather skin, glass ruby eyes, and "ferocious teeth, carved out of mother-of-pearl," which are "always on show for she had a permanent smile" (27). Weapon-like five-inch enameled red tin nails adorn her otherwise delicately beautiful hands. "[A]rranged in a chignon more heavily elaborate than any human neck could have endured" (27), her black wig is pierced through "with many brilliant pins tipped with pieces of broken mirror" so that with every move "she cast a multitude of scintillating reflections which danced about the theater like mice of light" (28).

The Professor bills Lady Purple as "the Shameless Oriental Venus" whose life amounts to a series of "Notorious Amours" (30), and over the years, he has promised his audiences an exotic voyeurism unprecedented in their own mundane lives. Those who attend this antiquated showman's ministrations discover in Lady Purple a marionette with a titillating past. According to the puppet master's carefully detailed reenactment, Lady Purple at one time had been a human being, although of mysterious origin. Abandoned as an infant to the care of a prosperous and childless mercantile couple, she absorbed their doting attention and affection, developed into a beautifully pubescent seductress of her foster father, whom—along with his wife—she killed with a fish knife and incinerated in their own house. Then "springing like a corrupt phoenix from the pyre of her crime, she rose again in the pleasure quarters, where she at once hired herself out to the madame of the most imposing brothel" (31).

Lady Purple flourished at the brothel and its "inverted, sinister, abominable world which functioned only to gratify the whims of the senses" (31). Over time her "talents verged on the unspeakable" (32): she performed every sadomasochistic act imaginable, and she subjected her lovers to the fires of a resourceful but remorseless lust that embraced torture, death, mutilation, and necrophilia. In the process, Lady Purple became "entirely the image of irresistible evil" (33), and in her deplorable decline into mechanical, senseless behaviors, she "abrogated her humanity. She became nothing but wood and hair. She became a marionette herself, herself her own replica, the dead yet moving image of the shameless Oriental Venus" (34). As the Asiatic Professor had demonstrated to audiences throughout the world, Lady Purple became the thing they see before them: the grotesquely titillating epitome of unchecked female libido, acting and reacting to the odd crescendi, glissandic intervals, and decrescendi of a samisen, the clacking of marionette joints, and the gurgling of guttural approbation.

On its surface, the relationship between the puppet master and Lady Purple closely parallels that of Pygmalion and Galatea in the Cyprian myth

transmitted into modern consciousness by Ovid's *Metamorphoses.* Ovid blames Venus for Pygmalion's famed disgust for women. Allegedly angered that the Cyprian women refuse to recognize her divinity, Venus made them all prostitutes,

> the first such women ever
> To sell their bodies, and in shamelessness
> They hardened, even their blood was hard, they could not
> Blush any more; it was no transition, really,
> From what they were to actual rock and stone.
> (*Metamorphoses* 241)

Appalled by the behavior of what he considered to be these Cyprian whores, Pygmalion disdained all women but fell in love instead with a beautiful ivory statue of his own creation and became her lover. He kissed, caressed, and lay with her, fantasizing her warm, abundant responses to his amorous favors, and eventually implored the gods to give him a wife like his ivory statue. Having "understood the prayer's intention," Venus gave the statue life. Then, Ovid claims, Pygmalion

> came
> Back where the maiden lay, and lay beside her,
> And kissed her, and she seemed to glow, and kissed her,
> And stroked her breast, and felt the ivory soften
> Under his fingers, as wax grows soft in sunshine,
> Made pliable by handling.

According to Ovid's account,

> The lips [Pygmalion] kisses
> Are real indeed, the ivory girl can feel them,
> And blushes and responds, and the eyes open
> At once on lover and heaven, and Venus blesses
> The marriage she has made. (243)

Their union produced a daughter, Paphos, through whom Pygmalion's (politically patriarchal) succession to the (traditionally matrilineal) Cyprian throne became secure (Howatson 221), and Pygmalion built a temple to honor Venus for her role in subordinating female eroticism to male dominion.

Carter's revision of this ultimate sex fantasy of patriarchal classicism replaces its "happy ending" with one more closely associated with another Ovidian myth of metamorphosis—that of the beautiful adolescent Narcissus, for whom "the strangeness / Of his infatuation" (68) engenders self-destruction. If such experiences suggest that our inner beings are real, Carter's revision proposes the even more unsettling suggestion that we *are* our inner beings, an ironic distillation of psychic truth that even the gods cannot nullify. Having completed his lurid enactment of Lady Purple's decadent decline, Carter's puppet master prepares to spend a typical evening

with his doll. Alone with her in the marionette booth, he repairs a tear in one of her costumes, dresses her again, and kisses her goodnight as he has always done. Carter's narrator observes that "[a] child kisses its toy before he pretends it sleeps although, even though he is only a child, he knows its eyes are not constructed to close so it will always be a sleeping beauty no kiss will waken" (37). But the puppet master is not a child, and this night his kiss breaks the spell: the doll "awakens," crushes him in her embrace, sucks forth his breath, drains his blood vampire style, and drops his remains to the floor "with a dry rustle, as of a cast armful of dead leaves, . . . empty, useless and bereft of meaning . . ." (38). Quickly shedding her marionette trappings, Lady Purple sets fire to the booth and walks away without looking back.

How is such a transition possible? Carter's narrator explains it this way: Lady Purple "gained entry into the world by a mysterious loophole in its metaphysics" (38). If one understands metaphysics in terms of first principles, the nature of being (ontology), and problems of ultimate reality, Carter's tale suggests the world's metaphysics are simply flawed, that flaw being, perhaps, a too subtle abstraction regarding the nature of the actual and the possible. Human reason says such a transition cannot take place even as the psyche knows full well it can and does: hence its insistence on mythic *metamorphosis*. Not coincidentally, *deus otiosis*, the withdrawal or disappearance of a deity when his/her creative powers are spent, accompanies *metamorphosis,* a mythological process for which the image of the lifeless puppet master proves psychologically apt and satisfying.

It may bear repeating that the common locale of both the Pygmalion and the Narcissus myths, as well as a number of other myths associated with Venus, is the island of Cyprus, a place in the classical tradition resplendent with symbols of mythic transition. Such symbols mark the shift of the ancient culture's association with the Great Goddess and the sanctity of all life to the dominance of patriarchy and its hierarchical dominion over the Earth. Situated just west of the Levant, Cyprus numbers among those areas projected in classical mythology where principles of metaphysics, strictly speaking, did not hold: a kind of geographical "psyche" out of which alleged metaphysical impossibilities emerged. This Cyprus reflects a place deep within the human psyche, fathoms beneath conscious realms, where *metamorphoses* occur with or without the approbation of logic. One might imagine such a place as very like the vast and gloomy region of Tartaros in Hesiod's *Theogony*. Separated from Earth by a great gated wall, in Tartaros

> lie the sources and limits
> of the black earth [. . .]
> of the barren sea, too, and of the starry sky—
> grim and dank and loathed even by the gods—
> [a] chasm [. . .] so great that, once past the gates,

one does not reach the bottom in a full year's course,
but is tossed about by stormy gales;
even the gods shudder at this eerie place. (31)

Tartaros functions as the dwelling place of Night, Sleep, and Death as well as a kind of "dumping ground" for discarded supernatural powers, such as the pre-classical Titans who fall from the sky but never actually die and who abide there even now, awaiting another "loophole" through which they may "come forth" once again to project their mythic images on the experiential world of humankind.

Even in the half-light of such rediscovered mythic data, the Asiatic Professor's image of Lady Purple as "the Shameless Oriental Venus" suggests a more curious complexity than one might immediately suppose. Having originated as "an Italian goddess of whom virtually nothing is known" (Howatson 592) except for her association with fertility and vegetation, Venus in time "became identified and acquired the mythology of the Greek goddess Aphrodite" (Howatson 592), who, in turn, had arrived in Greek mythology at the time Cronus took control of the universe on behalf of the Titans by castrating his father Uranus—literally and violently severing the original *hieros gamos*, that is, the mythical sacred union, of Gaea (Earth) and Uranus (Sky). It is Hesiod who recounts Aphrodite's parthenogenetic birth from Uranus' semen mixed with sea foam, but it is also Hesiod who acknowledges her arrival from the east by way of Cyprus during the Mycennaean age. Martha Ann and Dorothy Myer Imel identify Aphrodite as "an ancient mother goddess of the Eastern Mediterranean," long known to the early Phoenicians and "introduced to Greece during the Greek colonization of Canaan" (150-51). The common element found in these variant accounts is of Aphrodite's having come into Greece from the east, which is to say from the Levant: "[m]any of her attributes indicate her partially oriental origin," including "kinships with the Asian goddess Astarte" (Howatson 43) and other goddesses of Earth and its fecundity.

Of her many manifestations, it is the Cyprian Aphrodite who most closely reflects momentous struggles and shifts in the psychological, ideological, and cultural development of the organic human community. Robert Graves identifies the Cyprian Aphrodite as a bearded goddess who, among other bearded goddesses and "womanish gods like Dionysus," corresponded with "transitional social stages" in the area "from matriarchy to patriarchy" (73). Psychologically such images represent all of us, our embodiment projected from the mythic consciousness onto the culture as onto the text: symbols of the disintegration of the feminine/masculine psyche violently rent and cast into diaspora like native peoples from their homeland, at once seeking and denying its own nature, wholly one yet ever in transition. And so, one is tempted to say, the phoenix rises.

Cyprus evidenced such a loophole in the world's metaphysics; it contained such substance that, given the right circumstances, surfaced from the classical world's "heart of darkness" and projected itself in all its grotesque imagery upon the landscape of conscious reality. Throughout his life, Carter's aging puppet master has performed in the world's most exotic cities, including "Shanghai, Constantinople and St. Petersburg" (25) but has remained both ignorant of and indifferent to their dark interiors of unrealized possibilities as geographic "psyches."

When the tale begins, he has arrived unwittingly in another such "geographic psyche" suggestive of a loophole in the world's metaphysics. He has come to "a dark, superstitious Transylvania," a place whose reputation for "wreath[ing] suicides with garlic, pierc[ing] them through the heart with stakes and bury[ing] them at crossroads while warlocks continually practiced rites of immemorial beastliness in the forests" (25) has never reached him, thus has made no impression on him at all. Interested only in his own language and always accompanied by a "foundling girl no more than seven or eight" (25) and his deaf nephew, the Asiatic Professor has never attempted to communicate outside his own small circle; he has preferred the company of his nephew, with whom routinely he has held "interminable dialogues in sign language," conversations "punctuated by soft, wordless grunts and whistles" in such a way "that the choreographed quiet of their discourse was like the mating dance of tropic birds" (26). Carter cites "this means of communication so delicately distanced from humanity," as "peculiarly apt for [him], who had rather the air of a visitant from another world where the mode of being was conducted in nuances rather than affirmatives" (26). Moreover, the puppet master, the nephew, and the foundling girl "had never comprehended to any degree the foreign" because in their view, "[t]hey were all natives of the fairground and, after all, all fairs are the same" (26). As far as they are concerned, any fairground, regardless of its location, "maintains its invariable, self-consistent atmosphere," its attractive "freedom from actuality" (26) that is somehow also universal. All these elements being equal to him, the puppet master maintains a "benign indifference to everything except the simulacra of the living he himself created" (26). His creation is Lady Purple, and in her creation he has abrogated his humanity also.

"The travelling fair and the circus," Beate Neumeier observes of Carter's fiction in general, "recall literary traditions associated with aspects of inversion and/or the *known world*. The world of the fair and the circus, like that of Transylvania, Cyprus, and Tartaros, is the everyday world upside down or, more appropriately, inside out: the abnormal becomes the norm within its confines, yet it always remains exotic with regard to the outside world. Angela Carter is interested in precisely this ambivalence: the other as a norm and as a monstrosity on display" (147, emphasis added). By isolating

himself from the world of his audience, from the world beyond the carnival, and by accepting the carnival's "grotesqueness" as part and parcel of actuality, the puppet master not only has abdicated responsibility for his actions but also has abrogated his own humanity even as he has celebrated the abrogation of Lady Purple's humanity to the world at large by way of his distorted art. Indeed, the narrator likens his "wistful charm" to that of "a Japanese flower which only blossoms when dropped in water for he [. . .] revealed his passions through a medium other than himself and this was his heroine, the puppet, Lady Purple" (27). He has, in fact, become the very thing he both loves and abhors: he both nourishes and feeds on his fantasy. Carter's narrator explains:

> [. . .] the balletic mime of Lady Purple grew all the more remarkable with the passage of the years, as though his energy, channeled for so long into a single purpose, refined itself more and more in time and was finally reduced to a single, purified, concentrated essence which was transmitted entirely to the doll; and the Professor's mind attained a condition not unlike that of the swordsman trained in Zen, whose sword is his soul, so that neither sword nor swordsman has meaning without the presence of the other. Such swordsmen, armed, move towards their victims like automata, in a state of perfect emptiness, no longer aware of any distinction between self or weapon. Master and marionette had arrived at this condition. (34)

Carter would have us remember that Lady Purple's narrative is solely that of the Professor's imagination—her life, her nature, her decadence, her malign and destructive sexuality are all and merely the product, the fullness, the dangerously insipid embodiment of a palpable fantasy. As he limits her, so is she limited: what he can imagine for her, she can be; what he cannot imagine, she cannot be. Rather than a reincarnation of the well-known patriarchal phoenix rising renewed from the burnt-out ashes of her own life, she has become a "corrupt phoenix" rising from the ashes of the evil of those around her, surviving the conflagration only to repeat the pattern ingrained within her limited experience. She can imagine herself free of her manipulative puppet master but not different from what he has created her to be; she can imagine herself no longer manipulated *by* him, but she cannot automatically *be* in control of her own destiny except, as it were, to give as good as she has received. Under these circumstances, Carter argues, the cycle will repeat itself—must repeat itself: in time, Lady Purple's "undeadness" will again reduce her to the status of marionette with a decidedly unsavory

past. According to Carter, if no one "acknowledges art as a means of *knowing* the world, then art is relegated to a kind of rumpus room of the mind and the irresponsibility of the artist and the irrelevance of art to actual living becomes part and parcel of the practice of art" (qtd. in Lee 11). And this is precisely what the puppet master has done: he has relegated his creative powers to the dank chambers of his lurid psyche, and his festered soul is his art.

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The Inheritance of Curse in Sam Shepard's *Curse of the Starving Class*

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Some critics believe that the family in Shepard's domestic drama is a metaphor for society and that the disintegration of the family is a metaphor for American culture. Vivian Patraka and Mark Siegel see in *Curse of the Starving Class* "Shepard's vision of American society as having lost its promise, independence, opportunity, and close ties to the land" (22). They argue that the land itself "is doomed as a source of values" because it is devastated by the speculators (22). Doris Auerbach also interprets the family in the play as a metaphor for society. She maintains that "the spiritual starvation of America is so pervasive that none can escape" (48). Of course, we can read a social criticism in the play through its surface manifestations: the action revolves around two independent plans to sell off the same family farm—one by the father, Weston, the other by the mother, Ella—and they are both swindled by land speculators and lose their farm. But the approach of social criticism seems to be, to borrow Shepard's words, "an incomplete [or] partial way" ("Rhythm" 9) to probe into the meanings in the undercurrent of *Curse of the Starving Class* because the play deals with the human condition, not merely its social manifestations.

Ron Mottram supports this view and points out that Shepard uses the condition of the family as a metaphor for the human condition itself. The human condition "dooms everyone to be a carrier and transmitter of the poisons of past generations" (134). He continues to write that the curse in the play "is beyond genetics, beyond original sin, and finally, perhaps beyond explanation" (135). Rodney Simard, noting the naturalistic vision in the play, similarly holds that "isolated and divided, each family member succumbs to the curse as he or she perceives it" and that eventually "the environment and heredity win, for the play closes with Wesley having assumed his familial role" ("Sam" 86-87). In its underlying structure, however, the play deals intensely with the inheritance of a family curse. Now we may have to note that this theme of inherited curse is intensified through the undercurrent mythic structure borrowed from the Atreus myth in which the family curse of Tantalus is handed down through Atreus to Orestes.

When the play begins, Wesley is cleaning up the debris of the door which his father, Weston, broke in his drunken binge the previous night. In spite of Ella's insistence to leave the broken door alone and to let his father do the work, Wesley continues to clean it up. This first scene foreshadows the play's finale. Wesley's cleaning up the debris of the door broken by his father prefigures the punishment of Wesley and the other family members for the

misdemeanor of the head of the family.

Weston is a displaced man. He neglects his duty as the patriarch of the family, though he thinks he has done his duty by bringing in a bag of artichokes. By the time the play begins, he has already bought a piece of arid desert land and, on a drunken rampage, broken the door of the family house. Further, he has been away from home most of the time. Later, he sells the family farm to pay his debts and to get away to Mexico, showing absolutely no sense of responsibility as the head of the family, like his Greek model, Agamemnon.

However, in the second act, after a long sleep, he acts like a changed man. According to Simard, Weston tries to stop the curse from repeating in order "to gain control of his own existence" ("Sam" 86). But he merely talks and acts like a changed man. Explaining how it has happened, Weston tells his son that he has experienced a rebirth.[1] As a natural wanderer, he still cannot stand the idea of everything staying the same. So he is going to keep looking for something out there in Mexico as an escape artist. Following Wesley's advice, he leaves for Mexico. He still dreams that he can find Taylor, who sold him the desert land, and that he can get his money back so that he can start a whole new life there. He cannot understand reality around him because he is a dreamer. Without a clear hold on reality, he can hardly make any mature decision in his life. Thus, he can hardly be called an identity-seeker, as Florence Falk names him ("Role" 187). He appears to be a displaced man ensnared by the curse. He is not punished for his wrongdoing. But he instead hands down the curse.

The relationship of Weston and Ella parallels that of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra although Ella does not actually kill her husband. Ella is a whore, mother, and wife, a troubling distortion of a traditional matriarch (Falk, "Men" 100). She bars the door against her husband, preventing him from coming in the house the night before the play begins. Her action may be explained by the fact that she already had a boyfriend who impersonates a lawyer. She is thus a contemporary Clytemnestra figure, one who has betrayed her marriage.

In the first act, Ella does not seem to understand that she is also infected with the curse of the Tate family although she did not inherit a curse from her own family. But later in the play, Ella admits that she is captured by the fate, the curse of the family. She shows her perception of the curse with which her family is surrounded. She clearly knows that she has the curse and that she has to pass it down: "It's a curse. I can feel it. It's invisible but it's there. . . . We inherit it and pass it down, and then pass it down again. It goes on and on like that without us" (*Curse* 173-74). After this statement of her perception and her disappointment about her lawyer friend Taylor, she seems to trap herself in a maternal role that, in essence, is alien to her true nature.

She gives up her plan of escape to Europe. She resumes her nominal duties as a mother; for example, she goes to sign a statement for her apprehended daughter, Emma. Finally, as remaining parent in the family, she shows a clear familial vision in relaying Weston's eagle story. She presents an image of self-destruction as she tells of an eagle and a cat fighting each other in the middle of the sky and eventually crashing down together "like one whole thing."[2]

Above all, Ella hands down a curse to her daughter through the menstrual blood. Menstruation is "a curse that has been passed along from mother to daughter since the days of Eve" (Glore 60). Auerbach, however, contends that naming menstrual blood a female curse is a misnomer because "it is not a symbol of death, but one of life, one of fertility and procreation" (49). Auerbach's contention is, in a sense, right. Taking into account only fertility and procreation, menstruation cannot be called a curse. Rather, it must be called a blessing. But if the mythic dimension of the play is taken into account, her contention is not quite valid because the pain of childbirth was a punishment given by God to Eve for her sin.

Besides this female curse, Emma inherits the family curse. Like her father, she has a very hot temper. Despite her denying it, she has inherited what she calls the "highly explosive nitroglycerine" in her blood from her father. She tries to escape from the hostile situation of her family, leaving on a horse only to be dragged across the corral. Giving a graphic metaphor for fate, she claims, "Suddenly everything changed. I wasn't the same person any more. I was just a hunk of meat tied to a big animal. Being pulled" (*Curse* 148). That failed attempt at escape changes her mind; she gives up her escape and begins explaining her plans in the past tense. She realizes that she cannot escape by herself.

Emma acts as an Electra figure and an Iphigenia figure. Although the play does not imply Electra complex in her relationship with her father, she is closer to her father than to her mother, whom she hates enough to call her "a spoiled brat." In this sense she is an Electra, one who instigates her brother to kill her mother. However, at the end, her fate differs from that of Electra. When she notices that Weston is selling the farm, she shoots up the Alibi Club, her father's haunt.[3] She knows that there is no hope and no reason to stay home. Finally, after escaping from jail, she tries her second escape, "never to return." She is killed in an exploding car. Maybe the murder is totally accidental on one level because the gangsters want to blow up only the family car; or perhaps "Shepard somewhat startlingly kills her off" because "Emma's learning experience is distinctively negative" (Cardullo, "Wesley's Role" 6); or as Charles Lyons says, perhaps Shepard uses her as her father's "surrogate" (128). Clearly, on the mythic level, the curse of the family may need a human sacrifice, not a lamb killed by Wesley. Like Iphigenia, who is

sacrificed for Agamemnon's safe voyage to Troy, Emma may have to be sacrificed for her father's safe trip to Mexico.

Wesley is very sober and practical when the play begins. He has also a keen perception. In his long monologue, Wesley shows his perception of reality, sensing that something terrible is happening around him. By urinating over Emma's 4-H charts, he tries to save his sister: "I'm opening up new possibilities for her" (*Curse* 143). He himself dreams of going to Alaska where he thinks he can have a lot of possibilities. He dreams of being a frontiersman in the undiscovered land. In this regard Wesley is quite different from his father who wants to go to Mexico to be an escape artist. But Wesley's dream cannot come true because he cannot bring himself to act; he is already caught up by the curse. He tries to be reborn, applying the same remedy as Weston's. But he does all this only to find himself in Weston's old clothes. Donning his father's clothes may signify the role reversal between father and son, and Wesley takes over Weston's role as a family patriarch. On the deeper level, however, Wesley's wearing of Weston's clothes symbolizes the complete inheritance of the curse. The first sign of it reveals itself in the fact that he is very sympathetic to his father, who has the destructive power. He acquiesces in his father's wrongdoing by removing the debris of the broken door. However, he is not so sympathetic to his mother. Although he knows clearly what happened the previous night, he interrogates his mother about her reaction to the behavior of his drunken father. The point of his interrogation is to blame his mother for her harsh treatment of his father.

The classic analogues are clear again here. Wesley is a sort of modern Orestes, one who kills his mother on behalf of his father. Wesley does not actually murder his mother, but he symbolically kills her with hatred and derision. At some points in the play, his voice is very scornful of his mother's attitude. He derides her idea of going to Europe and her plan to sell the farm. Finally, he treats her as a harlot, insulting her by asking, "Where is your boyfriend? . . . Are you going off with him?" (*Curse* 171, 173).

Wesley does not try to escape from the terrible situation of his family. He rather tries, pragmatically, to stop it. In the second act, he tries to persuade his father not to sell the farm and suggests a way of reestablishing the avocado ranch. With all of his efforts in vain, he kills the lamb for food. Earlier in the play he tries to save the lamb, as though he saw his own suffering in the maggot-ridden lamb's suffering. This ritual slaughter of the lamb is part of Wesley's endeavors to stop the family's starvation, which can be a symbol of the family curse. To try to stop the curse, he sacrifices the lamb that can be identified with himself. Wesley, a son caught in a predestined role, is killed symbolically from the poison of his father. His fate resembles the fate of the lamb that he has been trying to save. As a

transformed and cursed man in his father's clothes, Wesley takes over the role of the family head: "He has no choice but to confront his [family's] past, to accept his blood and strive to transcend it" (Wetzsteon 259).[4] He has striven to alter the family's terrible condition, but he eventually has to accept the family past and its blood.

Clearly, the structure of the Atreus myth underlies *Curse of the Starving Class*, although it is distorted and only partially used in Shepard's recasting. Weston neglects his duty as a husband and has been away from home, just as Agamemnon is unfaithful to Clytemnestra while away from home. Weston returns home only to be blocked at the locked door by Ella, while Agamemnon comes home to be killed by his unfaithful wife. The end of the relationship as husband and wife between Weston and Ella is well expressed in the estrangement of their individual dreams. Weston wants to go to Mexico to be an escape artist while Ella wants to go to Europe to have a whole new place. Wesley blames his mother for her harsh treatment of his father while Orestes kills his mother on behalf of his father. Emma is also very sympathetic to her father, identifying herself with him by demonstrating her father's "nitroglycerine" in her temper. But her model is Electra. Like the grudging Electra, Emma always challenges her lying mother. She also derides her mother in relation to her mother's lawyer friend. However, at the end, sacrificed on behalf of her father, her fate differs from that of her model, Electra. Thus Shepard chooses a wholly negative twist, departing from the more upbeat conclusion of the *Oresteia*.

Although Shepard distorts the structure of the model myth in *Curse of the Starving Class*, he does not give his characters, except for Wesley, much freedom to act consciously. Wesley tries to stop the miserable condition of his family. Wesley's efforts are very self-conscious; as Simard says, "he chooses to break rather than repeat the pattern of his heritage" ("American" 31). But he eventually succumbs to his family condition. Weston's rebirth does not work because it is false. Ella's dream of escape and her plan of selling off the farm result from Weston's neglecting his duty and her feelings of persecution. In the end, all the family members appear, more or less, captured by the family condition, which may be their fate handed down through the mysterious curse of the family.

Notes

[1] Many critics believe that Weston has an epiphany and is really reborn as a changed man (Glore 59; Hart 73; Schvey 19; Randall 122). But Weston, along with the critics, seems to be under a delusion or to have a wrong idea of rebirth. A genuine rebirth would require his subsequent action to be different from what he acts thereafter. Rebirth comes usually with a perception that one is guilty or sinful and with a repentance for one's guilt or

sins. Weston does not really repent his past misdeeds. Trying to justify his past actions shows only his false reason to evade his responsibility. It goes without saying that he contradicts himself when he leaves home, where he finds what he has wanted all the time. Weston then is not changed at all through his alleged rebirth.

[2] Weston's eagle story, a metaphor for mutual destruction, is significant because it parallels the play's plot itself. But many critics give different meanings to the story. At the end of the play, Ella and Wesley relay Weston's eagle story, which they must have often heard. Some critics think that Ella and Wesley's version is "substantially different" from Weston's story (Mottram 138; Tucker 129; DeRose 98). But Bert Cardullo's *Explicator* note is more credible: "When [Ella] tells the story of eagle and cat . . . the cat enters the picture for the first time; when West told the story at the start of Act III, he stopped before the cat challenges the eagle for the lamb testes" (64). Another important point is the way they interpret the story. Considering the play focused on the father-son conflict, John Glore, Henry Schvey, and Esther Harriot agree that the eagle represents the father, Weston, and that the cat represents the son, Wesley (Glore 61; Schvey 19; Harriot 11). But for Luther Luedtke and Cardullo the eagle and cat are the father and mother who fight over the Tate land (Cardullo, "Shepard's" 64; Luedtke 152).

[3] Some critics think that Emma's shooting spree is retaliative; Emma ravages Ellis's Club "when she learns that [Ellis] has managed to buy up the family homestead" (Cardullo, "Sleep" 10; Whiting 498). Martin Tucker, seeing the Western-styled practice of justice in this incident, notes that Emma shoots up the Alibi Club, "whose owner has swindled her father out of his house" (126). In a stage version of the play, it might be possible to make Emma hang around to eavesdrop on Weston and Wesley's dialogues after she exits in the second act. But the published version of the play does not allude to anything like that. Emma simply exits when Weston tells his children that he has found a buyer. Weston does not mention the name of the buyer yet. Later Weston discloses to Wesley that the buyer is Ellis. The critics' misunderstanding can be compared to Ellis's; at the end of the second act, the police report the incident to Ellis, and he claims that Weston sent her down there.

[4] Wetzsteon actually makes this statement about Weston, but I find that it has greater relevance to Wesley. For Wetzsteon, the play's protagonist is Weston, whose "quest for spiritual liberation must circle back to its beginnings" (259).

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Cosmopolitanism and Decadence in the Westernized City: Achebe, Ngugi, and Mishima

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The centuries-old pastoral tradition in Western literature has contributed to the notion of urbanization as a fall from Edenic grace. This theme has emerged in recent non-Western fiction which pits images of the modern city against suggestions of a lost or fading traditional world free of outside influence. Non-Western writers have often bristled at the twin developments of rapid modernization and Westernization that have created such incongruities as McDonald's franchises in the shadow of ancient mosques or African businessmen in Brooks Brothers suits taking their BMWs to see the local witchdoctor (or "herbalist") about a potion to remove a hex that has been put on them. (Senegalese author Ousmane Sembene's novel and film *Xala* contains such an image.)

Reactions to such modernization and globalization vary among "Third World" authors. While many depict the rising post-colonial metropolises as embodiments of Western decadence, some reveal their ambivalence toward urbanization and modern technology by marbling their negative depictions of the non-Western city with images of the city as a site of progress and growth. While the Western lifestyle imposed on other countries can be represented as a satanic compromise of traditional local values, as in the work of Mishima, for instance, its perceived threat to native traditions has not blinded even "nativist" authors like Ngugi wa Thiong'o or critics of Western imperialism like Chinua Achebe to the shortcomings of pre-colonial practices or the potential benefits of at least some features of Western life.

Chinua Achebe, for instance, as much as he bemoans the loss of pre-colonial African harmony in *Things Fall Apart,* exhibits an ambivalence about the effects of these trends on African life in works like the 1952 short story "Marriage is a Private Affair." The story contrasts "the cosmopolitan atmosphere of the city" (*Girls at War* 23) of Lagos, Nigeria's most Westernized and modern urban center, with the custom-bound Ibo village the protagonist grew up in. While Lagos can accommodate such modern ideas like women becoming educated and holding professional jobs and people of different tribes getting married, the Ibo village frowns on both, while also maintaining its share of archaic attitudes towards things like "herbalists" and magic potions. Achebe, himself as Westernized a Nigerian as one could imagine, seems to side primarily with the forces of modernization in the city.

While he may view the fading Ibo traditions somewhat wistfully,

Achebe gives the reader the strong impression that the herbalists are quacks and that the anti-feminist anti-"miscegenation" attitudes of the traditional Ibo father in the story are outdated, stubborn, and bigoted. In matters of medicine, in fact, the father himself, the story's symbol of the old Ibo ways, being Christianized and having had some Western education, is described as "obstinately ahead of his more superstitious neighbors" (27). These neighbors rationalize the quackery of a local herbalist, who died from ingesting his own potion, by dismissing him as merely a "dishonest" herbalist, in contrast to the majority of herbalists still regarded as legitimate. Or else they claim that his potion would have worked on the person for whom it was originally intended and the error involved merely its misdirection. The woman who had commissioned it as a cure for her husband's wandering ways put it in the herbalist's own food to test it out on him. The entire episode thus takes on a burlesque quality, with the charlatan herbalist "hoist on his own petard." The traditionalist claims to medical knowledge are thus depicted as not merely wrong or quaint, but as absurd and dangerous. Achebe has been one of Africa's sharpest critics of these Westerners who would laud authors like V. S. Naipaul and Ayi Kwei Armah, whose novels Achebe feels present an overly dim view of post-colonial African aspirations (*Hopes* 73-82), yet the very difficulty of progress and the retrogressive tendencies of some African cultures are equally on display in his own fiction.

Although Achebe hardly seeks to denigrate African culture or to promote Euro-centric condescension toward "quaint" native African customs, he does seem to acknowledge the limitations of traditional African beliefs in an area like healthcare. To avoid smug ethnocentrism, Westerners must temper their horror at current stories of ritual female genital mutilation in West Africa, as described, for instance, by Alice Walker in *Warrior Marks* and *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, or of men in South Africa superstitiously hoping to cure their AIDS by raping virgins (q.v. Wright), with an appreciation of the new Western interest in traditional African medicines (q.v. Neuwinger), some of which may have legitimate bases in science, before asserting a pure cultural relativism or pure cultural absolutism in judging the stakes of the exchange of cultures involved in the new globalization or the after-effects of cultural imperialism on Africa and other colonized parts of the world.

However, Achebe's harsh view of traditional African medical lore in the story serves to amplify the theme of backwardness he also associates with traditional Ibo views of women's roles in society and of marriage outside one's own tribe. Works of African women authors like Bessie Head's autobiographical writings, Mariama Bâ's *Un Chant Écarlate*, and Myriam Warner-Vieryra's *Juletane* testify resoundingly to the crushing effects such attitudes have on modern African women. In Achebe's story, the father of

the bridegroom comes by the end of the story to regret his obstinacy in rejecting his son's wife, a gesture which has led him to end his relationship with his son. As a result, he will never see the grandchildren who will carry on his legacy. The bride, Nene, a modern Lagos woman, regards tribal restrictions on marriage as "something of a joke" (*Girls at War* 23) so archaic by the 1950s as to be laughable.

Achebe, of course, wants his readers to understand the dignity of such tribal traditions and the poignancy of their gradual dissolution, as evidenced by scenes in which the father reflects on the "losing battle" (29) against modernity that he knows he's fighting or in which traditional Ibo gentlemen point to the son's disobedience of his father in apocalyptic terms as "the beginning of the end" (26). Yet Achebe ultimately sides with Nene's modern attitude and tells us of the Ibo women of Lagos who gradually come to accept her, despite her modern ways and the fact that she's not an Ibo. The story mocks the tradition of arranged marriages by citing the inappropriate tribal selection for the story's protagonist of "an Amazon of a girl who used to beat up all the boys . . . [and was] a complete dunce at school" (23-24). The traditional father seems downright childish when he cuts his daughter-in-law's picture out of a wedding photo. The obtuseness and reactionary quality of the father's position is also revealed in his quoting of St. Paul to support the idea that "women should keep silence" (25) and in his dismissal of his son's prodigality as "Satan's work" (26). Such conservatism rooted in Christianity can hardly be taken as merely Afro-centrism or xenophobia. This family drama clearly operates on a more universal level, telling a story that has echoed throughout literature from *Romeo and Juliet* to *Fiddler on the Roof.* However, the specific African context lends the story a significant political dimension and topicality as African nations continue to struggle with the loss of native cultures and their displacement by modern Western systems and values.

In the sweep of Achebe's oeuvre, one can trace a movement toward ever greater acceptance of modernization, which, although sometimes regretted, is seen as inevitable and often beneficial, or at least equivocally so. Although *No Longer at Ease,* the title of Achebe's 1960 sequel to *Things Fall Apart,* expresses the feeling of discomfort that comes with decolonization and independence and evokes ruefully the sense of loss and alienation from traditional ways felt by the Magi in the Eliot poem from which the title is borrowed ("no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation, / With an alien people clutching their gods" [Eliot 41-42]), the larger theme of this novel and its 1966 sequel, *A Man of the People,* is less the corrosive effect of Westernization or modernization than the failure of a newly independent society to achieve a progressive enough attitude to succeed in the face of modern realities.

There is less ambivalence in Ngugi wa Thiong'o's story "Minutes of Glory." Clearly the Westernized or globalized city here is a place of corruption and represents a fall from grace. Ngugi demarcates the ways in which Western values and lifestyles corrode the souls of African people who have been drawn to the city from their native villages. Characters lose their African names and take on Western names: the protagonist's Christian name of Beatrice "sounded more pure and more beautiful" to her than her traditional African name. Women use face-lightening creams to remove the aesthetic stigma of dark complexions, exhibiting that racial inferiority complex Frantz Fanon describes as being common to his colonized psychiatric patients in *Black Skin, White Masks,* several of whom relate to him their dreams of being chased by menacing black bulls, which Fanon understands as symbolic projections of racial self-hatred.

The main character in the story, after leaving her village for the city, becomes a barmaid "in Alaska, Paradise, The Modern . . . and other beer halls" (whose pointedly Western and modern names resonate symbolically) filled with drunken nouveau riche men obsessed with their Jaguars, Bentleys, and Mercedes who tell ribald jokes. This dehumanizing job only leads to further degradation: she becomes a prostitute and then ends up in jail after resorting to a robbery she was driven to by penury and the desire for the transitory artificial pleasures of the city. The shallowness of Western materialism is presented starkly, with the protagonist coveting such trivial novelties as earrings and high heels in an ultimately vain pursuit of the self-esteem such artificial glamour seemed to promise girls like her from dull, remote African villages. Other women in the story are driven to suicide or horrifying infanticide after being lured away from the communal comfort of their native villages by opportunistic pimps promising them impossible luxuries and glamour.

Yet in spite of Ngugi's famous nativism, evident in his decision to write in his native African language and to use his original African name, the story contains its own ambivalence about the relative merits of life in the modern city and life in the traditional African village. While the traditional village may have a greater sense of communalism and concern for its residents and a more lasting and more spiritual sense of values, even the protagonist of the story realizes that one can't turn back the clock of "progress" and that "she was part of a generation which would never again be one with the soil, the crops, the wind, and the moon." The narrator dismisses her memories of her village as "the sweetest place on earth" as "romantic illusions of immeasurable peace and harmony." Ngugi seems to concede, however sadly, that life in African villages is hard and full of its own strife. It may be, however, at least free from the crass callousness of the city, where a woman's tragic gassing herself to death only inspires cackling jokes about her having

"gone metric—without pains."

This same modern urban callousness is the keynote of Yukio Mishima's 1966 story "Swaddling Clothes." In the story, modern urban promiscuity or broken marriages lead to instances of illegitimacy, in itself a symptom of societal decadence, but exacerbating this social problem is society's bland acceptance of it as a matter of routine. American social critics decry the same tendencies in our society, variously attributing them to the loss of religious faith, to unresponsive governments, or to the negative influence of popular culture, yet for Mishima the cause of the problem is Americanization itself, which he sees as a monolithic cultural threat in its displacement of traditional Japanese values.

Toshiko, the delicate female protagonist, who represents the purity of traditional Japanese refinement and sensitivity, faces the depraved insensitivity of chain-smoking Westernized characters who chortle in a night club over the strains of a braying jazz orchestra about the nanny sent by the employment agency who gave birth on the floor of her room unattended by proper healthcare providers or even a midwife. They joke about her "moaning like a cow" and "yelling like a stuck pig" and make puns about her letting "the cat . . . out of the bag" (176), their animal imagery both denying her her humanity and expressing indifference to her fate or that of her "bastard" son. The protagonist's husband is more concerned about stains on his rug than about either of these. He is a movie actor, a quintessentially American and modern profession, and he epitomizes American brashness and insensitivity by spouting loud hyperboles and bad puns and leaving his wife alone to take a cab home. In contrast to his wife's Eastern delicate frailty, he has a "smiling face" and "strong, white teeth" (177). He is caught up in Capitalist ambitions and is thus too busy to attend properly to his wife or to any spiritual introspection. Mishima amplifies the associations he makes between the husband's abrasiveness and his surrender to Occidental ways by describing everything Western in the story as somehow "tacky." The Western-style furniture of the couple's apartment is described as "unhomely" (175), for instance, suggesting not only ugliness and discomfort, but also an abandonment of Japanese aesthetic values Mishima considers a symbolic abandonment of the Japanese cultural homeland, an internal exile in a foreign culture.

Mishima deftly weaves a leitmotif of "newspaper" imagery throughout the story, connecting the illegitimate child's birth and the brusque reactions to it to the city itself, pointedly identified as a place of decadent Western influence. The newspaper is an apt symbol of both the "throwaway" mentality of the modern city and its shrill sensationalism. The "bastard" child is wrapped in newspapers by the contemptuous doctor who arrives too late on the scene. Delicate aromatic cherry blossoms have been replaced by cheap

paper substitutes. Strollers through the park "automatically kick aside the empty bottles or crush the waste paper beneath their feet" (179). Finally, a dangerous drunken bum sleeping on a park bench—the quintessential image of modern urban life's harsh neglect and decadence—wraps himself in newspapers to ward off the cold. This last figure, who perpetrates an act of random violence against Toshiko, who has sought the traditional aesthetic and spiritual pleasures of the cherry trees in blossom in the park by the Imperial Palace moat, is startlingly connected with the bastard newborn child seen at the beginning of the story.

It is interesting to note that both Ngugi and Mishima use images of fragile traditional women whose purity is threatened by Western-influenced men to symbolize the process of globalization. Such a strategy makes for an intriguing counterpoint to Western miscegenation fears of fragile white women threatened by the Nonwestern male Other in, for instance, E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India.*

Of the three authors, Mishima has taken the most uncompromising stand on the influence of globalization and urbanization on a traditional, more communal society. Facing a modern Japan humiliated by a defeat in the war, whose forced Westernization or Americanization is seen as the price of defeat, Mishima expresses in his writing the suppressed rage of his generation, which he views as having compromised away its integrity and honor in collaborating with Americanization. Exemplifying this attitude to the extreme are the sadistic thirteen-year-old boys who horrifyingly flay a stepfather in Mishima's 1965 novel *The Sailor who Fell from Grace with the Sea* ostensibly because, as a modern navy man, he has fallen from grace in accepting modern ways and abnegating a traditional Japanese code of honor. Mishima's own attempt to return to samurai ways and his ritual suicide demonstrate his own fidelity to this ideal. While Achebe and even Ngugi could make the necessary accommodations and adapt, however reluctantly, to Western culture, Mishima—uncompromising to the end—decided to end his own life rather than accept the way Japan was going.

Social critic Jane Jacobs has recently noted that the battle between the old and the new, between forces of progress and reaction, has always been fundamental to economics in general (Farrell). It can be seen historically in the displacements of rural workers by the English industrial revolution that led Wordsworth to reflect on the leech gatherer in "Resolution and Independence." Thomas Friedman's recent book *The Lexus and the Olive Tree* observes the ways in which the social fabric of traditional communal societies is destroyed by globalization, which now moves at an accelerated pace, producing revolutionary rather than evolutionary social change. It may be that the real revolutions in Africa and the rest of the Third World were not the wars of independence, like the largely reactionary Algerian Revolution,

Rhodesian guerrilla war, or Mau Mau uprising in Kenya, fought in the postwar years, but rather the new post-industrial revolution bringing modernity and Westernization to every corner of the world today.

While the wars that ended colonialism may have rid the world of the increasingly anachronistic phenomenon of empire-building and blatant economic exploitation of the technologically less-developed peoples of the world, and the self-assertion of once-marginalized non-Western cultures in post-colonial literary work may have provided a much-needed challenge to Western ethnocentrism and bigotry, the seemingly self-powered momentum of economic, technological, and cultural globalization continues to shape post-colonial non-Western societies and to alter their cultures profoundly. Recent violent reactions against this trend by Islamic fundamentalists suggest not a viable alternative to modernization, but a last-gasp attempt at resistance. The very means of terrorism employed and their sources of funding bespeak a world already dependent on modern technologies and infrastructures. E. M. Forster's vision at the end of *A Passage to India* of post-colonial Anglo-Indian relations based on cultural, political, and economic reciprocity and mutual respect offers an alternative to violent resistance and reaction to globalization. Post-colonial authors have an important role to play in contributing their national perspectives to the global dialogue and in promoting their cultural traditions to provide a greater sense of balance in the global marketplace of ideas, ending once and for all what Gayatri Spivak acutely dubbed the passive silence of the "subaltern."

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POETRY

Robert Collins
University of Alabama at Birmingham

Pilgrims

Festooned with pigeon feathers or plastic
buckles, stove-pipe hats or purple war paint,
at November's last assembly we attempted
to portray the First Thanksgiving at Plymouth,
where Squanto saved the starving Pilgrims
from certain disaster by planting hills of corn,
hoping, thereby, to redeem ourselves and regain
Sr. Timothy's good graces. Then we'd all
sit down, Pilgrims, Indians, and proud parents,
and consume the sumptuous bounty Providence
had graciously provided. To prepare us for
our parts, the worst class she'd ever had in a life
devoted to teaching, Sister taught predestination,
total depravity, and the perseverance of saints
as if she agreed with the heresies of Calvin—
that most of us were damned for all eternity
to the blistering fires of hell and nothing any
one might do—good works, prayer, or acts
of perfect contrition—would change the mind
of almighty God. As we put on our program,
Sister was beside herself, hovering in the wings
to whisper stage directions. She fumed at how
we flubbed our lines and muted our performance
when we'd done so well at dress rehearsal.
In spite of how professionally she directed,
she couldn't comprehend it wasn't possible
for kids like us to remain entirely in character,
conveying every nuance she desired, worried
as we were about surviving the brutal winter
we knew was rapidly approaching with so little
to sustain us and our fate decided already.

The Near Occasions of Sin

In the beginning they included only notorious
night spots downtown the Franciscan sister in charge
recorded on her blacklist: the only movie theatre,
especially on Fridays, Reliable Wine and Liquor,
the pool and pinball parlor, and the playground
in the park where gangs of kids convened to tell
crude jokes and smoke when school let out.
Steeped in sin, these were the major locations
we were instructed to avoid under no idle threat
of excommunication even if that leave us friendless
and force us to travel several long city blocks
through deepening gloom to resist temptation.
Though they arose and shimmered in the distance
like the neon signs of Vegas I once glimpsed
from the air lighting up the desert for miles
around as we flew to visit family on the coast,
unquestionable places like these weren't that tough
to stay out of. Soon I'd find more treacherous
locations to frequent much closer to home.
How was I supposed to avoid my own bedroom
and the upstairs bath without explaining to parents,
no longer amused, that I was only trying to do
as Mother Superior had ordered though that meant
staying up all night and not showering for days
till I was certain the immediate crisis had passed?
How would I ever avoid the darkened theatre
open twenty-four hours a day inside my head,
screening feature-length films for free, starring
shy girl from school—Jean Niven, Virginia Farley,
and Regina Billero—in various states of undress
in Panavision, Technicolor, sometimes even 3-D?
No matter how many times my conscience,
that sullen, overweight usher with terminal zits,
collared me and kicked me out, appropriately
chastened, I found myself sneaking back in.

Patricia Waters
Chattanooga State Technical Community College

yeah, sure

I am drinking a longneck in the backseat, car door open
to afternoon heat, Natchez,
my hair is long, family vacation,
the wagon broke down in Memphis,
a rental came through, so now
here I am with him, the kids, Mississippi in August,
our white Lincoln parked on this bluff.
We look up and down the river
like we are going to see some rescuing hand
come right down from heaven to straighten us up
or at least put us in a movie with a happy ending,
he doesn't know it yet, his mind twisting,
turning on itself, but he's getting rid of me.
I'm wearing a white teeshirt,
red silk Valentino skirt limp with sweat, heat,
your kisses still on my mouth,
no ideas, but scared and happy,
you stealing my sugar. Two mornings later
that Lincoln crosses Lake Pontchartrain to New Orleans
where maybe things will be different.
But I mail the letter anyway. Just in case.

What is left when it won't go away

The butcher at the Bargain Barn
has taken a fancy to me
as I inspect the meat
lying in its fresh red pools,
shining in its cellowrap.
Usually I go for the dead baby-like chicken,
skinned, boneless, non-analogous breasts,
pulpy pale, plump with hormones
and other chemical desiderata
it is best not to know
just as I have no desire to know
the butcher, so quick to fling aside
his white and bloody hand-stained
coarse cotton apron.
When I have finished my shopping,
he is lounging among the check-out girls
with butcher banter
and I look at the check I have to write,
my hand making letters, numbers,
and sense beyond the store's plate glass windows
the large and lighted world
like a flaring thing over all our lives:
the night ahead, each of us going
to apartment, trailer, house, single room,
where wait the fridge, the stove,
what will transform the frozen,
the fast, the raw, the left-over, the cold
into what will feed us
and we the hungry will be grateful.

Mike Spikes
Arkansas State University

Artificial Roses

Why is it bad form
to give your girl
artificial roses
on Valentine's day?
Let's say they look
like they bloomed in the earth,
that she can't tell them from
genuine flowers
unless they're touching her skin.
O.K., so they smell like plastic
or silk,
not a living thing,
but let's say you spray them
with an artificial
rose scent, sweet as nature
ever made. It's possible to buy
such. Let's also say
you're not cheap,
that you pay a bundle for them,
as much as for any that grow,
and she knows it.
Why is that so loveless?
Aren't fake ones more perfect
than real?
She needs defects
wilted, dwarfed, or discolored petals
only authentic bouquets display?
Fragility? The risk of falling apart?
Thorns that actually stick and draw blood?
She needs death
to lurk in each plant,
like a rat in the woodwork
waiting for dark
to scavenge the kitchen?
Is that what she has to have to know
you truly,
really
have given your heart?

Theodore Haddin
University of Alabama at Birmingham

Waiting at the Bank

She sauntered in the door and walked behind me
as I sat waiting for the cage to safe deposits
to open but something stirred in me behind my glasses
she was all in red her hair shone like heavy silk
cut cleanly just above the shoulder deep pink went
down the length of her body spiraling
around her waist and tight over her buttocks
to just below her hips and stopped above the sleekest pair
of legs that glided into red boots with just a hint of fur
at the tops that made the legs seem more bare
I thought I was the one who was staring
but one of the bank officials a woman in plain
came over as if to carry out some business
with a teller but she only stood back not even
in line and soon she too was staring not directly
but when she thought no one was looking
and did she stare she really looked hard
like what *is* this and I never and so forth
but what I guessed was she wanted to go back home
and try herself out before the mirror in some
getup just as weird the only thing was she couldn't match
her face pink and deep purple-lipped as it was and nothing,
no nothing from where I sat could match those legs

If You Stand Around in Alabama

If you stand around in Alabama
very long, roots go down from your feet
you don't have to go back to Africa here
or Mexico to stamp your self as pure
to find the home that is you
come on, says Kabir, wake the rootless ones
let them break out of box car and broken home

I Will Make You Another Poem

I will make you another poem
as simple as the dawn falling
into the chinkapin oak
whose leaves flood the lawn
beside your window
and I will surround this tree
with sounds of delight
of words and birds to your sight
look at them as toward the sea
where crests come salt and free
how green land changes
in the mirror of the sea
how the artist's eye
makes green, makes blue
in all the colors of the sky

Terry Everett
Delta State University

3. Thunderstorm Good Morning

The dark clouds roil,
the thunder rumbles,
the trees dance wildly
with the wind,
and rain falls hard enough
to blot out vision,
and yet inside
this goldfish bowl
where I read and write,
I think of you
and sunflowers blossom
in the sunflow of my heart.

20. Robin's Egg Blue Blessing Good Morning

This morning as the dark misty days continue
and the atmospheric pressure remains low,
I check on the robin's nest you discovered
yesterday on the high ledge in that window
in our lounge, and before first light with the nest
in the dark and me in the artificial light
I do not see the nest and panic, thinking
of what force might have blown or swept it away,
and then I think to turn off the lounge lights
and walk back to the nest now visible
in available light and robin's egg blue eggs
shine within the dark nest so perfectly formed
by her who made it conform to the shape
of her warm breast so she could lay her heart
upon the eggs and now just past the moment
of first light above the dark nest of Mother Earth
the egg-shaped bubble in which we breathe shines
Robin's Egg Blue upon robin's egg blue.

23. Orpheus Ascending Good Morning

After weeks of clouds and low pressure
a morning comes clear and the stars
of summer sing to one who sees
them before first light in indigo
backlit by Arcturus falling
in the west, Ursa Major diving
in the north, the Summer Triangle
touching meridian, touching
our hearts with April hope springing
toward the fulfillment of summer.

Maura Gage
Louisiana State University, Eunice

White Bonnet, Red Day

The red day of clouds
fell over all like heavy mud,
a suspicion of rain
echoing over the fields.
The snowy egrets comb
through cut rice and cane,
find crustaceans in the wet,
the sound of cattails and reeds
in marshy foreground,
a wind-filled music.
A chemical smell rising
amidst the birds and farmland.

Radio plays on the porch,
a burning cigarette;
tiny girl in playpen: blue dress,
white bonnet, blonde curls.
A broom stands watch there,
in the corner; a strange red day,
and then the whisking swirls
of wind and rain, an autumn music
without refrain.

Sandra H. Bounds
East Mississippi Community College

A Piece of Home

September now
in the Mississippi Delta.
Cotton fields stretch beyond sight
in every direction.
Their dazzling whiteness lightly covers
rich ebony soil beds
like king-size counterpanes.
Ready for harvest,
the cotton has been tried and refined
by the summer sun's fiery heat.
The haunting beauty
of this rural landscape
endears and endures—
a little piece of home.

Jeanne S. Kelly
Holmes Community College

Confessions of a Would-be Siren

Tide rolls in, lapping up the sand
as it has since time began.
Ancient adventurers call to me
in the haunting cadences of waves.

I would sing the irresistible song
luring sailors to lose their way,
crash into dangerous rocks.
I would bewitch like Circe
turning men to pigs,
my beauty a snare for their destruction.
I would experience the thrill of conquering,
taking captives,
making slaves.

Instead, I am like Penelope
weaving island tapestry alone,
quietly fending off unworthy suitors,
remaining faithful to a man
who listens to sirens' songs
and follows Calypso.

Joe Amoako
Delaware State University

Who Art Thou Man

Why sit under the juniper tree
Wailing and dancing to the tune unknown
Why clad yourself in purple and ashes
Your feet the tingling dull bells

Nine months you were nourished
Though the cord spoke to you in silence
Suspended in the ocean of tranquility
The ray of light you murmured within
Till the cord you severed to your hurt
Not my making but your making

Yonder the grave lies in wait
Tick-tock the days numbered
One to seventy plus
The clock halts
Back to the ancients
Into the clouds
Till the trumpet resounds

Be ye still until the roll-call
Each to respond
Your sheaves in your bosom you carry
In the just balance to be scaled
Who art thou man
Be still with the silent voice

Written in Lagos, Nigeria, in memory of a Togolese student who died at my brother's clinic.

Marth Minford-Meas
Cincinnati, Ohio

Emerging Prints

Two girls stand nearly back to back
in an etching. Negative space between
forms a squeezed oblong. One partaker

glances out impudently. Floral factors
from sides of dual kimonos emerge.
Robes so identical that sight relates

bear splotches of white on black,
butterfly-like. The enclosed area begins
to suggest sense. Background arches

on both sides carve dark wings, relax
movement. Inked heads become fuzzy
nodules. Engraver's vision Rorschachs

a hologram of tapestry and line: tempora
where none exists: young women seeking
to extrapolate beyond fixed temperament.

FICTION

The Healing

Paula J. Lambert
Holmes Community College

I've come to know the smell of death, and I no longer find it objectionable. I see death every day when I ride in the country, miles and miles on my bicycle, my legs heaving and hauling, never stopping except for the roadkill, and sometimes lifting myself of the seat, balancing my weight into my arms, my hands, so that my thighs feel it more and I push out all the energy I have into the pedals, through the wheels, onto the pavement, and back, finally, into the earth. That's where we're all headed, you know, back to the earth.

It's the roadkill that gets me. So much of it even out here where there's so little traffic. But the cars and trucks that do come barrel through, unthinking, uncaring, sideswiping squirrels and armadillos, possums and snakes. Turtles. Birds. The poor damn birds. Like the cardinals so red, the color of passion, flying low and senseless from thicket to thicket straight out across the road, careless as love and smashed to bits just as senselessly, and then there it is, the smell of death, the call of the vultures, as clear as a broken heart, as final as divorce, the end of a coupling, the end of marriage. For me, it felt like the end of life, and I fancied I smelled my own death there, for a while.

And the split was my fault, though I didn't know it at the time. All I knew was that she'd asked me to leave, and I was too stunned not to go. I thought she needed some time, a day or two maybe, a week, and I packed a suitcase and checked into the Comfort Suites. I was there four days when she called to ask where she should send the rest of my things. That's when I realized it was serious.

Donna was already divorced when I met her, bulimic and buffaloed by her first husband, the one who'd done her in, physically, emotionally. She'd finally found the guts to leave him and was just starting to figure out how to have fun when we met, at a blues club in Memphis, one of the quieter clubs off Beale Street. She was on the dance floor alone with her eyes closed, holding a bottle of Bud and sort of rolling her hips to the music, trying to get lost in it she told me later. Trying to do more than hear it or even feel it; she was trying to be the music, trying to be the blues. She looked so goddamned sexy, though, so vulnerable I guess, small and skinny and not quite right with the beat of the music, not quite managing to get into it the way she seemed to be wanting to, and I figured I could help her. I'd had a few beers myself and was feeling cocky, went right up to her and put my hand on her hip, curled my left hand around the neck of the bottle she was holding in her right, and pulled

her to me. She opened her eyes real sudden-like, as though I'd frightened her, or thinking back on it now, more like I'd annoyed her, but I swayed my own hips and carried hers with me, and she got a different look on her face, resignation maybe, and she laid her head on my shoulder and we danced together to that goddamned Memphis blues, sexiest music man ever made, so much passion coming out of so much pathos. And that's what defined our relationship, me swooping in to rescue her when all she was doing was looking for herself to begin with. How did I know then, how did either of us know, that she never would find herself with me in the way? That if I carried us both through the beat of the blues she never would find her way through the music alone?

I took the summer off from teaching and went down into Mississippi, to the little piece of land my dad had left me, had left us I'd always figured, and planned to do a little writing, a little healing; I was trying to finish a book and told myself pain always does a poet good. It's material. I figured I'd maybe do a little fishing, thought about hunting, though it was the wrong season and the only thing I was hunting anyway was how to get my life back. I'd brought my bike and decided after a couple of days of doing nothing to finally go for a ride, down the state highway first, before turning onto the county roads. I don't know why the turtle caught my eye; I wasn't looking for such things then and hadn't yet learned to recognize the smell, but maybe I'd caught it somehow, subconsciously. Maybe I was drawn to it before I ever knew it. Maybe that's why I'd been drawn to Donna.

There it was, on the side of the road. The back half of its shell was completely crushed, in pieces still covering the bloody mush that used to be part of its body, its legs, tail, abdomen I guess. But the front part of its shell was intact and perfect, its front legs out—when one moved slightly, I realized it was still alive—and its head out, quiet, eyes blinking, and when I bent low over my bike to see better, the ants that were crawling over it through the blood and mush and pieces of shell as well as over his blinking eyes—not a lot of ants, but a few, the blood was red and relatively fresh, he had not been in that condition overly long—but when I bent to see him, he retreated, pulling his head and living legs into the part of his shell that was still intact and perfect. I was quiet, still, got a good look at him, material, a metaphor, a freaky horror of man vs. nature struggles god-damn-us, and then lifted up a bit so I was not so close, and his head and neck and legs came out again, all the way, and he blinked again, contemplative, one half completely dead, crushed and miserable, and one half fully alive . . . or at least functioning.

I couldn't help thinking of Donna, what she was like when we met, half dead and no way to heal, and I realized all at once the only thing I could do for this turtle was let it die. I left it on the side of the road, tried to forget it, but it had imprinted itself on my brain, one of those images we poets carry

with us, the strongest one I think I'd ever come across, or at least the most personal one I'd seen in a long time. I kept thinking it funny, that turtle's need to protect itself when it was already so obviously done for. There was something there that didn't know yet how critical the situation was, something that hadn't given up, that retreated when it sensed new danger, but then opened itself up again for whatever he figured he was headed for next.

I guess it was a little like me, too, in a way. I went back again and again that summer to Memphis and to Donna, thinking there had to be something left, that she wouldn't go on without me, that I couldn't go on without her, but I always retreated to the trailer, to the country, to the miles and miles of riding that built up my physical body and allowed me to lick my spiritual wounds. It hadn't quite dawned on me yet that Donna had learned what I hadn't figured out, that she'd learned about death. She was dead when I met her on the dance floor, looking for a pulse somewhere in the beat of that music. I gave her my heartbeat instead, pumping my blood back through her, for her, helping I thought then, enabling I know now, never stepping back far enough to allow her to figure out her own resurrection.

I don't think I really learned to recognize that smell until the day I went to Memphis to talk to her one last time, one last time that I thought would convince her to let me back, and found someone else living in the apartment. They'd never heard of Donna, and the landlady wouldn't tell me a thing, said everything was paid and that was all that mattered to her. She didn't care where her tenants went when they left and she wasn't about to get tangled up in anything involving a divorce.

Divorce. Jesus. The word hadn't even come up yet. I was still thinking by Labor Day I'd be back in my office at school with a finished manuscript and a wife who'd figured out what she wanted. It never dawned on me she'd figure out she didn't want me. I called the club where she worked and found out she'd quit. I thought of friends who'd know where she was, but calling them seemed too damn humiliating. I went home instead, got my bike out and rode hard in the horrible heat, the humidity near a hundred per cent that day. I may as well have been riding through water as air. I caught a smell that nauseated me and had an idea right away what it was, but I couldn't find any animals on the sides of the road. After half a mile or so, it started to fade, but it had been too strong to begin with; I had to know what it was, had to know what had suffered with me that day, and I circled back twice before finding the armadillo in the grass off the shoulder. Jesus, the smell was strong and I couldn't see what was causing it, though the thing was certainly dead; all that showed was a thin red line—bright red, the blood was fresh—along its side. I turned it over with the toe of my shoe and had to shove hard to get it to roll. I had no idea those things were so heavy. It was twenty pounds if it was an ounce. It finally flipped, though, and there it was,

the hara-kiri cut through its underbelly, the guts spilling out with the roll and I thought again I'd found a metaphor—this time for myself. All that was left, I remember thinking, was to wait for the buzzards to pick it clean.

I used to think the buzzards were God-awful creatures, ugly, scavengers, great Grim Reapers with enormous wings and horned beaks, but you know, I've come to think of them as beautiful. When I listen to Muddy Waters moan about how "you got to take sick and die some of these days" or hear sweet Janis Joplin begging us to "take another little piece of her heart," I realize what the vultures are for, and I know about that need to be picked clean.

I learned to slow down when I saw the buzzards feeding—I sensed them, sometimes, before I saw them, always there was that retreating smell of death and, sure enough, when I'd make it around a curve or over the next rise, there they'd be. I'd try to see what it was they were working at. Once, I saw the four legs of a deer sticking up straight from a ditch, and the next day when I passed, I saw something similar, but smaller, more slender, and finally saw that it was the deer's rib cage, its ribs pointed upward; I don't know what had happened to the legs—maybe they'd collapsed without the support of their meat and skin, maybe the birds had snapped and cracked them off, but when I saw that almost-white ribcage rising out of the reeds and grass, I determined to come back and find it later, when I had a chance. I wasn't ready to stop that day; I had a new poem going in my head and working it out was distracting me. It was a few days before I went out again—that damn poem was a bugger and took everything I had to get it right—and then I rode and rode along the side of that highway, circled around several times where I thought I had seen it, but never saw any evidence that the deer had been there. All I could find in the ditch was black-eyed susans coming up, dark yellow flowers on long green stems.

I've come by now to love the buzzards. There's something about them, about what they do, that's cleansing, I think, and beautiful and natural. They're gorgeous, enormous, but they clean out the body and set the bones to bleach, leave the soul to fly, I suppose, fly to surprising places maybe, like low along the thickets, or straight-dead level alongside a car racing with the open-mouthed driver.

On the day I finally left Mississippi, headed back to Memphis and a new life, new apartment, new semester, finished manuscript in my briefcase and bicycle on the back of my car, I saw more buzzards feasting ahead on the left and slowed down, anxious to see what their carrion was and expecting to have to strain to see it. It turned out to be a large calf, its head and neck and shoulders plainly visible from the road, its body hidden like the deer in tall grass. I thought it would have been interesting to pass by it day after day, see what was left of it, how it changed, how long it would take the vultures to eat

it, if there would be a skull left, but I knew I wouldn't pass by that way again until long after the calf was nothing but a memory.

I remembered the turtle, the first damaged creature I'd seen that summer, the one I'd thought was so much like Donna and didn't realize at first was like me as well. When next I'd ridden that way, I saw the scattered pieces of the turtle's bottom shell, that yellowed color with the dark lines—scattered along the side of the road—and at first I thought it had been hit again, though that didn't seem likely since it was off the road the first time, and then I thought the scavengers must have cracked it apart with those so-strong beaks, trying to get at what was inside. I saw only the pieces of the bottom shell—I didn't see any remains of the top, or think to look for them further. I don't even know if that's what vultures do, really, if they can tear a turtle's shell to pieces, but I like to think they're capable of it, that it's the right kind of help for the turtle, turned inside out and broken to bits so there's not a chance of recovery, not until the earth swallows him up again, uses him for fodder, for fertilizer, and then figures out on its own how to turn him into black-eyed susans. That's healing. That's what it takes, for all of us.

Traveling Dreams

Beverly Derden Fatherree
Hinds Community College

Fancy saw the dust from the flatbed pickup truck before the truck was close enough to see the ugly green paint or the boards nailed on the sides, before she could read "Coleman's Rolling Emporium—Whatever Your Heart Desires" printed in faded red block letters on the door. She took the last bite of her apple and threw the core into the dusty front yard. She spit on her fingers and slicked back pale strand of hair hanging in her face.

"Aunt Julia," she called into the screen door of the frame house, "the rolling store's coming down the road."

Aunt Julia pushed back the screen and let it slam as she came out onto the narrow porch.

"John Coleman knows better than to come down this road to sell me any geegaws off his rolling store. I told him enough times I ain't paying him two dollars for something I can get for dollar out'n the catalog."

Aunt Julia stood at the top of the steps and chewed her blackgum toothbrush filled with snuff. She wiped her hands on her apron and watched the truck move slowly down the road. Fancy looked down at her dirty bare feet and sighed.

The truck rolled to a stop in a cloud of dust. A young man with greasy black hair and dark, thick-looking skin climbed out. He had a patch over one eye and he limped across the yard to the bottom step.

"Evening, Mrs. Woolbright. How are you and your lovely daughter today?" The uncovered eye, the color of wet pine bark, was bloodshot.

"I ain't a 'Mrs.' in the first place and Fancy ain't my daughter in the second. Who are you and where's John Coleman?" The hump on Aunt Julia's back was noticeable as she stretched her neck forward to stare down the steps at the young man. He wore a shiny green suit and a lemon yellow shirt open at the neck.

"Mr. Coleman is ailing, *Miss* Woolbright, took bad with the gout, so I've taken over his route for the time being. I'm George McGee." The young man smiled a smile that didn't leave his mouth and held out his right hand.

Aunt Julia took out her toothbrush and leaned over the porch rail. She pitched her head forward and spit out a stream of snuff juice and wiped her mouth with the palm of her right hand. Then she offered that hand to Mr. McGee. He hesitated only a moment before taking the hand and shaking it.

"I'd be pleased to show you the merchandise from the rolling store, Miss Woolbright," he said, his voice becoming deeper and smoother. "We got jew'lry, we got housewares, we got sewing goods, we got whatever your

heart desires, just like the sign says."

Aunt Julia took her tin of snuff from her apron pocket and swirled her toothbrush in it. Then she stuck the toothbrush in the corner of her mouth.

"Humph! My heart don't desire nothing I got to pay out the nose for. John Coleman don't come down this road to sell nothing to me. I get what I want from the catalog. So you're wasting your time."

Fancy walked up close to Mr. McGee and pulled on his coattail.

"What's the matter with your eye? You got a eyeball under that patch?" She stared up at him, waiting.

"Fancy Woolbright, I'll tan your hide for asking questions that ain't none of your business. Mr. McGee's bad eye and gimpy leg don't have nothing to do with you," Aunt Julia scolded. She eyed Mr. McGee expectantly. He smiled an understanding smile.

"Miss Woolbright, don't fuss at this sweet young girl. Children jes' naturally curious about anybody different. And I don't mind telling people that I come by my handicap honest, in the service of my country," he said. He turned to Fancy, who still stared. "I got me a glass eyeball in there that I can take out at night. It's the prettiest blue eye you ever seen. I keep it covered up when I'm selling, though, 'cause it's been known to hypnotize people. And I don't want to take advantage of good folk."

Mr. McGee drew himself up straighter. "Now about my goods. I think you'll find I got some unusual items that you won't see in the catalog. Won't you just step over to the truck and take a look?"

Fancy had already lifted one edge of the tarp that covered the back of the truck.

"Aunt Julia, there's a china doll-baby with yellow hair just like me and my sweet dead Mama! It's the most beautiful china doll-baby I ever seen. I ain't never had no china doll-baby in my whole life."

"And you ain't never gonna have one neither," Aunt Julia answered. "You're nearly nine years old—too old to be playing with doll-babies." Aunt Julia had come down the steps to look under the tarp. "Wasn't nothing sweet about your dead mama, anyway. Put that china doll-baby back before you break it."

"It's already broke," Fancy said, rubbing her hand over the doll's hair. "The back of her head's all smashed in."

Mr. McGee took the doll from Fancy and held it up.

"You can't see where she's broke unless you're looking for it. Nobody will know. If you can't see nothing wrong, then it's like it ain't even there. This here is a two dollar china doll from New York City. I'll let you have it for fifty cent."

He handed the doll back to Fancy and reached under the tarp.

"Miss Woolbright, Mr. Coleman said to show you this first thing,

seeing as how you set such store by religion. It's a pitcher of Jesus Christ hisself."

Aunt Julia spit a stream of snuff into the dirt and snorted.

"What do I need with another pitcher of Jesus? I got every pitcher of Jesus ever made. I got Jesus sleeping as a little bitty baby, I got Jesus praying at the temple, I got Jesus hanging on the cross. Jesus eats the Last Supper in my kitchen." But Aunt Julia moved closer to get a better look at the picture Mr. McGee pulled from under the tarp. He held it up proudly.

"You may have all them pitchers, but you ain't got this one. This one's got a gen-u-ine gold-colored aluminum frame. And it's got a border of real plastic orange blossoms across the bottom." Mr. McGee paused and leaned closer to Aunt Julia. "And you plug it in and it lights up."

Aunt Julia shifted her toothbrush to the other side of her mouth. She picked up the cord that dangled from the bottom of the picture.

"How much?" she asked, looking Jesus eyeball to eyeball.

"This pitcher is usually three fifty, but Mr. Coleman said to sell it to you for three dollars if you wanted it. And it's a bargain at that."

Aunt Julia pulled her gaze away from Jesus and stared into Mr. McGee's good eye.

"Three dollars! I wouldn't pay three dollars for a photograph of God hisself, much less a pitcher of Jesus. You just get on out of here," Aunt Julia said as she took one last look at Jesus and turned back to the house.

"Aunt Julia," Fancy pleaded, "can't I please have this china doll-baby, please?"

Aunt Julia didn't even answer. She just stomped up the steps and into the house, slamming the screen door behind her.

Mr. McGee snatched the doll out of Fancy's hands and flung it under the tarp, along with the gently-smiling Jesus. Without a word, he climbed into the truck and cranked it up. He moved off in a cloud of dust.

In a few minutes, the screen door slammed again and Aunt Julia stomped back out onto the porch. She thrust some money toward Fancy.

"Run after that truck, Fancy, and tell that fella that I'll pay two fifty and not a penny more for that Jesus. Tell him he'll be lucky to get that much around here."

Fancy grabbed the money and ran through the dust after the slow-moving truck.

"Mr. McGee, Mr. McGee, stop!" she yelled. "Stop!"

The truck finally slowed to a stop and Fancy trotted the last few yards panting.

"Mr. McGee, Aunt Julia sent me. She said . . ."

Fancy stopped when she got even with the window and looked in. George McGee looked back at her with two good eyes, his patch pushed up

like a third eye on his forehead.

"You ain't blind. You ain't got no blue eyeball to take out at night. You probably ain't got no limp neither. You ain't got nothing wrong with you at all," Fancy said, glaring in through the window.

George McGee spit into the dirt at Fancy's feet.

"That's right, kid, ain't nothing wrong with me at all. But folks buy more if I got a handicap. And pity's just as good a reason as any to buy this junk. What can I do for you? Your aunt decide she can't live without a 'luminated Jesus?"

Fancy continued to stare. Finally, she said, "Folks around here don't like to be fooled. They don't like that at all."

Mr. McGee laughed a short, nervous laugh.

"But we ain't gonna tell 'em, are we, Fancy? Pretty little girl like you wouldn't want to get nobody in trouble."

Fancy smiled a sweet smile. "I sure don't want to get nobody in trouble, Mr. McGee. My Aunt Julia said she'll give you two dollars and a quarter for that Jesus, not a penny more, to take it or leave it.

Fancy put one hand on her hip and dug into her pocket with the other.

"And I'll give you a quarter for that broke china doll-baby. Ain't nobody gonna pay fifty cent for a broke china doll-baby. You might as well sell it to me."

George McGee stared hard into Fancy's face. He got out of the truck and slammed the door. He walked to the back and threw off the tarp.

"You're a sassy little kid, you know that? Your Aunt Julia needs to beat the daylights out of you."

Fancy just smiled.

"Awright, you can have the pitcher and the doll-baby. But you tell your old hump-backed aunt she ain't getting no plastic orange blossoms for two and a quarter. You tell her that."

He ripped the orange blossoms off the picture and threw them into the truck.

"Give me my money," he demanded, holding out his hand.

Still smiling sweetly, Fancy put the money into his hand. He counted it and stuffed it into his pocket. Then he threw the picture and the doll into the dirt. He climbed into his truck and drove off without another word.

Fancy picked up her doll-baby and brushed her off. "Goodness, you're about the prettiest doll-baby I ever seen. I b'lieve I'll name you after my sweet dead mama. Tezzie Karo. That's a pretty name for a pretty girl. It don't matter if your head's broke. Nobody will ever know."

Then she picked Jesus up and brushed him off, too. She tucked Tezzie Karo under one arm and Jesus under the other and turned down the dusty road toward home.

From *Sally Irma Knox Lee* (a novel in progress)

Dorothy Shawhan
Delta State University

My birth was uneventful so they say, though neither of the instigators lived to see my second year. I was born on the 31st of August near Natchez, Mississippi, in the year of our Lord 1822. My mother had five children before me, though she was only 25 at the time of my birth. I did not really know her as she was called home when I was less than two years old, but I have distinct impressions, memories if you will, though some say it is impossible to remember anything from that tender age. I never hear "Amazing Grace" but her clear voice lifts, her sweet face smiles, and her heart beats strong against my cheek. The scent of cape jasmine can bring me to tears, for in my imagination, or is it memory? white blooms shine in her dark hair.

Aunt Ellen, my mother's sister, by nature gloomy, says this is not true. There were no flowers, my mother's voice was weak and sickly, the cabin stark and sour. One glimpse she validates—a lantern in the night, a voice calling, "Quick, go for the doctor," and an answer, "No use. She's gone." Sorrows have crowded my life, but none heavier than having lost my mother.

She and my father had come down the Mississippi River from Kentucky in a flatboat to seek a better life only to find death and to leave six children orphaned. A few months after my mother died of yellow fever, my father drowned in the river, perhaps in that way people in great grief have of meeting with accidental death. He and his brothers were taking logs down the Mississippi to New Orleans, and he slipped inexplicably into the swift current, which bore him out to the Gulf and to worlds beyond. His body was never recovered. Of him I have no memories, just a wedding portrait by some itinerant painter, Alice and Jacob, stiff, unsmiling adolescents, he fair and gangly with the faintest suggestion of a beard, she dark, slender as narcissus.

My brothers and sisters were parceled out to my father's brother's families in Mississippi, but I was sent back to Kentucky with Aunt Ellen, my mother's sister, who had come to stay with us during Mother's illness and afterward. Aunt Ellen and Uncle John lived in Perry County, Kentucky, in the small coal mining town of Hazard, a raw frontier town recently formed and named for Oliver Hazard Perry, a hero of the War of 1812. Aunt Ellen was considerably older than Mother and was childless. Her husband John owned a general store. I loved them desperately, as only orphaned children can, and they did their duty by me, but that was all. They had had one child of their own years before, but when she died in infancy, they buried their love and even interest in children with her. "I will never suffer that much again," Aunt

Ellen told me grimly, and I believed her. Death had come unexpectedly to their fair rosy Annie, as unexpectedly as I was orphaned and sent to them, and they seemed to count the two events as comparable. They did not fare well with the unexpected.

Both their bodies and their house seemed constructed as hedges against surprise. They were tall, gaunt but firmly built people who grew to so strikingly resemble each other with the passing years that I almost believed in my early childhood that they were one and the same person with two sets of black clothes. Aunt Ellen had lost her hair through some illness, and what little she had was short and iron gray like Uncle John's. Uncle John had no beard, unlike most men of that day, but I never saw him shave and wonder now if he had a beard at all. They both had exceptionally large square teeth, though neither liked to eat. "I don't care a thing about food," Aunt Ellen often said, her nose wrinkled before a platter of ham and eggs as if smelling a foul odor. The expression on their faces was also the same—dour determination not to be taken unawares.

Their house, the place I would think of as home until my seventh year, was built like a rock, as Uncle John was fond of saying. It was a large square house of ugly sulphurous yellow stone. No trees or flowers surrounded the house, no grandmother's rose bush brought from Pennsylvania or apple tree grafted from a neighbor's. Aunt Ellen kept the ground around the house scraped bare of any life. Inside, the house was as stark as the yard. The room that would have been a parlor for most families of their means had nothing in it at all, nor did the dining room. "Why should it?" Aunt Ellen said when I was old enough to ask, "we will have no callers here." In the whole house there was not a thing to give comfort or add beauty to everyday life. Even the quilts, unlike the fanciful ones in many frontier homes, were dark and drab.

My room, if it could be called that, was little more than a crawl space in the unfinished attic. I had a cornhusk pallet on the floor and a nail on the wall for my one dress. No heat or light ever found its way there. Aunt Ellen said, with satisfaction, that I screamed most of the night when they first left me in this room but gradually I became reconciled. "Nothing is gained by coddling children," she said.

Shortly before I left that house forever, I discovered a secret that defied the description of the house as I had known it. I discovered it quite by accident, and the discovery undoubtedly had something to do with my being sent away swiftly to boarding school at the age of nine. At the top of the stairs and to the left of the ladder that led to my attic room was a locked door about which, being a curious and observant child, I had questioned Aunt Ellen. No other doors in the house were locked, not even the outdoor ones. She had said it was a linen closet for extra quilts. I did not doubt her exactly

but had imagined for myself a room there, joining my aunt's and uncle's, with a real bed, washstand, a fireplace, and even a little rocking chair of carved walnut wood and a caned bottom. Maybe if I tried to be good, I reasoned, such a room might be in my future. For I was not a good child, Aunt Ellen impressed upon me daily. I was excitable and high strung, too prone to tears, too defiant, not suitably humble considering my status as orphan, nor appropriately grateful for all she and Uncle John were doing for me. But given time and the rod, which she did not spare, she would straighten me out, she said.

The locked door became something of an obsession with me. I wanted above all to see behind it. My life had so little mystery, such a scarcity of beauty, that the closed door intrigued and beckoned me. I never passed it without trying the knob to see if Aunt Ellen might have miraculously forgotten and left it open. And one day she had. I will never forget what I saw as the door swung slowly open. The room was so close to the one I had imagined that I closed my eyes thinking that if I opened them again, I would see merely a linen closet. But no, there it was, the dream room, canopy bed with soft pink drapes, a carpet with large pink and white roses, the child-sized rocking chair, a doll cradle by the fireplace with a sleeping china doll in an elaborately tucked gown. I walked through the door, leaving it ajar behind me, like one unexpectedly admitted to paradise. I stood and stared for who knows how long before I picked up the doll and sat in the rocking chair just my size and began to rock and sing a lullaby, a song I often sang to myself convinced that my mother had sung it to me.

Lost in my own world, time had no meaning nor did the sound of footsteps on the stairs. Then a scream filled with rage and grief filled the house, and I was flung from the chair, my arm almost pulled from its socket, my head crashing into the stone hearth.

"Annie's chair," Aunt Ellen screamed like one possessed. "Annie's, do you hear?" I looked up at her through the blood that was gushing from a cut on my scalp, and I can truthfully say though I have since had to deal with wild animals in the woods, invading armies, and Death in many guises, nothing since has terrified me like her rage at that moment. Her face was distorted into an almost unrecognizable shape and her eyes were dilated, hard and black as coal.

I expected her to kill me, and I still believe she might have had not Providence intervened in the manifestation of Uncle John. He had come home during the day, an unheard of thing for him to do, because he had left his favorite pipe on the kitchen mantle. Aunt Ellen was dragging me across the room by my arm, leaving a trail of blood across the rose-filled rug. "Out," she was screaming, "out, you little misery," when Uncle John walked up the stairs and into the scene. I expected no help from him, feeling that I deserved

whatever happened and that they would act as one. He didn't say a word, but he took Aunt Ellen's hands and held them to her side. She struggled for a moment, and then began a loud mountain keening. He turned her around and marched her through the door that connected their bedroom to Annie's and lay her on the bed.

"You've got yourself overwrought, Ellen," he said. Then he walked back to me, closing the door behind him. He picked me up, took me down to the well and washed the blood away. "You ain't hurt bad," he said finally, "just a little cut on your scalp made you bleed like a stuck hog. You stay out of that room, you hear?" From then on I never thought of Ellen and John as a single being.

The fantasy of a composite aunt-uncle had been easy to maintain because I rarely saw them together. Uncle John was at the store during all the daylight hours, not even taking any of his meals with us, though granted they were no reason to come home—corn mush for breakfast, cabbage and cornbread for dinner, the same, cold, for supper. Occasionally we had ham for breakfast or a chicken for dinner, but not often. Sundays were no different. My aunt and uncle were not church people and had little use for those who were.

"Methodists got a hold of your mother at a camp meeting," Aunt Ellen told me once, "for all the good that did her. Praying and singing and acting a fool."

"What's a Methodist?" I asked.

"Don't talk to me about Methodists," she said.

On Sundays Uncle John went to the store as usual, though he did not open it, and Aunt Ellen scrubbed the bare already sterile floors, chopped wood, spun wool on her wheel, a constant round of redundant drudgery like any other day.

My mother had called me Sally, Aunt Ellen said, but she herself thought that was a frivolous, silly name for a frontier child and so insisted that I go by Irma, my second name. She said at first I would not answer to Irma but eventually I came to understand that Irma I would be, at least in that house. I have favored the name Sally since learning it was my mother's choice, but at the same time, the name has been colored for me by Aunt Ellen's disapproval. As compromise I prefer to be called Sally Irma and thereby incorporate the free spirit of my mother with Aunt Ellen's stern practicality, a quality that does have a usefulness in this world if not in the one hereafter.

When I was old enough to hold a broom, Aunt Ellen put me to work in both the house and the store. At age four I became a sort of apprentice to drudgery. She would work alongside of me; to her credit she never tried to put her chores off on me. Instead, she became even more compulsive about them.

To help the tedious hours pass, I would ask questions about my parents. Most days she was tight-lipped on the subject. "They're dead and gone," she would say, stirring the wash pot fiercely. "Leave it." But sometimes she would let slip a little scene from her memory, colored of course with the dark brush of her perspective, and I would embroider it in my imagination.

"Not to speak ill of the dead," she said, "but your father was a foolish man, and were it not for him your mother would be alive today." She always spoke to me as she would to another adult, never making any effort to talk down or to soften her views. She was never explicit about why she held my father responsible for Mother's death. Surely he was not responsible for yellow fever, but he took her far away, and she bore so many children at so young an age that all her health went into childbearing with no reserves for herself when she needed it.

One incident Aunt Ellen told me to illustrate his foolishness took place when he and my mother were fifteen, the year before they married. The month was May, and the winter had been particularly harsh with more snowfall in the mountains than usual. The spring thaws had begun and flooded every creek and river.

"Jacob had seen your mother only once in his life," Aunt Ellen said, bringing the ax down smartly on a log of oak wood, "but he walked a day and a night, all the way over Lost Mountain, through flood and wild animals and who knows what danger, just to sit for an hour in the kitchen tongue-tied and stare at Alice. He was covered in mud when he knocked on the cabin door, his arms full of mountain laurel, and we knew what he wanted. No need for him to talk; your mother talked enough for three people. As unexpectedly as he arrived, he put on his hat and left." The oak was in kindling now, and she piled it into my arms until I staggered with the load.

I nurtured this little glimpse of my parents' past until it flowered into a history. I knew his fear as he forded the cold streams, water to his waist and no notion to what depths the next step might take him. Wolves must have howled, bobcats screamed, and owls mocked from the dark trees. Another kind of fear, but worse, must have dogged his steps—what would she say when she came to the door and found him there, homespun shirt tattered from grasping briars, creek water streaming from his hair? Would she remember him from the camp meeting so many months ago? What if she were already promised? I knew her surprise and pleasure too that a boy went to such trouble to see her face, saw how the blood rose to her face, how her eyes danced. I recreated every glance, every word, every nuance of their hour together.

"She married him, more's the pity," Aunt Ellen said as she threw her load of kindling crashing into the wood box by the fireplace. "Signed a death warrant, cast her lot with a boy no more able to take care of a family than a

jack rabbit, and followed him into the wilderness."

"But I wouldn't be here if she hadn't, Aunt Ellen," I said, loving this life more than I ought even at that age.

She straightened up and looked hard at me, something like pity crowding out the usual disinterest from her gray eyes. "You live as long as I have, child, you'll hold that against her." Her words settled on me like a chill, a prophecy of ill omen, and they echoed down the years to four little graves in Mississippi, and hovered around me through other griefs too numerous to count, but never have I regretted being born, thanks be to God.

I came to understand that my mother had been more like a daughter to Aunt Ellen than a sister, and that her defection South with my father had been perceived a betrayal to the family with its fierce blood loyalty. They never really forgave my mother, and so her death brought with it a burden of guilt for unfinished business and a necessity to blame someone—logically (or illogically) my father.

"It all came out at the funeral," Aunt Ellen said one day while we were canning beans, "just how weak your father was. He cried like a woman, made no attempt to be strong for the children or for anybody else. He had insisted on laying her out himself, turned the women out of the room, and put her poor corpse in her wedding dress with a wreath of flowers he had picked in the woods in her hair. He buried her with her wedding band on her hand, too, though its gold could have bought considerable necessities for you children. He would allow no help in making the coffin, digging the grave, or filling it in. He was crazy is all I can say, crazy and thinking just about himself."

This long speech was uncharacteristic of Aunt Ellen and might have been brought on by memories of happier days canning the beans with my mother. Whatever the impetus, I cherished the memory, though my interpretation of it was quite different from Aunt Ellen's. Far from being about weakness, the story for me signified passion and devotion and was a tribute to the short life my parents had shared.

Soon after the episode of my discovery of Annie's room, Aunt Ellen told me that because I was increasingly incorrigible, she and Uncle John had decided I must go. They could do no more for me personally, but they would pay my way to a boarding school for girls, Nazareth Academy in Bardstown, Kentucky.

"Please don't send me away," I cried, "I'll be good; I'll be so good you won't recognize me." Why would I want to stay in a place where I was so obviously unwelcome? Because that was the only home I had ever known, I was only nine years old, and human nature being what it is prefers the known, miserable though it be, to the unknown.

But go I must, and the next week found me with all my possessions

in a wooden crate standing in front of Uncle John's store to catch the stage. The journey would be an arduous one, a combination of stagecoach, horseback, flatboat, and my own two feet. One of the drivers, a Mr. Potts, was going to Bardstown as well and was charged with looking after me. I remember little about the actual journey. Aunt Ellen did not come to see me off. Her parting words to me were not to disgrace the family. Uncle John stayed inside the store until the stage pulled up. Then he came out to lift my crate on with the other baggage and to say goodbye, though actually he never said it, just thrust Annie's doll into my hands before he lifted me into the coach. What that gesture must have cost him at home I will never know, but for me it seemed the most significant act of kindness anyone had ever shown me. Then in seconds the stagecoach rumbled away with the horses' heads pointed toward Bardstown.

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