

EAPSU Online:  
A Journal of Critical  
and Creative Work

Published by the English Association of  
Pennsylvania State Universities

Volume 8, Fall 2011

ISSN 1548-1964

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## Introduction

I am very pleased to introduce these selections for the Fall 2011 edition of *EAPSU-Online*. As usual, we have an excellent blend of scholarly and creative pieces, including memoir and poetry. A theme of this edition concerns boundaries and borders, as well as crossings. We find different iterations on the theme in each contribution.

In “Are Ye, Gods?": Interrogating the Divine in Melville’s *Timoleon Etc.*,” Jonathan A. Cook examines Melville’s stance of religious skepticism—a conviction in the impossibility of absolute truth—in his final collection of poems, *Timoleon Etc.*, which appeared a few months before Melville’s death in 1891. Jonathan A. Cook’s detailed exegesis of *Timoleon Etc.* is an important contribution to Melville scholarship, shedding light on a work that very few scholars have written on.

Moving from the boundaries of human knowledge to the constraints (and opportunities) of language, Timothy K. Nixon’s “Linguistic Bias and English as a Counter-Offensive in the Fiction of Arturo Islas” explores Mexican-American writer Arturo Islas’s strategic use of English in his novels as a way of challenging the hegemony of English in the United States. Nixon’s essay analyzes instances of boundary bending in his use of English across a number of Islas’s works.

Kim McKay’s “Modernism and Contemporary Arab Fiction: James Joyce and Somaya Ramadan” considers the borders of literary movements. McKay argues that modernism remains a current, evolving tradition, which Egyptian author Somaya Ramadan draws upon in her 2001 (2002, in English translation by Marilyn Booth) novel *Leaves of Narcissus: A Modern Arab Novel*. McKay examines a number of modernist authorial influences on Ramadan’s novel, most notably James Joyce, and encourages us to read contemporary Arab texts, more generally, as part of a living modernist tradition.

Hannelore N. Rogers’ “A Hole in The World” and “The Muffin,” two works of memoir, examine sensitively the ability of language and gesture to provide vital meaning in the face of changes and challenges. Rogers’ pieces are stories of connection amidst loss, of finding wholeness through communication. Where boundaries exist, these pieces tell us, we find opportunities for crossings.

Noel Sloboda’s three poems draw upon literary and historical subjects. Two poems, “Sex Education II” and “Dystopia Debate,” dramatize the English classroom, a place where discussions of literary works often lead to unusual insights. His poems demonstrate how meaning often forges its own paths, into new fields (and forests).

Michael Downing’s “Converting Stereotype to Archetype in August Wilson’s *The Piano Lesson*” continues his analysis in the 2010 edition of *EAPSU Online* of August Wilson’s use of archetype. Downing provides a thorough reading of this important play—perhaps Wilson’s most anthologized work—and argues that Wilson is dramatist as mythographer, who transforms the debased language of stereotypes into transcendent ideas.

Andrew Vogel's "In geography and in geography": Mapping the Form, Subjectivity, and Determinism of Gertrude Stein's Geographical Imagination" offers a key to Stein's geographically informed view of human nature and the individual. Vogel highlights Stein's belief that environmental factors and the experience of location determine our subjectivity, in terms of both its content and its modes of understanding. The borders of our consciousness are outlined in the geographies that we inhabit.

Finally, we conclude with two pieces of occasional poetry by Michael Downing. Written during the Fall 2011 EAPSU Conference at Bloomsburg University, these poems cross the margins of time and bring us back to this conference.

I thank all of the contributors for their excellent work, and I thank you, the reader, for your support of this publication.

Yours truly,

Jeffrey Hotz, Associate Professor of English  
East Stroudsburg University of Pennsylvania

## **“Are Ye Gods?”: Interrogating the Divine in Melville’s *Timoleon Etc.***

***Jonathan A. Cook, Middleburg Academy***

Although the posthumously appearing *Billy Budd* is often considered Melville’s literary “last testament,” the lesser-known work that actually terminated his career as a published writer was a collection of forty-two poems, *Timoleon Etc.* Appearing a few months before his death (which occurred on 28 September 1891) in a self-published edition of only twenty-five copies, *Timoleon Etc.* officially ended the sequence of four volumes that Melville had published during his later career as a poet, although a substantial amount of poetry and prose, including a completed volume of poems dedicated to his wife, *Weeds and Wildings*, remained in manuscript at his death. Divided into two parts, the second of which was entitled “Fruit of Travel Long Ago”—a reference to Melville’s extended tour of Europe and the Levant in 1856-1857—*Timoleon Etc.* distinguished itself from his previous volume of sea pieces and nautical reminiscences, *John Marr and Other Sailors* (1888), by its subject matter of religion, art, and the role of the artist in society. If we consider *Timoleon Etc.* a kind of last testament within Melville’s total oeuvre, a significant part of this testament would be the religious skepticism that had shaped his imagination during the previous four decades. This essay will examine the sequence of poems in *Timoleon Etc.* relating to religion in order to understand the final phase of the author’s creative interrogation of the Judeo-Christian tradition, whose *deus absconditus*

had become increasingly conspicuous by his absence, in Melville's view, during the later nineteenth century.<sup>1</sup>

As a writer who had undergone a protracted crisis of Christian faith comparable to many of his Victorian contemporaries (but not his American peers until a generation later), Melville had early embraced the tradition of philosophical and religious skepticism which began in the classical world. Codified by the second-century philosopher Sextus Empiricus, classical skepticism was traditionally denominated Pyrrhonism after one of its leading practitioners, Pyrrho of Elis (c. 360-275 BCE), who pioneered the technique of questioning the finality of truth claims and the logical methods by which truth could be discovered. Encouraging suspended judgment (*epoche*) and systematic doubt of sense impressions, proponents of early skepticism—coined from the Greek verb for “examine” or “consider”—taught that reaching absolute truth on any subject was impossible, for only relativistic and approximate forms of truth were obtainable. By doubting absolute claims to truth, the skeptical thinker could

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<sup>1</sup> Citations of *Timoleon Etc.* in the present essay will be from the Northwestern-Newberry edition of Melville's *Published Poems*; on the printing and publishing history of *Timoleon Etc.*, see *ibid.* 565-78. The deliberately offhand inclusion of “Etc.” in the collection's title was probably an ironically dismissive acknowledgment of his marginal status as a contemporary poet. The volume was dedicated to the American artist Elihu Vedder (1836-1923), whose illustrated edition of Edward Fitzgerald's *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyam* (1886) provided inspiration for some of Melville's late work especially the poems in *Weeds and Wildings* (see Dillingham 167-75). For critical discussions of *Timoleon Etc.*, see Abel; William B. Stein Chs. 5-6; Schurr Ch. 5, Davis 159-74; Robillard, “Introduction” 34-47; and Dryden Ch. 5. Abel claims that *Timoleon Etc.* was “unified by its varied reiteration of the theme that preoccupied his thoughts at the close of his career—that bold and original thinking alienates artists and intellectuals from their fellow-men” (330). Davis argues that the volume shows “the attempt once again to synthesize the dialectic between mind and body” (159). Dillingham asserts that Melville's “primary subject is devotion to art” (171). Robillard (“Introduction”) suggests that the idea of pilgrimage and the quest for knowledge unifies the collection, as hinted by its final poem, “L'Envoi.” In Dryden's view, *Timoleon Etc.* explores themes of poetry and history and the situation of the literary artist in America. My own examination of the poems in *Timoleon Etc.* comes closest to William B. Stein's insightful analysis of their varied religious symbolism. On Melville's reading of Matthew Arnold's poetry and the latter's influence on his characteristic themes and techniques as poet, see Bezanson. On Melville's assiduous self-education as a poet, see Hershel Parker's “Historical Note” in Melville, *Published Poems*. Dillingham provides a useful overview of many of the intellectual influences that shaped Melville's last decade as a writer.

potentially reach a condition of *ataraxia*, or equanimity, free from the stresses of conflicting ideas and beliefs.<sup>2</sup>

Melville's first sustained exposure to the tradition of modern skepticism occurred during his composition of *Mardi* (1849), at which time he eagerly consumed the essays of Montaigne, the first great practitioner of Renaissance skepticism (Hecht 296-305). Along with his other wide reading in the late 1840s, Melville's incipient philosophical and religious skepticism was subsequently catalyzed by his immersion in the multi-volume set of Bayle's *Dictionary* that he bought in 1849 and that had a significant impact on the philosophical vision of *Moby-Dick* (1851) (Bell), as depicted in the antithetical relativistic and absolute truth claims of Ishmael and Ahab, respectively. While *Pierre* (1852) and the ensuing short fiction dramatized Melville's growing doubts about the practicability of Christian ethics, his religious skepticism reached its most trenchant fictional embodiment in *The Confidence-Man* (1857), whose multi-layered satire undercut a comprehensive roster of national faiths, both religious and secular, especially the pervasive belief in America's moral and material progress (Cook). Following his abandonment of prose fiction, Melville's investigation into the problem of faith in the modern world received perhaps its consummate expression in his poetic depiction of the international pilgrims of *Clarel* (1876), which eloquently dramatized many of the issues of the Victorian crisis of belief. Although primarily focused on the Judeo-Christian tradition, Melville's poem also included allusions to non-Western religions, in keeping with the new academic discipline of

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<sup>2</sup> For an informative recent account of classical skepticism, see Groarke. For a comprehensive history of religious doubt, see Hecht. Melville's introduction to the skeptical tradition was primarily by way of his extensive readings in the late 1840s in Plato, Montaigne, Bayle, and others. The most skeptical book in the Old Testament, Ecclesiastes, also exerted a strong lifelong influence on Melville's thought and writing.



comparative religion which increasingly recognized basic similarities between the world's faiths in an "intersympathy of creeds" (Potter).

In order to understand the nature of Melville's representation of religion in *Timoleon Etc.*, we must also briefly review some of the relevant religious trends of the Victorian era. By the middle of the nineteenth century, systematic doubt about the supernatural origins of Christianity and the Bible had been fostered by the Higher Criticism pioneered by German biblical scholars, which sought to analyze the various books of the Old and New Testament in relation to authorship and historical setting. David Strauss's *Life of Jesus*, published in England in 1846 in a translation by George Eliot, had initiated the process of "demythologizing" the text of the New Testament legitimated by the new Hegelian philosophy, while Ludwig Feuerbach's *Essence of Christianity*, published in the next decade (again translated by George Eliot), argued for Christianity as an idealized reflection of human nature. In the realm of British science, Charles Lyell's *Principles of Geology* (1830-33), Robert Chambers' *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* (1844), and especially Darwin's *Origin of Species* (1859) all successively undercut the biblical account of the creation outlined in Genesis while discrediting Christian supernaturalism and dogma. These and other contemporary challenges to Christianity were reflected in the troubled faith or intractable doubt of such leading writers and thinkers as Carlyle, Eliot, Mill, Tennyson, Arnold, Ruskin, and Hardy, whose writings variously reflected the pervasive spiritual climate of doubt. Moreover, as A. N. Wilson has noted, the religious skepticism of many eminent Victorians "was, as often as not, allied not with the sunny good cheer of Gibbon or Hume, but with profound depression, self-hatred, and melancholy. ... Nineteenth-century unbelief seldom limits itself to an expression of specific uncertainty about,

let us say, the literal truth of the Bible, or the existence of angels. It accompanies wider symptoms of disturbance, a deep sense (personal, political, social) of dissolution" (10, 11).

## II

As the title poem in Melville's collection, "Timoleon" depicts a loss of moral confidence and guidance that was broadly representative of early fourth century Greece—and, by extension, later nineteenth-century England and America.<sup>3</sup> Reconfiguring an episode in Corinthian history that Melville found in Plutarch's *Lives* and Bayle's *Dictionary*, the poem narrated the moral history of the title character's crisis of conscience after conspiring to kill his older brother Timophanes for his tyrannical seizure of power—an act partially enabled by the mother's early favoritism of the older sibling. As a variation of the conflict between public duty and private loyalty, community and family, "Timoleon" hints at the author's early sibling rivalry with his prematurely deceased older brother Gansevoort, whose career as demagogic political orator for the expansionist Polk administration ended with his mysterious premature death in London in 1846 while filling a diplomatic post; the poem hints as well of Melville's long internal exile from the American audience that had largely rejected him as a writer since the mid 1850s. Like Arnold's *Empedocles on Etna*, whose melancholic hero expounds a similar *Weltschmerz*, "Timoleon" raises contemporary religious and moral questions under the rubric of classical history. Set in the time of Plato, the later Sophists, and the decline of Athens as the leading

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<sup>3</sup> See Shulman for an insightful comparison themes in "Timoleon" and *Billy Budd*. For other discussions of "Timoleon," see William B. Stein 74-77; Shurr 153-57; Shetley, "Melville's 'Timoleon'"; and Dryden 171-77. The editors of the Northwestern-Newberry edition of Melville's *Published Poems* (751-53) suggest that Melville relied on the translation of Plutarch's *Lives* by John and William Langhorne (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1875).

Greek city state, “Timoleon” exemplifies the skeptical decoupling of morality and religion that seemed to threaten the Victorian world with the decline of Christianity.

The poem begins with a relentless volley of questions about the ethics of dealing with an act of political usurpation that has been given the veneer of legitimacy—questions that will point to the seeming relativity of all moral action, and the apparent inoperability of divine justice in the world. Thus, the speaker asks whether someone who does a public service by killing a political usurper should then doubt his actions, lacking the arrogance and opportunism that evil-doers often possess:

Shall the good heart whose patriot fire  
Leaps to a deed of startling note,  
Do it, then flinch? Shall good in weak expire?  
Needs goodness lack the evil grit  
That stares down censorship and ban,  
And dumfounds saintlier ones with this—  
God’s will avouched in each successful man? (ll. 6-12)

Asking whether virtuous political action is ultimately less adapted to worldly success than tyranny, the questions are intimately related to some of Melville’s most memorable fiction, as in Starbuck’s inability to confront Ahab over the latter’s usurpation of the *Pequod* to hunt Moby Dick, or Billy Budd’s moral paralysis when faced with Claggart’s charges of treason. If good and evil are not equally balanced in the world, the former will always work at a disadvantage to a more ruthless and assertive evil—an idea dramatized in *Billy Budd*, which was probably written about the same time as *Timoleon* (Shulman).

Drawing on a theme that dominates Melville’s *Pierre*, the speaker in “Timoleon” goes on to ask whether overly virtuous actions are self-defeating: “Seems virtue there a strain forbid— / Transcendence such as shares transgression’s fate?” (ll. 15-16). The potentially fallible nature of

moral idealism, with its basis in a divinely sanctioned knowledge of goodness and truth, is called into question here. Moreover, if the doer of a virtuous deed is at first blamed by the world but then restored to favor, is this change evidence of a providential plan or merely a chance event? As we will see by the end of the poem, all these questions are raised by Timoleon's history. The poet completes the first stanza by identifying his subject as having gained both glory and martyrdom at the same time ("crowned with laurel twined with thorns"), while also identifying the Greek hero as a displaced Christ figure in his exemplary sufferings. Himself a kind of martyr to his career as literary prophet, Melville as speaker justifies his sympathetic interest in Timoleon's fate ("Not rash thy life's cross-tide I stem, / But reck the problem rolled in pang" [ll. 22-23]) in explicitly Christian terms; for the poet will "reach and dare to touch thy garment's hem" (l. 24) like those healed by Christ in the gospel of Matthew (9:20-21; 13:36).

Sections II, III, IV, and V of Melville's poem are taken up with narrating the earlier history of Timoleon and his brother, and the background events leading up to the decisive action of the poem, the killing of Timophanes to restore proper political authority in Corinth. Thus, Section II relates how Timoleon heroically saved his brother in battle against Argos ("Covers him with his shield, and takes / The darts and furious odds and fights at bay" [ll. 35-36]), while Section III tells of the mother's preference for the older brother Timophanes, whom the mother thinks will make her "An envied dame of power, a social queen." Timophanes' unscrupulously ambitious nature is thereupon revealed when he attains rule in Corinth through a ruthless and deadly seizure of power: "Foresworn, with heart that did not wince / At slaying men who kept their vows, / Her darling strides to power, and reigns—a Prince" (ll. 74-76). Section IV reveals Timoleon's revulsion at his brother's actions and the beginning of his plan to kill his tyrannical

brother, a plan foreshadowed in a dream in which he sees the executors of justice confronted by the demons of fratricide in a vision reminiscent of Orestes' career in Aeschylus's *Oresteia*: "He sees the lictors of the gods, / Giant ministers of righteousness, / Their *fasces* threatened by the Furies' rods" (ll. 90-92). Yet Timoleon decides to act on his divinely guided sense of moral righteousness and civic virtue: "He heeds the voice whose mandate calls, / Or seems to call, peremptory from the skies" (ll. 95-96). In Section V we learn that Timoleon, with two confederates, sought to criticize the injustice of his brother's rule to his face; but Timophanes responds with laughter and the contemptuous dismissal of his brother's accusation: "'what to me is Right? / I am the Wrong, and lo, I reign, / And testily intolerant too in might.'" (ll. 106-8). In response to this flagrant display of hubris, Timoleon consents to his brother's death, and thus "Right in Corinth reassumes its place."

Sections VI and VII contain the moral center of Melville's poem. In Section VI, the hitherto virtuous act of tyrannicide is interpreted by the "whispering-gallery of the world" as an immoral act of fratricide. The speaker goes on to provide the historical context for Timoleon's actions:

The time was Plato's. Wandering lights  
Confirmed the atheist's standing star;  
As now, no sanction Virtue knew  
For deeds that on prescriptive morals jar. (ll. 121-24)

The "Wandering lights" here are the Sophists, who were notorious for spreading relativistic notions of morality throughout Greece at this time in their role as peripatetic instructors of rhetoric. Sophists like Antiphon and Thrasymachus taught that "nature" was paramount over artificially created human laws, and thus ultimately "might makes right"; a tyrant like Timophanes was a legitimate ruler by reason of his successful coup. For Timoleon, the

unexpected result of his virtuous act of killing a tyrant is now seen as a culpable act of fratricide, which goes against “prescriptive morals” and has no special “sanction.” The effect of this public rejection of his action leads to a crisis of doubt in Timoleon’s mind:

Reaction took misgiving’s tone,  
Infecting conscience, till betrayed  
To doubt the irrevocable doom  
Herself had authorized when undismayed.  
Within perturbed Timoleon here  
Such deeps were bared as when the sea  
Convulsed, vacates its shoreward bed,  
And Nature’s last reserves show nakedly. (ll. 125-32)

Timoleon suffers what amounts to a mental breakdown and suicidal depression, at first being tempted to end his life (“from Hades’ glens / By night insidious tones implore— / Why suffer?” [ll. 133-35]), and then going into self-imposed exile that is described as a kind of spiritual decapitation: “In severance he is like a head / Pale after battle trunkless found apart” (ll. 143-44).<sup>4</sup>

In Section VII, Timoleon gives vent to his complaint against the gods for misleading him into a morally dubious action while dismissing the need to involve any merely human actors in his quandary:

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<sup>4</sup> Plutarch writes of Timoleon’s “melancholy and dejection” following his brother’s murder: “An action must not only be just and laudable in its own nature, but it must proceed likewise from motives and a lasting principle, that so we may fully and constantly approve the thing, and be perfectly satisfied in what we do; for otherwise, after having put our resolution into practice, we shall out of pure weakness come to be troubled at the performance, when the grace and godliness, which rendered it before so amiable and pleasing to us, begin to decay and wear out of our fancy... For a succeeding dislike spoils the best of actions, and repentance makes that which was never so well done become base and faulty; whereas the choice that is founded upon knowledge and wise reasoning does not change by disappointment, or suffer us to repent, though it happen perchance to be less prosperous than the issue” (297). Melville thus emphasizes the divine inspiration for Timoleon’s actions more than Plutarch, who suggests Timoleon’s lack of philosophical fortitude. Most of Plutarch’s biography focuses on Timoleon’s prolonged campaign to subdue the uprising in Sicily. Bayle’s brief life of Timoleon is followed by several pages of footnotes on the uncertain influence of fortune and merit in the events of human life, which probably contributed to Melville’s formulation of the metaphysical doubts found in “Timoleon.”

Like sightless orbs his thoughts are rolled  
Arraigning heaven as compromised in wrong:  
    “To second causes why appeal?  
Vain parleying here with fellow clods.  
To you, Arch Principals, I rear  
My quarrel, for this quarrel is with gods.  
    “Shall just men long to quit your world?  
It is aspersion of your reign;  
Your marbles in the temple stand—  
Yourselves as stony, and invoked in vain?” (ll. 147-56)

One might detect the echo here of Melville’s greatest fictional rebels, Ahab and Pierre, as well as their ancient prototypes, Prometheus and Job, both of whom outspokenly questioned the workings of divine justice in the world. In addition, Timoleon’s reference to the statues of the gods as indifferent to human welfare may also remind us of the contemporary tragedies of Euripides, which mirrored the relativistic morality of the Sophists by highlighting the detachment and moral failings of the gods. The main difference between Melville’s Timoleon and these literary and religious prototypes is that former’s aggrieved complaint modulates into a surprisingly deferential and apologetic appeal for divine magnanimity:

    Ah, bear with *one* quite overborne,  
Olympians, if he chide ye now;  
Magnanimous be even though he rail  
And hard against ye set the bleaching brow.— (ll. 157-60)

Like the Victorian intellectuals whose head and heart were at odds over the declining credibility of Christianity, Timoleon invokes the favor of the Olympian gods even as he arraigns them for their cruel absence and indifference. With his attack on their callousness, Timoleon’s lament lead to his final agonized indictment of the moral neutrality of the gods, whose existence is simultaneously both affirmed and denied:

    “If conscience doubt, she’ll next recant.  
What basis then? O, tell at last,

Are earnest natures staggering here  
But fatherless shadows from no substance cast?  
“Yea, *are* ye, gods? Then ye, ‘tis ye  
Should show what touch of tie ye may,  
Since ye too, if not wrung, are wronged  
By grievous misconceptions of your sway.  
“But deign, some little sign be given—  
Low thunder in your tranquil skies;  
Me reassure, not let me be  
Like a lone dog that for a master cries.” (ll. 161-72)

If the gods exist, then they should sympathize with “earnest natures” like Timoleon, who is now desperate for some higher validation for his actions; for if the gods are not “wrung” by his plight, then humans have “grievous misconceptions” of their imaginary power. The moral agony of Timoleon stems from the painful disjunction of morality and religion in his thought, which is unresolved at the end of his remarks, when he is still pleading for a heavenly sign that he was not at fault for killing his corrupt brother.

The fact that Timoleon’s crisis of self-confidence was partly inspired by Melville’s own religious doubts is demonstrated by two marginal notes he made to his reading in two key texts for his fiction and poetry. Thus, during a reading of *Don Quixote* in 1855, he marked a response to the knight’s defense of his idealized mistress, La Dulcinea (“a knight-errant without a mistress is like a tree without leaves, a building without cement, a shadow without a body that causes it”) by interjecting: “or as Confucius said ‘a dog without a master,’ or to drop both Cervantes & Confucius parables – a god-like mind without a God” (qtd. in Shulman 359-60). If the annotation reveals Melville’s sense of personal bereavement over his loss of faith, a more outspoken rationalistic dismissal of divinity was evident in Melville’s reading of Matthew Arnold’s *Empedocles on Etna* in 1871. At this time he annotated the Greek philosopher’s insistence that human beings have no god-given right to be happy (“Thou has no *right* to bliss, /



No title from the Gods to welfare and repose” [l.ii.160-61]) by indignantly asserting: “A Western [i.e., American] critic here exclaims— What in thunder did the Gods create us for then? If not for bliss, for bale? If so, the devil take the Gods” (qtd. in Bezanson 381). In this sharp critique of Old Testament creationist myth (Gen. 2; Job 10; Ps. 119:73-80; 139) and Protestant theology, if the “gods” have created humans only for misery—or Calvinist hell—then they should be summarily dismissed, for their only proper theological role is to help their human dependents.

Although there is no answer to Timoleon’s plea, he is eventually forgiven by his native city when he is sent to lead Corinthian troops at war in Sicily and is able to restore peace there:

And Corinth clapt: Absolved, and more!  
Justice in long arrears is thine:  
Not slayer of thy brother, no,  
But saviour of the state, Jove’s soldier, man divine. (ll. 181-84)

In an unanticipated reversal of fortune, Timoleon is now a public benefactor, and his earlier “crime” forgiven. Yet despite this positive validation of his actions as a tyrannicide, and his previous experience of exile as a displaced form of death, Timoleon now “reposed” as a “loved guest” in Sicily and thenceforth never returned to his native Corinth. The Greek hero is now seemingly possessed of the spiritual equanimity that served as the implicit goal of classical skepticism. We thus return at the end of the poem back to the speaker’s questions at the beginning, asking whether Timoleon’s “emergence” after “eclipse” was “high Providence, or Chance?” In other words, were Timoleon’s virtuous actions ultimately vindicated by supernatural authority, or were they accidentally rewarded by the workings of chance? Do the gods really exist? If so, what is their ultimate attitude toward human suffering? If not, on what authority do human beings base their morality? The questions at the start of the poem are unanswered at the end, conveying the interrogative mood of Melville’s religious skepticism.

If “Timoleon” represents the problematic nature of religious beliefs in both the age of Plato and (by implication) the Victorian era, “After The Pleasure Party” depicts a modern educated woman’s struggle to overcome the confines of fleshly desire—including sexual jealousy—within the symbolic context of classical mythology, notably the dichotomy between the heavenly and earthly Aphrodite, and the mythological origins of sexual love, as set forth in Plato’s *Symposium*. In heated accents recalling the dangers of sexual infatuation found in such classical heroines as Phaedra and Dido, the Urania of Melville’s poem—who bears the name of the muse of astronomy and was ultimately based on the pioneering American astronomer Maria Mitchell (1818-1889)—narrates the story of her involvement in a “pleasure party” of tourists visiting an Italian villa on the Mediterranean coast. In “After The Pleasure Party,” we witness a display of spitefulness in the Greco-Roman god of love, Eros/Cupid/Amor, as well as an indictment of the unnamed creator god who was responsible for human unhappiness by creating the human race in two interdependent sexes.

“After the Pleasure Party” has only gradually emerged to critical scrutiny as a poem shaped by a complex array of philosophical, biographical, and literary influences including works by Plato, Ovid, Milton, Schopenhauer, Hawthorne, Tennyson, and Arnold.<sup>5</sup> Important to

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<sup>5</sup> Melville met the biographical model for Urania, Maria Mitchell, on a visit to Nantucket with his father-in-law in July 1852; other details for the setting of the poem came from Melville’s visit to Italy in early 1857 and the revelation this gave him of the art of classical antiquity and the Renaissance (Melville, *Journals* 100-24). The visual stimulus for the poem’s depiction of a spiteful Amor was probably provided by his visit to the Borghese villa, where he saw a bas relief or sculpture of “Venus & Cupid” and noted the “mischievous look of C.” (*Journals* 107; see also 468-69). Sutton has examined the poem’s use of the images of heavenly and earthly love, as found in Plato’s *Symposium*, as well as its echoes of Sappho’s despairing self-representation in Ovid’s *Heroides* XV. Shurr has demonstrated that the poem echoes the pessimistic philosophy of Schopenhauer’s *The World as Will and Idea*, which Melville read in the late 1880s. More particularly, the poem dramatizes ideas found in Chapter 44, “The Metaphysics of the Love of the Sexes,” including the philosopher’s negative portrait of the figure of Cupid/Eros, which is reflected in the characterization of Amor in Melville’s poem. On Melville’s reading of Schopenhauer, see also Dillingham 58-70. Allan Stein has demonstrated that the character of Urania was partially modeled on Zenobia in Hawthorne’s *The Blithedale Romance*, whose frustrated passion for Hollingsworth and sexual jealousy of Priscilla

an appreciation of Melville's use of the name Urania, for example, is Milton's invocation of her as astronomical muse at the start of Book VII of *Paradise Lost*, where Urania is deemed the sister of divine Wisdom (VII.9-10), a figure depicted as coeval with the creation in the biblical book of Proverbs. Urania accordingly inspires the epic poet's heavenly flight: "Up led by thee / Into the Heav'n of Heav'ns I have presum'd / An Earthly Guest, and drawn Empyrean Air" (VII.12-14). On the other hand, in Matthew Arnold's poem "Urania," the heavenly Aphrodite represents a passionless ideal "muse" beyond the reach of men because of their moral shortcomings:

She smiles and smiles, and will not sigh,  
While we for hopeless passion die;  
Yet she could love, those eyes declare,  
Were but men nobler than they are.

Beginning with the fifth stanza, the poem describes the potential transformation in Urania's demeanor if she could encounter better examples of mankind:

Yet oh, that Fate would let her see  
One of some better race than we;  
One for whose sake she once might prove  
How deeply she who scorns can love.

But until that time, "Coldly she mocks the sons of men. / Till then her lovely eyes maintain / Their gay, unwavering, deep disdain." Significantly, Melville marked the last stanza of the poem,

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are creatively adapted in Melville's poem. Philbrick has shown that "After the Pleasure Party" is also shaped by Melville's reading of Hawthorne's *Passages from the French and Italian Notebooks* in 1872, for the astronomer Maria Mitchell was a companion to the Hawthornes when they traveled from France to Rome in 1858. Philbrick demonstrates how a scene from Hawthorne's Italian notebook describing a visit by the Hawthornes and Mitchell to the Rospigliosi Palace in Rome—which Melville himself had visited a year earlier (*Journals* 109-10)—provided him with a specific setting for the poem (transposed to the Mediterranean coast) as well as hints for the resentment expressed by the character of Amor in the poem in Melville's own sense of rejection by Hawthorne at the end of their friendship. Shetley ("Melville's 'After the Pleasure Party'") has related Melville's poem to the writings of Henry Adams and Harriet Beecher Stowe on the contrast of Venus and Virgin in later nineteenth-century American culture. Finally, Parker (139-40) has briefly noted linguistic echoes in the poem from Tennyson's *The Princess*, an extended examination of the contemporary debate on female education. For discussions of Milton's and Dryden's astronomical muse Urania in relation to Melville's poem, see Dryden 178-79, and Dillingham 93, respectively.

double-lining its final two lines (Bezanson 372). Unlike the mythological Urania figures of Milton and Arnold, Melville's heroine is unable to transcend the fallen world of human desire to attain celestial wisdom, for her celibate life has unleashed the forces of nemesis in the juvenile god of love.

Following its epigraphic "Lines Traced Under an Image of Amor Threatening" in which the spiteful son of Venus/Aphrodite warns of the dire consequences of "*Taking pride from love exempt,*" Melville's "After the Pleasure Party" consists of the extended dramatic monologue of an American female astronomer whose confession of sexual passion and jealousy during an Italian excursion leads to a final choric commentary from the poet about the dangers arising from a vengeful Amor. The poem takes place in two locations, first at an unnamed scenic villa on the Mediterranean, and the second at the Villa Albani in Rome. Like Hawthorne's Zenobia or James's Isabel Archer, Urania faces the devastating consequences of romantic infatuation and disillusionment after an attempt to lead a life dedicated solely to intellectual pursuits. The poem is thus an account of a "fall" from (literally) heavenly wisdom into sexual and emotional devastation, fueled by an unrequited love for an unnamed male companion who has shown more interest in an alluring younger woman.

After an initial evocation of the beauty of the sensual Italian scene where the "pleasure party" has taken place, Urania reveals the depth of her dismay as she attempts to control the eruption of passion that has occurred in her: "To flout pale years of cloistral life / And flush me in this sensuous strife. / 'Tis Vesta struck with Sappho's smart" (ll. 21-23). Upset at the incongruous nature of her feelings, she decries her shameful loss of control: "But baffled here— to take disdain, / To feel rule's instinct, yet not reign; / To dote, to come to this drear shame—"

(ll. 33-35). Still feeling the passion that overwhelms her, which she depicts in a metaphor dating back to Sappho's lyrics ("Hence the winged blaze that sweeps my soul / Like prairie-fires that spurn control" [ll. 36-37]), Urania looks back on her previous life of solitary observation and study, at which time she lived as a votary to the stars in imagined self-coronation:

"And kept I long heaven's watch for this,  
Contemning love, for this, even this?  
O terrace chill in Northern air,  
O reaching ranging tube I placed  
Against yon skies, and fable chased  
Till, fool, I hailed for sister there  
Starred Cassiopea in Golden Chair.  
In dream I throned me, nor I saw  
In cell the idiot crowned with straw. (ll. 39-47)

In the last two lines Urania reveals the vanity of her ambition in an allusion to the crown of straw that a pre-conversion St. Augustine imagined himself winning in poetic contests, as recounted in Book 4 of the *Confessions*. The life of the intellect has only led to her humiliation, as Urania expresses shock that she could fall so fast and far: "What gain I barrenly bereaved! / Than this can be yet lower decline— / Envy and spleen, can these be mine?" (ll. 51-53). Like Milton's Satan in his agony of jealousy over the sight of Eden (*Paradise Lost*, IV.9-120), Urania is dismayed by the eruption of envious emotions within herself. The source of her agony, of course, is her secret passion for an unnamed male in her party who seems to find more interest in a barefoot young woman carrying a conspicuously phallic token of spring:

"The pleasant girl demure that trod  
Beside our wheels that climbed the way,  
And bore along a blossoming rod  
That looked the scepter of May-Day—  
On her—to fire this petty hell,  
His softened glance how moistly fell!  
The cheat! on briars her buds were strung;  
And wiles peeped forth from mien how meek.

The innocent bare-foot! young, so young!  
To girls, strong man's a novice weak.  
To tell such beads! And more remain,  
Sad rosary of belittling pain. (ll. 54-65)

Like a jealous Zenobia denigrating Priscilla during the May day celebrations at Hawthorne's Blithedale, Urania is intensely jealous of her younger sexual competitor. The allusion above to rosary beads that she must still count in her penance foreshadows Urania's later unsuccessful attempt to find consolation in Christian retreat. Yet before that occurs, we first rehearse Urania's final despair at her attempt to divorce her intellect from her femininity. Like Timoleon, in the midst of her agony of frustration and rejection Urania expresses the desire to commit suicide, as Sappho was allegedly to have done because of her unrequited love for the ferryman Phaon—a literary legend recorded in Ovid's *Heroides* and elsewhere:

Could I remake me! or set free  
This sexless bound in sex, then plunge  
Deeper than Sappho, in a lunge  
Piercing Pan's paramount mystery! (ll. 80-83)

Urania's lunge will, she hopes, break through the "mystery" of nature and sexuality embodied in the goat-god Pan. Urania's complaint continues in an indictment of the workings of sexual reproduction in nature; for if human selfhood is incomplete until each sex meets its intended other half, what if this never happens? How then can an individual attain spiritual wholeness? The condition of the human race thus resembles a kind of slavery to the flesh that, contrary to Christian teaching, is impossible to transcend. The poem then recalls the myth of the androgyne set forth by Aristophanes in *The Symposium*, in which human beings were originally created as self-sufficient sexual hybrids but were punished for an attempt at revolt by being divided into male and female:

For, Nature, in no shallow surge  
Against thee either sex may urge,  
Why hast thou made us but in halves—  
Co-relatives? This makes us slaves.  
If these co-relatives never meet  
Self-hood itself seems incomplete.  
And such the dicing of blind fate  
Few matching halves here meet and mate.  
What Cosmic jest or Anarch blunder  
The human integral clove asunder  
And shied the fractions through life's gate? (ll. 84-94)

The god of Nature in Urania's lament, who has torn apart the original human adrogyne, is thus either a cosmic jester or anarchic blunderer like the Gnostic creator god who has divided human nature into male and female and then forced the "fractions" through "life's gate," a metaphor of the birthing process. As in the contemporary philosophy of Schopenhauer, human sexuality only adds to the oppressive forces of will that characterize the universe. The "dicing of blind fate" in the assignment of a marriage partner—a potential reminder of several notoriously unhappy or disastrous Victorian marriages (Carlyle, Bulwer-Lytton, Dickens, Ruskin), and a predominant theme of Hardy's fiction and poetry—leads to Urania's bitter indictment of the cruel humor or stupidity of the gods.

The poem continues with the chorus-like intrusion of the poet declaring it unknown whether Urania "lived down the strain / Of turbulent heart and rebel brain" since Amor may have continued to express his "boyish spite"; but at some later date she visited Rome where she was transfixed by the colossal statue of Athena ("form august of heathen Art") displayed at the Villa Albani (now Torlonia). Before this experience, however, she had visited a "convent shrine" where she was moved by an image of Mary to contemplate conversion to Catholicism and monastic retreat; but she now addresses a prayer to Athena as the "mightier one":

“Languid in frame for me,  
To-day by Mary’s convent-shrine,  
Touched by her picture’s moving plea  
In that poor nerveless hour of mine,  
I mused—A wanderer still must grieve.  
Half I resolved to kneel and believe,  
Believe and submit, the veil take on.  
But thee, armed Virgin! less benign,  
Thee now I invoke, thou mightier one. (ll. 125-33)

Like Hawthorne’s Zenobia threatening to take the veil before her suicide, or Hilda seeking the confessional at St. Peter’s in *The Marble Faun*, Urania has been tempted by the consolations of Catholicism to join a religious order; but she ultimately turns instead to the inspiration of Athena for strength to overcome her sexual malaise:

Helmeted woman—if such term  
Befit thee, far from strife  
Of that which makes the sexual feud  
And clogs the aspirant life—  
O self-reliant, strong and free,  
Thou in whom power and peace unite,  
Transcender! raise me up to thee,  
Raise me and arm me! (ll. 134-41)

Significantly, Urania prefers the armed wisdom of classical Athena to the passive self-denial of the Catholic Mary. Yet the ironic upshot of this choice is that the poet/frame narrator denies Urania the peace of mind she craves, for “Nothing may help or heal / While Amor incensed remembers wrong.” Just as the Roman poet Virgil famously asserted that *Omnia vincit amor* (“Love conquers all”) (*Eclagues* X.69) and depicted Amor/Cupid as secretly inspiring the widowed queen Dido with a fatal passion for Aeneas (*Aeneid* Bk. 1), Urania in Melville’s poem will apparently continue to be a victim of unfulfilled physical passion as an older single woman. At the end of the poem, the speaker in the role of chorus invokes aid for Urania from her virgin peers: “Then for Urania, virgins everywhere / O pray! Example take too, and have care” (ll. 150-



51). In Melville's representation of Christian and classical gods found in the poem, the latter are clearly more powerful; but they are cruelly fickle like Eros/Amor or unreliable like Athena, offering no hope of moral support. Like "Timoleon," "After the Pleasure Party" represents a world spitefully out of joint, with an absence of gods to set it right.

In "After the Pleasure Party," Melville created a surprisingly modern evocation of the conflict between intellect and desire, spirit and flesh, romantic love and vocation, in an educated American woman. While a seeming anomaly in Melville's poetry, the poem nevertheless evokes the work of some of his Victorian contemporaries. "After the Pleasure Party" thus exhibits a sexual candor comparable to the frustrated erotic fervor of Swinburne's *Poems and Ballads*, while the aura of isolation, romantic disappointment, and religious questioning are evocative of Arnold's laments over lost love and faith such as "Switzerland," "The Grand Chartreuse," and *Empedocles on Etna*. Melville's indictment of the creator god who designed the world so that sexuality is a torment to the individual evokes a familiar theme in Hardy's fiction; indeed, there are suggestive resemblances between the poem and Hardy's depiction of the conflict between higher and lower natures and desires in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* and *Jude the Obscure*, both of which date from roughly the same late Victorian milieu as *Timoleon Etc.*

### III

Following the first two long poems of *Timoleon Etc.*, with their skeptical depictions of classical and Christian divinities, we encounter a series of poems depicting the disappearance of God in contemporary Christianity. In the first of these poems expressing doubt about the

Christian revelation, “The Night-March” describes the radical dissociation between an unidentified Roman army marching silently through the night and its absent “chief,” whose existence is merely legendary. While the poem might suggest the religious situation of the late empire between Constantine’s formal recognition of Christianity in 325, and the fall of Rome in 476, the poem resists attempts at historicizing and has the impersonality of a dream. The first two stanzas describe the strangely noiseless appearance of the phantom army, with its battle standards furled and trumpets silent, its presence indicated only by flashing weaponry and armor:

With banners furled, and clarions mute,  
An army passes in the night;  
And beaming spears and helms salute  
The dark with bright.

In silence deep the legions stream,  
With open ranks, in order true;  
Over boundless plains they stream and gleam—  
No Chief in view! (ll. 1-8)

It is only when we reach the third stanza that we discover that the poem expresses the insuperable divide between Christianity and Christ; for this is implied when the missing legendary “Chief” is associated with a “shining host,” through whom he sends his unspecified “mandate”:

Afar, in twinkling distance lost,  
(So legends tell) he lonely wends  
And back through all that shining host  
His mandate sends. (ll. 9-12)

Several words and phrases here demonstrate a Christian context for this mysterious leader. The word “mandate” is related to the biblical “commandment,” which describes the law given to Moses by Yahweh that was refigured by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5-7).

The original meaning of “host,” on the other hand, is “army” or “great multitude”; thus the phrase “shining host” describing the marching army also suggests the biblical imagery of a heavenly “host” of angels (Ps. 103:20-21; 1 Kings 22:19) who accompanied Yahweh, the “god of hosts.” (All quotations herein will from the Authorized Version of the Bible.) In the gospel of Luke, Jesus’s birth is announced to the shepherds by the appearance of a “heavenly host” (2:13). “Host” also means the bread of the Eucharist; hence this “shining host” through which the unnamed leader sends his “mandate” is also potentially the “body” of Christ. The fact that the distant chief “lonely wends” his way suggests the image of Christ as rejected by the world he had come to save (John 1:10-11). Finally, the image of the “chief” lost in the “twinkling distance,” as “legends tell,” evokes the traditional association of Christ’s birth with a star over Bethlehem (Matt. 2:2, 9-10) as well as the post-resurrection Jesus who has ascended into heaven.

In “The Night-March,” the Christian soldiers are depicted with spears and helmets, which “salute / The dark with bright.” The reflected brightness conveyed by the marching soldiers may recall a New Testament image of the ideal Christian in the epistle to the Ephesians: “now ye are light in the Lord: walk as children of light” and “have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness” (5:8, 10). This epistle instructs the faithful to be like soldiers in their conduct, wearing “the whole armour of God,” which includes “the breastplate of righteousness,” “the helmet of salvation,” and “the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God” (5:13-17; see also 2 Tim. 2:3-4). Commenting on the phantom army in Melville’s poem, William Bysshe Stein cites the contemporary Protestant hymn “Fling Out the Banner! Let it Float” as a possible influence (78); but the ideal of the Christian soldier would probably have

been more familiar to late nineteenth-century Americans in the well-known hymn “Onward Christian Soldiers,” written by Sabine Baring-Gould in 1865 and set to music by Arthur Sullivan in 1871, the first verse of which reads:

Onward Christian soldiers, marching as to war,  
With the cross of the Jesus, going on before.  
Christ the royal Master, leads against the foe;  
Forward into the battle, see his banners go!

In Melville’s ironic dream vision, the army of Christian soldiers, their “banners furled,” has no designated mission; nor does it have a visible leader. The *deus absconditus* of Christianity is only a distant memory in the darkness of the present.

Like “The Night-March, “The Margrave’s Birthnight” offers another oblique commentary on Christ as an enigmatic hidden god to his followers, demonstrating the essentially fictive nature of the Christian myth. In the latter poem, a mysterious German margrave—the hereditary title of certain princes in the Holy Roman Empire—fails to appear at his castle on his birth night, a scenario likely based on the two thousand year history of Christ’s failure to return for his Second Advent. The fact that the leading proponents of the view of Christianity as a mythic structure were mid-nineteenth-century German scholars like Strauss and Feuerbach makes the German setting of Melville’s poem especially appropriate. The poem begins by depicting a scene of winter festivity in some unnamed German principality, an event with obvious resemblances to Christmas. With picturesque imagery worthy of Washington Irving’s well-known portrayal of a traditional English Christmas in *The Sketch Book*, the poet details the gathering of rural peasantry to the unnamed Margrave’s castle in the middle of the winter:

Up from many a sheeted valley,  
From white woods as well,  
Down too from each fleecy upland

Jingles many a bell,

Jovial on the work-sad horses  
Hitched to runners old  
Of the toil-worn peasants sledging  
Under sheepskins in the cold;

Till from every quarter gathered  
Meet they on one ledge;  
There from hoods they brush the snow off  
Lighting from each sledge

Full before the Margrave's castle,  
Summoned there to cheer  
On his birth-night, in midwinter,  
Kept year after year.

O the hall, and O the holly!  
Tables line each wall;  
Guests as holly-berries plenty,  
But—no host withal! (ll. 1-20)

The allusions to “cheer” and “holly” are appropriate for the poem’s subtext of Christmas celebration. The analogy between the missing “margrave” and Christ is also suggested by the pun embedded within the former title, for Christ was one who “marred” the “grave” with his resurrection. In another pun, the feast depicted in the poem is analogous to a failed attempt at communion, for there is obviously no “host” present here. The speaker goes on to question whether the margrave’s dependents can find satisfaction in their celebration without their noble “host,” whose throne and table setting are both empty:

May his people feast contented  
While at head of board  
Empty throne and vacant cover  
Speak the absent lord? (ll. 21-24)

Another pun on “contented” implicitly raises the question of whether Christian communion, the ritual whereby Christ is remembered, can give “content,” for despite the Catholic doctrine

of the Real Presence, the margrave, like the “chief” in “The Night-March,” is conspicuous by his absence. As William Bysshe Stein astutely notes, “In the rhetorical question poised in the passage, Melville asks whether Christianity can endure without the New Testament vision of the living Christ” (79).

The poem continues by noting the radical disconnection between the festive activities and the absence of the individual for whom they are designed, as music is played, guests served, and old “observance” given; yet the noble host is not there to acknowledge the event:

No, and never guest once marvels,  
None the good lord name,  
Scarce they mark void throne and cover—  
Dust upon the same.

Mindless as to what importeth  
Absence in such a hall;  
Tacit as the plough-horse feeding  
In the palfrey’s stall. (ll. 33-40)

We find here still another pun on the word “lord,” while the “dust” on the throne and table setting conveys a hint of death; for as God said to the fallen Adam, “dust thou art, and unto dust shall thou return” (Gen. 3:19). The guests are as “tacit” as the “plough-horse” stabled where the aristocratic “palfrey” was kept. The poem ends by asserting the functional nature of the birth-night holiday for the peasantry, who need the annual festivity as a change from their laborious routine:

Ah, enough for toil and travail,  
If but for a night  
Into wine is turned the water,  
Black bread into white. (ll. 41-44)

The mention of wine and bread here again implicitly alludes to the Christian sacrament of communion, while the peasant’s “travail” suggests a traditional Christian term for the labor,

pain, and suffering that characterize the world according to St. Paul (Rom. 8:22). In the poet's final statement, the ritual of attending the absent Margrave's birthday celebration has a functional value in the welcome release it gives to the peasantry from the dreary routine of mundane reality.

In a shift of philosophical vision, "The Garden of Metrodorus" evokes the materialist philosophy of Epicurus, who advocated a life of spiritual withdrawal in keeping with the depiction of the secluded garden of the poem, named after one of the philosopher's chief followers. The poem thus continues the theme of the absent leader in *Timoleon Etc.*, but now he is the invisible inhabitant of a garden designed for intellectual contemplation, not metaphysical deception. As a pioneering proponent of the Democritan theory of matter, Epicurus undercut the sway of the gods by doubting their existence, or theorizing their ineffectual condition as diffuse configurations of matter. With no supernatural realm to fear, Epicurus advocated a life of quiet retirement fostering emotional equanimity with friendship and intellectual inquiry at its center (Hecht 34-41).

In Melville's poem on the Epicurean ideal of seclusion, so contrary to the active public life of ancient Athens, each of the two stanzas of the poem provokes a question from the poet concerning the invisible occupant of the garden. In the first stanza, noting its "moss-grown gate" and "hedge untrimmed," the poet asks "And who keeps here his quiet state? / And shares he sad or happy fate / Where never foot-path to the gate is seen?" (ll. 3-5). In the second stanza, noting the absence of signs of life and silence of those frequenting the garden, the poet asks again: "Content from lonesome who may win? / And is this stillness peace or sin / Which noteless thus apart can keep its dell?" (ll. 8-10). The implied answer here is that the Epicurean

inhabitant of the garden has reached a state of equanimity that is the ultimate goal of classical skepticism. Echoing a series of conventional beliefs about human solitude, the poet asks how the occupant of the garden can avoid loneliness, and whether such withdrawal signifies a well-adjusted nature or one hiding from the world in shame. The fact that Melville himself was deliberately living in a comparable condition of spiritual withdrawal and solitude in the last years of his life makes such questions especially poignant.

Another form of spiritual withdrawal can be found in two short poems, "The Weaver" and "Buddha," which depict the impulse toward transcendence of the physical world in two non-Western religions, Hinduism and Buddhism, respectively. In "The Weaver," the ascetic figure of the title, alone in his "mud-built room" over a period of "years," weaves a shawl for "Arva's shrine." The reference to "shrine" here implies that the site is a place of worship devoted to either a saint or god. Devoid of human comforts or society, the weaver's only sign of life is his "busy shadow on the wall." Like a monk, the solitary figure has mortified his body and mind: "The face is pinched, the form is bent, / No pastime knows he nor the wine, / Recluse he lives and abstinent" (ll. 5-7). Given the weaver's shrunken body and solitary existence, the "shawl" that occupies his labors is a symbol of his living death, a virtual shroud; moreover, the impersonality of the scene described in "The Weaver" implies that the poem is a potential illustration of the ascetic impulse within virtually all forms of religious worship, not just Hinduism. As the editors of the Northwestern-Newberry edition of Melville's *Published Poems* note (787), Melville first intended to give the poem an Islamic context by writing "Mecca's" in line 2 and "Allah's" in line 8, but he eventually settled on "Arva," an obscure figure from Hindu mythology, thereby demonstrating the ecumenical range of reference latent within the poem.



An even greater impulse toward self-annihilation is manifested in “Buddha,” a brief tribute to another major world religion. William Dillingham (32-42) has demonstrated the wide interest in Buddhism in later nineteenth-century America, as found, for example, in William Rounseville Alger’s *The Solitudes of Nature and Man* (1869), which Melville read some time in the early 1870s. In only six lines, Melville’s “Buddha” exemplifies the central doctrine of Buddhism, namely, the desire to escape the cycles of pain and suffering in the world and attain Nirvana, or nothingness: “Sobs of the worlds, and dole of kinds / That dumb endurers be— / Nirvana! absorb us in your skies, / Annul us into Thee” (ll. 3-6). Unlike “The Weaver,” the religious aspirant here is part of a group of devotees (“us”); and there is a more explicitly pronounced impulse to transcend the sufferings of the physical world in quest of self-annihilation.

#### IV

If many of the poems in the first part of *Timoleon Etc.* constitute a rationalist critique of religious faith, “The New Zealot of the Sun” presents an implied criticism of the positivist, demythologizing impulse of modern science—a criticism earlier embodied in the character of the geologist Margoth in *Clarel*. The “zealot” of the poem’s title is accordingly devoted to science as a type of surrogate religion. Addressing the sun, which in the new discipline of comparative religion was often considered the ultimate source for God, the speaker evokes the movement of the sun from east to west as a journey through both time and space, from a degrading and abject idolatry in ancient times to a modern enlightened rationalism, bent on “searching every secret out.” The movement of the poem thus suggests a version of the

traditional idea of a progressive *translatio imperii* (or *translatio studii*) from east to west, as famously phrased in Bishop Berkeley's poem evoking the westward course of empire, "Verses on the Prospect of Planting Arts and Learning in America."

Initially addressing the sun as a "Persian"—an allusion to the Zoroastrian worship of the sun as chief deity—the speaker in the first stanza evokes the sun's rise in a realm of absolute human subjection, where "adulators sue" and "prostrate man" follows religious rites from time immemorial. In stanza two, the sun is described as an "Arch type of sway" shining over "Asia's plain" from which issue "many a wild incursive horde / Led by some shepherd Cain" (ll. 11-12), a likely allusion to the figure of Tamerlane (1336-1405) memorialized by Marlowe. In stanza three, like the ruthless military conquerors just mentioned, the gods ("brood of Brahma"), too, issue from the East, conquering peoples "like to the scythed car, / Westward they rolled their empire far, / Of night their purple wove" (ll. 16-18). While the allusion to the westward movement of empire here recalls the well-known phrase from Berkeley's poem, the ensuing line describes the union of power ("purple") and ignorance ("night") that characterize these new faiths. Stanza four describes the theological tyrannies that ensue from these new gods, for the sun is now described as a "chemist" breeding each "sorcerous weed / That energizes dream," resulting in a series of oppressive and delusive "myths and creeds" that have reached their natural end in "Calvin's last extreme" of a tyrannical deity and theology.

In the penultimate stanza the poet questions whether the sun—whose primeval rays "In time's first dawn compelled the flight / Of Chaos' startled clan" (ll. 26-27)—will ever be capable of dispersing "worse Anarchs, frauds and fears, / Sprung from these weeds to man?" (ll. 34-36). However, in the final stanza it is suggested that "Science" can create a stronger "power" than

sunlight that will “quell the shades you fail to rout, / Yea, searching every secret out / Elucidate your ray.” According to the speaker’s blindly rationalistic faith, science will explain everything in the cosmos, ironically even the composition of sunlight itself. With an overweening ambition comparable to Ahab’s, the new zealot inadvertently demonstrates that the Enlightenment-inspired rationalism of modern science can become a misguided enterprise reproducing the faith it allegedly scorns; for the very skepticism that questions the existence of gods has ironically failed to question the ultimate truth claims of science, with their denial of humanity’s emotional and spiritual needs.

The dedication to “light” as a moral or creative ideal, as portrayed in “The Enthusiast,” offers a nobler—if also more challenging—vocation than that of the scientist in “The New Zealot to the Sun.” Bearing an epigraph from the book of Job (13:15) relating to the need for keeping faith in one’s self, “The Enthusiast” questions the dedication to ideals typical of “youth’s magnanimous years,” as opposed to the prudential wisdom of age, when he who began as an idealist might “Recant, and trudge where worldings go / Conform and own them right” (ll. 7-8). Continuing in the same vein, the speaker asks whether “Time” can make the idealist ultimately compromise with “palterers of the mart,” so that they might eventually “shrink from Truth so still, so lone / Mid loud gregarious lies” (ll. 15-16). The last stanza offers encouragement to the idealist to “put the torch to ties though dear, / If ties but tempters be” (ll. 19-20), suggesting the teachings of Christ on transcending family ties (Mark 3:31-35; Luke 2:44-49); while the poem’s final injunction not to complain if blindness or despair ensues evokes the example of Milton: “Nor cringe if come the night: / Walk through the cloud to meet the pall, / Though light forsake thee, never fall / From fealty to light” (ll. 21-24). We recall that

the root meaning of the word “enthusiasm” means “filled with god or spirit” (*theos*). Hence Melville’s poem offers praise of a moral and creative idealism that is willing to brave all odds to achieve its ends; consequently, the poem likely reflects the personal challenges that faced Melville as a virtually unknown writer in later nineteenth-century America. Unlike the reference to light in “The New Zealot to the Sun,” moreover, the light in “The Enthusiast” is an interior phenomenon. It is the light of creativity and personal faith that is still crucial to the artist amidst the decline of traditional religious faith.

As two ensuing poems demonstrate, however, the world’s “darkness” is not easily overcome. In “Fragments of a Lost Gnostic Poem of the 12<sup>th</sup> Century,” Melville creates a two-part poetic “fragment” setting forth the basic tenets of medieval Gnosticism, a heretical branch of Christianity premised on the idea that the creation was an act of evil, not good, as the Catholic church held. The implicit historical context for the poem was the rise of Gnostic beliefs among the Cathars (or “Pure Ones”) of Southern France who were exterminated by the armies of the pope in the early thirteenth century during the Albigensian Crusade. Essentially dualist in theology, Catharism, like its earlier ancestor Gnosticism, held as its most fundamental tenet the corrupt nature of the physical universe, which was seen as the creation of a radically flawed divinity called the *Rex Mundi*, or god of the world. Adepts who possessed this secret wisdom (gnosis) would nurture their divine “spark” by transcending the corruptions of the flesh and worshipping a second god of pure spirit and love whose messenger was Jesus Christ. Proponents of Catharism were divided into the *Perfecti* (the perfect ones) and the *Credentes* (believers). The former acted as unofficial clergy and led lives of celibacy, simplicity, non-violence, vegetarianism, and charity, while the latter were allowed to lead regular lives in the

world except that they avoided marriage and procreation—a practice that led to charges of sexual perversion by Rome.<sup>6</sup>

In Melville's poem, the first quatrain presents an ironic juxtaposition of worldly achievement and its fatalistic result, a predictable product of the evil permeating the creation, now asserted as a legal claim against the individual:

Found a family, build a state,  
The pledged event is still the same:  
Matter in end will never abate  
His ancient brutal claim. (ll. 1-4)

The negative views of sexual procreation and the state, as found in the theology of Catharism, are echoed here. The second and final stanza, following an implied gap in the text indicated by asterisks (suggesting the genocidal disappearance of the sect), presents the paradoxical relationship of action in the world and true redemption, according to Gnosticism's dualist beliefs:

Indolence is heaven's ally here,  
And energy the child of hell:  
The Good Man pouring from his pitcher clear,  
But brims the poisoned well. (ll. 5-8)

The quatrain summarizes the provocative theology of the dualistic Cathars, who believed that the physical world was a hellish prison from which the believer should seek escape by various means of asceticism but not suicide. Line seven above subsumes a historical reference, for the

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<sup>6</sup> Believing in reincarnation, the Cathars rejected the doctrine of the trinity and sacrament of the Eucharist, as well as the existence of hell and purgatory. Although defeated in its polemical battle with early Christianity, Gnosticism and Manichean dualism survived in parts of the eastern Roman Empire such as in Armenia among the Paulicians and in the Balkans among the Bogomils ("Friends of God"), and later spread throughout parts of France, Germany, and Italy during the High Middle Ages. It suffered its final defeat by the armies of pope, whose extermination of the populace of Languedoc was meant to eliminate any future threat to Catholicism, while the newly established Inquisition dealt with any remaining heretics. For another analysis of the Gnostic context of the poem, see Shurr 164-66.

Cathars, whose name was imposed on them by their enemies, originally called themselves the *Bonnes Hommes et Femmes* (Good Men and Women). If such Good Men indulge in “pouring” out their spirit by means of engagement with the world—especially in the form of procreative sexuality—they will only be contributing to the tainted “well” of the physical universe.

In another exploration of the origins and nature of evil, the Pauline idea of the “mystery of iniquity” (2 Thess. 2:7) can be found in the “The Marchioness of Brinvilliers,” an exercise in *ecphrasis* on an alleged painting of the notorious serial murderess Marie-Madeleine-Marguerite d’Aubray, Marquise de Brinvilliers (1630-1676). The painting is not currently known; indeed, the description would seem to rely more on the famous portrait of Beatrice Cenci by Guido Reni than any known portrait of the infamous marquise.<sup>7</sup> In his eight-line poem, Melville begins by describing an image of the murderess as surrounded by various shades of light and darkness, while emphasizing a series of antitheses that create a combination of visual and moral chiaroscuro:

He toned the sprightly beam of morning  
With twilight meek of tender eve,  
Brightness interfused with softness,  
Light and shade did weave: (ll. 1-4)

The mixture of light and darkness here hints at the ethical-metaphysical antitheses that characterize the Judeo-Christian creator god as well as the aesthetic techniques available to the

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<sup>7</sup> The only known portrait of the marquise is a drawing by Charles LeBrun (1619-90) showing its guilty subject as religious penitent; but there is little correspondence between this portrait and the image of the marquise in Melville’s poem. It is not known if Melville had an actual picture in mind for his poem. His examination of French art during his visit to France in early December 1849 does not mention any likely model for this portrait (see Melville, *Journals* 30-34). For more on the poem’s artistic background, see Robillard, “Wrestling with the Angel” 250-53. The editors of the Northwestern-Newberry edition of Melville’s *Published Poems* note that “the details in the poem more closely resemble the Guido Reni portrait of Beatrice Cenci than any located portrait of Brinvilliers. Melville owned an engraving of the Cenci portrait by Vincent Biondi” (805). The editors similarly note that Melville may have used the English version of the title “Marchioness” instead of the French “Marquise” because of the appearance of Albert Smith’s recent book *The Marchioness of Brinvilliers* (London: Richard Bentley, 1886).

Baroque portrait artist. As the Old Testament god famously asserted in Isaiah: “I form the light, and create darkness: I make peace, and create evil” (Isa. 45:7).

The description of the marquise’s image continues in its juxtaposition of “candor” with “mystery starred in open skies,” terminating with the contrast between the attractive (“floating all in sweetness”) and dangerous depths of her “fathomless mild eyes”—eyes that provided an opaque window on the soul of a killer:

And gave to candor equal place  
With mystery starred in open skies;  
And, floating all in sweetness, made  
Her fathomless mild eyes. (ll. 5-8)

As in his many previous representations of the problem of evil, Melville raises the issue of the ambiguity of human nature as a possible reflection of the ambiguity of the divine creator. What emerges from the poem is not so much a distinct portrait of the infamous marquise as of the inexplicable mystery suggested by the criminal nature hidden behind her feminine beauty. The paradoxical image suggests a connection with the archetype of the lethal Romantic seductress, as in Keats’s “La Belle Dame Sans Merci” and *Lamia*, as well as the various nineteenth-century incarnations of the legendary figure of Lilith. (The earlier poem “Lamia’s Song” in *Timoleon Etc.* speaks more directly out of this tradition.)

V

The final two poems in the first part of *Timoleon Etc.* examine the moral and spiritual deficiencies of later nineteenth-century America, with its crass materialism coexistent with a decadent Christianity. In “The Age of the Antonines,” Melville offered a comparison between the world of the second-century Roman Empire, as portrayed by Gibbon, with its string of

“good” emperors culminating in the stoic “philosopher king” Marcus Aurelius Antoninus (who ruled in 161-80), and the world of Gilded Age America, with its political and commercial corruption. Stanton Garner has examined Melville’s poem as a product of his many years as an inspector for the New York Custom House, with its vast network of bribery and political cronyism, as well as his concern with the collapse of republican virtues in an era dominated by venal politicians and robber barons. The poem begins by noting the disparity between the traditional millennial visions of the Protestant churches and the reality of war between major European powers (as in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71), and goes on to evoke pagan second-century Rome as the zenith of Western civilization:

While faith forecasts millennial years  
Spite Europe’s embattled lines,  
Back to the past one glance be cast—  
The Age of the Antonines!  
O summit of fate, O zenith of time  
When a pagan gentleman reigned,  
And the olive was nailed to the inn of the world  
Nor the peace of the just was feigned.  
A halcyon Age, afar it shins,  
Solstice of Man and the Antonines. (ll. 1-10)

Proposing to look backwards in history for an age of peace comparable to the Christian millennium, the poet, with Gibbon’s Enlightenment historiography for guide, looks to a fabled era of the *Pax Romana* under the rule of a pagan emperor, before the transformation of Christianity into the official religion of the empire. In the ensuing stanza, the contrast between the unabashedly pluralistic polytheism of Rome and the salient vices of a declining Protestant Christianity are outlined:

Hymns to the nations’ friendly gods  
Went up from the fellowly shrines,  
No demagogue beat the pulpit-drum



In the Age of the Antonines!  
The sting was not dreamed to be taken from death,  
No Paradise pledged or sought,  
But they reasoned of fate at the flowing feast,  
Nor stifled the fluent thought.  
We sham, we shuffle while faith declines—  
They were frank in the Age of the Antonines. (ll. 11-20)

Instead of delusive hope for spiritual resurrection posited by St. Paul (1 Cor. 15), or the apocalyptic redemption from history set forth by the Revelation of St. John the Divine, the second-century Romans freely debated the operations of fate without the hypocritical “sham” of a providential universe that modern Christians must maintain while the dogmatic supports for the faith disintegrate.

In the third and final stanza, the poet notes the rule of law and political order that characterized the world of Marcus Aurelius, in contrast to the pervasive social climbing and political corruption of Gilded Age America, with its string of mediocre or morally compromised presidents beginning with Grant:

Orders and ranks they kept degree,  
Few felt how the parvenu pines,  
No lawmaker took the lawless one’s fee  
In the Age of the Antonines!  
Under law made will the world reposed  
And the ruler’s right confessed,  
For the heavens elected the Emperor then,  
The Foremost of men the best.  
Ah, might we read in America’s signs  
The Age restored of the Antonines. (ll. 21-30)

While Melville seems to echo the authoritarian political philosophy of Carlyle—the election of the emperor by the “heavens” sounds remarkable like the antiquated monastic world evoked in *Past and Present* (1843)—the emphasis on order presented here is the necessary precondition for the attainment of world peace in the poem. The final muted wish that America’s “signs” (an

ironic allusion to the “signs of the times” of Matthew 16:3) might indicate a return to the world of the *Pax Romana* is an attempt to conclude the poem with a small consolatory hope for change, however unrealistic.

The last poem in the first part of *Timoleon Etc.*, “Herba Santa,” or “holy weed” (modern Spanish uses the spelling *hierba*, meaning “grass,” “herb,” or “weed”), proposes the sociable pleasures of smoking as a modern substitute for the god of Christianity who has failed to bring peace to the human race. While the modern reader must ignore contemporary scientific knowledge about the health risks of smoking in order to appreciate this poem, the poem’s representation of the ceremonial peace pipe, or Indian calumet, as a more likely instrument for bringing about a form of millennial peace than traditional Christian ritual is a deliberately provocative formulation that we can still savor at the start of the twenty-first century. (With reference to a different “weed,” the poem might especially appeal to pot-smokers past and present.) The poem’s praise of the peace pipe is additionally relevant in the context of the continuing decimation of Native American tribes in the later nineteenth century. Christianity cannot fulfill its ostensible mission because Christ’s loving sacrifice, commemorated in the Eucharist, has only led to two millennia of schism and war between sects of worshippers:

Shall code or creed a lure afford  
To win all selves to Love’s accord?  
When Love ordained a supper divine  
For the wide world of man,  
What bickerings o’er his gracious wine!  
Then strange new feuds began. (ll. 8-13)

Instead of conflict, the lowly tobacco peace pipe will ironically outdo Christ and Christianity at its own “pacific” mission of uniting the human race in one non-sectarian community:

Effectual more, in lowlier way,  
Pacific Herb, thy sensuous plea  
The bristling clans of Adam sway  
At least to fellowship in thee!  
Before thine altar tribal flags are furled,  
Fain would'st thou make one hearthstone of the world. (ll. 14-19)

Through its access to the “soul” from the “nerve,” the sacred herb can effectuate a relief from regret, or even sin, in a manner like that of conventional Christianity; “so canst win / Some from repinings, some from sin, / The Church’s aim thou dost subserve” (ll. 30-32). While the working class can find relief and reconciliation with their lot in the act of smoking (“Him soothest thou and smoothest down / Till some content return again” [ll. 35-36]), even the criminal classes can find a redemptive influence in the sacred herb, which offers a non-sectarian gospel:

Even ruffians feel thy influence breed  
Saint Martin’s summer in the mind,  
They feel this last evangel plead,  
As did the first, apart from creed,  
Be peaceful, man—be kind! (ll. 37-41)

Feeling the mellowness of Indian summer (“Saint Martin’s summer”) in their minds, the most recalcitrant human subjects feel peace and charity to their fellow humanity. In the penultimate stanza, the speaker asks whether the sacred herb, a mere “weed,” can act as a modern substitute for Christ’s Second Coming, since the universal love promised by Christ’s first advent has not been fulfilled:

Rejected once on higher plain,  
O Love supreme, to come again  
Can this be thine?  
Again to come, and win us too  
In likeness of a weed  
That as a god didst vainly woo,  
As man more vainly bleed? (ll. 42-48)

In the end, however, such hopes of a modern form of secular redemption may seem excessive; for the poet concludes by telling himself to remain content with merely dreaming of such possibilities while enjoying the sensual delights of tobacco alone:

Forbear my soul! and in thine Eastern chamber  
Rehearse the dream that brings the long release:  
Through jasmine sweet and talismanic amber  
Inhaling Herb Santa in the passive Pipe of Peace. (ll. 49-52)

“Herba Santa,” then, offers a modern naturalistic substitute for the repeatedly failed millennial dreams of Christianity, creating peace where the latter only fomented division and conflict. Just as the act of smoking consecrated the friendship of Ishmael and Queequeg in the early chapters of *Moby-Dick*, the same is proffered here as a remedy for the ills of the modern world. If the spirit of Christ is conspicuous by its absence, then the poet will suggest a substitute religion of communal smoking. The poem thus augments Melville’s argument in the poems of *Timoleon Etc.* that Christianity has run its historical course, and its savior god has no chance of return to redeem humanity from a fallen world.

## VI

The second part of *Timoleon Etc.*, entitled “Fruits of Travel Long Ago,” consists of eighteen poems that are distinguishable from the first part of the collection by their evocation of picturesque “sights” from Italy, Greece, and Egypt, including historical cities and landscapes (“Venice,” “Pausilippo,” “The Attic Landscape,” “Off Cape Colonna,” “Syra,” “In the Desert”) as well as architecture (“Pisa’s Leaning Tower,” “Milan Cathedral,” “The Parthenon,” “Greek Architecture,” “The Great Pyramid”). The overall impression left by many of these poems is the spiritual beauty inherent in Mediterranean landscapes and cultures adhering to classical canons

of aesthetics, which thereby demonstrate a “reverence for the Archetype” (“Greek Architecture,” l. 4). In these poems, the varied portrayal of the disappearance of God found in the first part is replaced by the representation of classical forms of beauty, including temples and churches, as objects of devotion—a transformation in keeping with the various manifestations of Aestheticism in later nineteenth-century culture and art.

While most of the poems in “Fruits of Travel Long Ago” pertain to art and classical aesthetics, the final two poems, both set in Egypt, complete the whole collection’s skeptical depiction of religious themes by associating the monotheistic god of the West with the arid landscape of ancient Egypt. Thus “In the Desert” describes in series of four quatrains the poet’s overwhelming experience of the noonday desert sun, whose power is depicted as comparable to the Hebrew god’s. Beginning with a striking paradoxical image, the poet in the first stanza compares the intensity of the light of the desert sun to the “plague” of total darkness that Yahweh brought the Egyptians as punishment for pharaoh’s intransigence (Exod. 10:21-23): “Never Pharaoh’s Night, / Whereof the Hebrew wizards croon, / Did so the Theban flamens try / As me this veritable Noon” (ll. 1-4). In the second stanza, the intense light is compared to the experience of a calm at sea, when “Undulates the ethereal frame; / In one flowing oriflamme / God flings his fiery standard out.” Originally the red banner of St. Denis, an “oriflamme” (“gold flame”) describes any flag that rallies troops for battle. God’s act of flinging his “fiery standard out” (ll. 6-9)—a likely reminder of Yahweh as a military Lord of Hosts (Josh. 5:14) and Divine Warrior (Ps. 77:16-20; Isa. 13:13; Joel 2:11)—implies the omnipotent power of the sunlight on the open ocean, when the atmosphere of the sky “undulates” with radiant energy even as the ocean is hypnotically still. In the third stanza, the desert sunlight is described as so powerful

that it vanquished Napoleon's soldiers during his Egyptian campaign; for "bayoneted by the sun / His gunners drop beneath the gun," another likely allusion to the Hebrew god of battles.

In the final stanza, we witness a shift in mood when the poet salutes the desert sunlight as the mystical manifestation of the Hebrew divinity: "Holy, holy, holy Light! / Immaterial incandescence, / Of God the effluence of the essence, / Shekinah, intolerably bright!" (ll. 14-17). At the start of Book III of *Paradise Lost*, Milton had paid tribute to "holy Light," celebrating it as a visual form of the divine nature: "Bright effluence of bright essence increate [uncreated]" (III.6). In Melville's adaptation of the blind poet's salute, the divine light, or "shekinah," overwhelms human perception, just as the light of the burning bush had overcome Moses, so that the prophet "hid his face, for he was afraid to look upon God" (Exod 3:6). As the "dwelling" or presence of God in post-biblical and rabbinical Judaism, the "shekinah" was conceived as being present in the pillar of cloud and tent of meeting that accompanied the Israelites in the Sinai desert; hence Melville's use of the term is symbolically appropriate here. "In the Desert," then, confirms the mystical presence of a god-like force in the sunlight of the Egyptian desert; yet it is a force that is potentially inimical to human well-being. The poem thus hints at the ambiguous nature of the divine, as previously experienced by the prophet Moses and the Hebrew people generally, whose god was an inscrutable combination of the redemptive and the destructive.

If "In the Desert" salutes the blindingly godlike power of light, the poem's Egyptian counterpart, "The Great Pyramid," offers an antithetical image of the divine embodied in an ancient architectural wonder symbolizing the incomprehensible sublime god at the origins of the Judeo-Christian tradition. For Melville now associates the creation of the monumental

Great Pyramid of Giza with the creation of a monotheistic god synonymous with Yahweh of the Old Testament. Built in 2560 BCE as the tomb for Fourth Dynasty King Cheops, the limestone Great Pyramid at 455 feet was the tallest manmade structure in the world until the completion of Lincoln Cathedral circa 1300. Basing his poem on the account he wrote of ascending the same stupendous architectural wonder on 31 December 1856 during his trip to Europe and the Levant, Melville created a portrait of an archetypal deity who is massive in size and power—a supreme embodiment of sublime wonder and terror.

As Melville recorded in his journal at the time, “I shudder at idea of ancient Egyptians. It was in these pyramids that was conceived the idea of Jehovah. Terrible mixture of the cunning and awful. Moses learned in all the lore of the Egyptians [see Acts 7:22]. The idea of Jehovah born here. ... Pyramids still loom before me – something vast, indefinite, incomprehensible, and awful” (Melville, *Journals* 75, 76). The idea of Moses’s dependence on Egyptian religion for the development of Israelite monotheism had been debated throughout the Enlightenment (Assmann Chs. 3-4), and Melville was no doubt aware of some of these debates. The very form of his poem on the pyramid, with two pairs of octosyllabic couplets followed by a shortened four-syllable line, accentuates the immovable solidity of the massive stone structure. Sharing characteristics of the evil Gnostic creator god, the deistic notion of Yahweh as a product of Jewish priestcraft, and the cruelly predestinating god of Calvinism, Melville’s enigmatic Great Pyramid is ambiguously poised between human and supernatural influences, nature and culture; it is thus a fitting final manifestation of Melville’s religious skepticism.

In the poem’s seven stanzas, a number symbolic of divine perfection or completion, Melville creates an image of the overwhelming physical presence of the pyramid. Thus in the

first stanza, the poet notes the enormous scale of the masonry of the pyramid, asking whether it is a product of a human or divine creator, culture or nature; for the enormous rows of stone blocks, or “courses,” in the pyramid—without its polished outer limestone casing, the pyramid has a step-like structure—create a question in the viewer’s mind about the mysterious origins of such a structure:

Your masonry—and is it man’s?  
More like some Cosmic artizan’s.  
Your courses as in strata rise,  
Beget you do a blind surmise  
Like Grampians. (ll. 1-5)

Significantly, the Grampian mountains of the Scotland Highlands, which exhibited rugged pyramidal-shaped slopes comparable to the those described in Melville’s poem, contained the highest mountain peak in the British Isles, Ben Nevis (4,409 feet).

Continuing the image of the pyramid as mountain, the second stanza focuses on the tiny forms of those climbing the pyramid, who ascend it like those scaling an Alpine peak:

Far slanting up your sweeping flank  
Arabs with Alpine goats may rank,  
And there they find a choice of passes  
Even like to dwarfs that climb the masses  
Of glaciers blank. (ll. 6-10)

In the third and fourth stanzas, the pyramid reveals itself as impervious to nature and the elements, a “sterile” arid structure that dominates the blue skies of the desert and weathers its sandstorms:

Shall lichen in your crevice fit?  
Nay, sterile all and granite-knit:  
Weather nor weather-strain ye rue,  
But aridly you cleave the blue  
As lording it.



Morn's vapor floats beneath your peak,  
Kites skim your side with pinion weak;  
To sand-storms battering, blow on blow,  
Raging to work your overthrow,  
You—turn the cheek. (ll. 11-20)

The truncated fifth line begins here to hint at a subversive association between the pyramid and the Judeo-Christian god; for the pyramid is “lording it” over its environment like the “Lord” of the Old Testament, while the ironic image of the pyramid turning its “cheek” to the sandstorm makes ironic use of Jesus’ well-known championship of non-violence in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5:39). Exemplifying impassivity instead of pacifism, the pyramid is inhumanly indifferent to the vicissitudes of time and weather. Then, in the fifth stanza, to the idea of the pyramid’s indifference to the elements is added the seemingly eternal nature of the structure’s age:

All elements unmoved you stem,  
Foursquare you stand and suffer them:  
Time’s future infinite you dare,  
While, for the past, ‘tis you that wear  
Eld’s diadem. (ll. 20-25)

Since the pyramid does not show any sign of physical decline from the elements, its existence extends infinitely into the future, while its demonstrable antiquity has earned it a crown of divine sovereignty.

In the sixth stanza, those who seek to enter the pyramid’s labyrinthine passages are driven mad and die, as a legend of “old palmers”—namely those who have made a pilgrimage to the Holy Land—relates:

Slant from your inmost lead the caves  
And labyrinths rumored. These who braves  
And penetrates (old palmers said)  
Comes out afar on deserts dead

And, dying, raves. (ll. 26-30)

The heart of the enigmatic pyramid is thus forbidden to mortals, just as it was forbidden to enter into the inner sanctuary of the Hebrew Temple in Jerusalem. The last stanza of the poem continues the association of the pyramid with the Hebrew god:

Craftsmen, in dateless quarries dim,  
Stones formless into form did trim,  
Usurped on Nature's self with Art,  
And bade this dumb I AM to start,  
Imposing him. (ll. 31-35)

The implicit paradox is that this god-like architectural structure was created by human “craftsmen,” whose architectural creation “usurped” on nature with a form of “art.” The word “art” here implies the notion of “artifice,” for the pyramid is not an object of creative and imaginative beauty, as are the Greek temples described in other poems in the second part of *Timoleon Etc.*; it is instead comparable to the elusive but strategically calculating Yahweh of the Old Testament, who enigmatically named himself “I AM THAT I AM” to Moses at the burning bush (Exod. 3:14). Like the Old Testament divinity, whose unlimited power was seemingly imposed by priestly “craftsmen,” the pyramid was brought into existence by human builders working in “dateless quarries dim,” but then it has assumed a seemingly independent life of its own. The last stanza of Melville’s poem thus evokes the traditional Enlightenment attack of Judeo-Christian religion as the product of designing “priestcraft”; for as the book of Acts had enigmatically asserted, “Moses was learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians” (7:22). In the end, Melville’s evocation of the Great Pyramid implies the creation of the god of monotheism by the Hebrews as a blend of both human ingenuity and supernatural mystery—a mystery that

the shape of the pyramid (named by the Greeks after its resemblance to the form of a flame, or *pyr*) has traditionally conveyed.

## VII

In August 1861, John Ruskin wrote to his American friend Charles Eliot Norton: “it is to me so fearful a discovery to find how God has allowed all who have variously sought Him in the most earnest way to be blinded – how Puritan – monk – Brahmin – Churchman – Turk – are all merely names for different madneses and ignorances...” (qtd. in Wilson 272). Like Ruskin, Melville was a life-long religious seeker, much of whose fiction and poetry portrayed the various forms of “madness” and “ignorance” that possessed those who thought they had discovered the reality of the divine. Melville’s last published work in his lifetime reveals a similar concern with the deliberate or inadvertent betrayal that faith in God has perpetrated on various individuals and societies; yet here and elsewhere he demonstrates the recurrent human need—or instinct—for faith. Basem L. Ra’ad has noted the basic duality of Melville’s attitude toward religion: “on the one hand, his recognition of the unconscious human need for mythic protection; on the other hand, his distrust of the self-deceptive obsessions that the religious mind creates” (138). We might conclude that Melville’s recurrent interest in the irresolvable problems of faith and the nature of the divine reveals a mind devoted to continued intellectual inquiry and suspended judgment—in short, the skeptical outlook—that were integral to his creativity as a writer of both fiction and poetry.

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## **Linguistic Bias and English as a Counter-Offensive in the Fiction of Arturo Islas**

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Author and academic, Arturo Islas (1938 – 1991) grew up in an environment where, while his family spoke Spanish in the home, English was to be spoken in public. It was in the public forum of the schoolroom that Islas came to realize how laden with significance and political import language can be. Speaking Spanish in the El Paso schools at mid-century was a punishable offense. Admittedly, Islas was not alone in this; he shared this experience with numerous other individuals of Mexican heritage. Gloria Anzaldúa, for one, underwent a similar linguistic disciplining. Describing the experience in her work *Borderlands* (1987), Anzaldúa suggests that it was the abandonment of Spanish, rather than the learning of English, which traumatized children like her. The system would not allow polyglotism. The children were forced to disavow something central to their identity and cease speaking Spanish. Anzaldúa implies that those in power underestimated what was being asked of the pupils. “For some of us,” Anzaldúa notes, “language is a homeland closer than the Southwest” (77). Thus, in the life of a young person of Mexican ancestry, an English-only schoolroom functioned as a site of extremely personal, immediate cultural imperialism. In this manner, the domination of the Mexican-American students was at its most invasive: to succeed in—or even survive—the schooling, the individual had to succumb to the colonizing force. The dominant power, which had previously laid claim to territory in the desert Southwest, assumed control of the linguistic space in the public forum. The communication medium was colonized. The Mexican-American

child, in turn, was similarly colonized. "I am my language," Anzaldúa declares (81), and for persons like her and Islas, the domination of the linguistic identity was the domination of the ethnic identity.

Given the dynamics at play that force Mexican-Americans to adopt English in the public domain and lead them to relegate Spanish to the domestic sphere, language becomes fraught with complexity and anxiety. For instance, does one become *agringado/a* for speaking English among family and friends? Or, is one prepared to face the economic ramifications of speaking Spanish in the workplace? Islas lived with such linguistic uncertainty. He faced what appeared to be a dilemma: whether to employ the language of the Anglo-American imperialist culture or to work in a medium that would encumber his acceptance by the U.S. literary market. I would like to suggest that Islas, finding neither option desirable, rather ingeniously invented a third alternative. What Islas demonstrated in such a decision is that unusual minoritarian stance known as disidentification. He did not withdraw from mainstream (i.e., Anglo) society by writing in Spanish, yet neither did he accommodate the monolingual bias of that mainstream. In his professional life, he was a professor of English who championed minority literatures. And in his fiction, Arturo Islas employed language as a disidentifying counter-offensive. Islas complicated and reformulated the now-familiar equation of linguistic Other with resistance by loading a typically familiar discursive medium (English) with discomfiting traps that disrupt and mock language-based chauvinism.

While origins of thought are practically impossible to determine, given ideas' nature as developments or rejections of earlier ideas, for our purposes, we can point to Michel Pêcheux and Louis Althusser as the thinkers who laid the groundwork for the concept of

disidentification. In 1970 Althusser published an essay outlining how governments—“states,” to use his term—perpetuate ideologies. Individuals live within these ideological constructs and are made subjects (i.e., they are subjected to ideologies). Whenever a figure or group or institution realizes its subject status and rebels, the ideology of the state is affirmed, for, according to Althusser, the thrust and counter-thrust of the struggle maintains the status quo. About a decade later, Michel Pêcheux complicated the matter by suggesting there might be more than two possible relationships to the prevailing ideology. Pêcheux suggests that in addition to the “good subject,” the figure who does not challenge the ideology, and the “bad subject,” the figure who opposes the ideology, an alternate position arises: the disidentifying figure who refuses to accept the subject position altogether. However, Pêcheux dismisses such theorizing by concluding that in practical terms it is impossible to escape ideology. Neither Pêcheux nor Althusser took the concept much farther; they focused on the idea’s relevance to traditional Marxist class struggle.

After nearly two decades, an amplification of the concept that offers itself to our consideration of Arturo Islas’s use of English arose. In *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (1999), José Muñoz refines the concept of disidentification to show its usefulness for individuals whose gender, sexual, racial, and ethnic identities situate them in an oppositional stance to the ruling ideologies. Muñoz argues, like Althusser before him, that the oppositional stance does nothing but reinscribe the ideologies. Nevertheless, Muñoz observes that Pêcheux might have been onto something: certain minoritarian figures, when confronted with mainstream culture, do indeed reject assimilation and spurn resistance and instead take what amounts to a third path. As for Islas, rather than write in Spanish or employ a univocal



form of English, he adopted an alternative mode of discourse that exemplifies disidentifying practice, because it shatters the binary; it complicates our conceptualization of language and thereby expands our understanding of language's uses and deployment. In his explication of the disidentifying strategy, José Muñoz explains how certain populations mock, and thereby eviscerate, dominant culture and ideology. Disidentification, then, is a stance "that neither opts to assimilate within ... a structure nor strictly opposes it; rather, disidentification is a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology" (Muñoz 11). I believe, therefore, we see Islas disidentifying through the linguistic choices he made in his writing.

Nevertheless, such linguistic and artistic decisions are not made in a vacuum. To wit, Pêcheux observes, "every discursive practice is" part of an "overdetermined complex" arising from unique "historical conditions" (155). Islas's choices, then, were made amidst the thrust and counter-thrust of an imperialist/Chicano stalemate. While a small number of Chicanos/as were producing works in Spanish, Islas decided to write in English. Yet he had no tolerance for Mexican-Americans who denied their heritage. It is clear from a lecture delivered at Stanford University in 1985, which carried the subtitle "Autobiography as Self-Denial," that Islas thought Richard Rodriguez, through, among other things, his condemnation of bilingual education programs, adopted an assimilationist response to American *gringo* culture. In Islas's eyes, such an approach necessitates a denial of one's difference in the hopes of finding a seat at the dominant culture's table. By contrast, some of the Chicano/a activists who were Islas's contemporaries published in Spanish, thereby resisting the United States' dominant Anglo culture. They opted out of English in a move that could be interpreted as their rejecting the

culture that had rejected them. For these resisters, withdrawing from the (linguistic) exchange altogether made the most sense.

By writing in English, Islas could not realistically be deemed part of the resistance, but I believe there is ample evidence within his writing to show he was not an assimilationist either. His fiction went far beyond spicing English-language narratives with Spanish terms and idioms. And code-switching has been observed in many other works by Mexican-American authors, while numerous scholars have commented on its practice. Fernando Peñalosa's *Chicano Sociolinguistics* (1980) and Rafael Pérez-Torres's *Movements in Chicano Poetry* (1995), for example, are but two informative studies that explore code-switching and its frequent political deployment. What Islas engaged in, by contrast, was not merely the code-switching employed by bilingual writers; it was much closer to Juan Bruce-Novoa's concept of "interlingualism," because Islas capitalized on "the constant tension" (226), as Bruce-Novoa phrases it, between Spanish and English speakers to question who, in fact, is the central, the dominant, the powerful. Indeed, Islas disidentified with mainstream, English-only American culture, and his fiction was the tool for his disidentification. His work lulls monolingual, English-speaking readers into a discursive exchange with its seemingly approachable, putatively nonthreatening, ostensibly English-language representation of ethnic and cultural minorities, but after further consideration of what they have read, these same readers experience an instability, a discomfort where their previous centrality, their dominance is shaken by an inability to engage fully with the discourse around them: for a change, they are encumbered by their exclusive fluency in English.

We can turn to a consideration of Islas's writing to see this disidentification in practice. Before we do that, though, we would be well served to consider the ways in which language is charged with bias and bigotry, how it operates, both within a minoritarian ethnic community and between the ethnic community and the larger U.S. society. In a document entitled "Chicano Professor Teaches Anglos about Their Literature," Islas claimed, "I grew up with two languages, two cultures, two dimensions in almost everything. It made me almost schizophrenic. Now I see it as a great advantage" ("Chicano Professor" 26). Clearly, what Islas is describing is how what was painful in his life also proved to be productive. His facility with Spanish and English enabled him to conceive of that third path that is disidentification; while never forgetting that Spanish-speaking individuals in the United States suffer because of their language, he avoided an "either/or" dichotomy of assimilation or resistance and used a loaded, trap-filled English to shift the battleground beneath the feet of his mainstream readers. Furthermore, a product of two languages and two cultures, Islas describes himself as schizophrenic, but it is, for us, his readers, at least, a schizophrenia he capitalized on to great effect. His writing was incredibly masterful, and no aspect of it demonstrates this artistry better than his use of language.

Specifically, Islas deployed language both as a theme and as a formalistic device in his literary artworks. Thematically, Islas exposed how language can be used as a differentiation of caste or a marker within a sociolinguistic hierarchy. Through his novels and short fiction, Islas illustrated how language is imbricated with other characteristics normally isolated for discriminatory purposes, such as class, race, and ethnicity. Technically, he played with language. Islas seemed to relish the liminal space created by Chicanos/as' language, and in his writing he

explored the dynamics of that English/Spanish/Spanglish speech Anzaldúa refers to as “the language of the Borderlands” (20). For example, although writing primarily in English, Islas would occasionally intersperse Spanish words and phrases—sometimes with a translating explication, and sometimes not. In several instances, he wrapped these two issues, the thematic and the formal considerations, back around onto each other, using the untranslatability of certain Spanish concepts to reposition the reader (assuming he or she was a non-Spanish-speaking individual) as a linguistic Other. In such instances, I believe, Islas demonstrates a disidentifying practice. In his writing, especially in his use of language (English and Spanish) and his exposés on how language functions, Islas stimulates empathy in the reader—that is, feeling with those subaltern classes and categories of people who are excluded and alienated for their language skills. Moreover, we can see through such moves that Islas did not relegate theme and formalistic concerns to separate spheres. He facilitated a cooperative détente between technical and thematic issues to create literature that was at once polished and political, artistic and engaged.

Specific examples from the writing will demonstrate Islas’s deployment of language as both theme and artistic device better than I can describe it. So, we might look to Islas’s first novel, *The Rain God* (1984), to see how language functions for some as a tool of oppression and alienation, or minimally as a mark of distinction. Frederick Luis Aldama’s critical biography, *Dancing with Ghosts*, relates how over the course of a decade, as publisher after publisher rejected the manuscript, Islas cut back on the amount of Spanish used in the text. As he revised what became a novel that English speakers might assume they could comfortably settle in with, the occasional, infrequent Spanish terms or phrases that remained were much more strategic in

their use. In *The Rain God*, the first novel of the planned-trilogy about the Angel family clan of Del Sapo, Texas, Islas presents us with a narrator, Miguel Chico, who works through the painful memories of his family from a safe and comfortable distance in San Francisco. With geographic and chronological distance, Miguel Chico has been able to partially extract himself from the family's lore and sway. He is able to scrutinize his family through his memories of them, unveiling the bigoted attitudes of key members of the Angel family, attitudes that he and other relatives find repugnant.

The center of bigotry in the Angel family is populated by Miguel Chico's grandmother (Mama Chona), his great aunt (Tia Cuca), his father (Miguel Grande), and a few other aunts and cousins. They are bigots who despise indigenous peoples and the lower class, even though they themselves are of a mixed heritage and only minimally middle class. Islas capitalizes on Mama Chona and Tia Cuca's delusional hypocrisy for its obvious comic effect: "Although they were always poor, the old ladies retained their aristocratic assumptions and remained señoras of the most pretentious sort. Their hands were never in dishwater, and cleaning house was work for the Indians, even if the old ladies could not afford to have them do it. Consequently, their homes were dusty" (*Rain God* 147). Throughout *The Rain God*, and even in its sequel *Migrant Souls* (1990) for that matter, Islas lampoons Mama Chona and Tia Cuca for their self-delusion. The women affect aristocratic airs; meanwhile, their *mestiza* heritage, which is physically manifested in their skin tone and sharp-edged cheekbones, belies their claims of European purity. "As much as she protected herself from it," Miguel Chico thinks about his grandmother, "the sun still darkened her complexion and no surgery could efface the Indian cheekbones, those small very dark eyes and aquiline nose" (*Rain God* 27). However, Islas refuses to allow

such humorous irony to dissipate the larger point he is making about the malignancy of bigotry, whether it is based in class or race, and how it is harmful to all of society, even the bigot him or herself.

Linguistically, the two elderly sisters are just as deluded. For Mama Chona and her allies within the family, language is akin to class and ethnicity; it is a determinative factor in a person's status, a signifier of his or her social acceptability. They actually seem to enact Pêcheux's observation that "every subject is ... the responsible author of ... his 'utterances'" (156) for their own discriminatory purposes. And with this idea in mind, the Spanish spoken by Chona and Cuca "was a cultivated imitation of the Castilian Spanish they believed reigned supreme over all dialects" (*Rain God* 141). Just as they try to pass off their cheekbones as indicative "of highborn Spanish ladies" (*Rain God* 141), Tia Cuca and Mama Chona glory in their simulacrum of a language. It is a practiced imitation of what they believe European Spanish to be. Without Islas even attempting to duplicate their speech, we can almost hear the lisps of the women's affected Castilian tongue. But most significantly, these two women believe that the language they speak surpasses any other language. By association, it sets them apart from—actually sets them *above*—speakers of other languages. This arrogance far exceeds what might be deemed ludicrous, for Mama Chona actually believes that God communicates with her in Spanish (*Migrant Souls* 14), and this presumably would be the well-enunciated, grammatically correct Spanish she and Cuca speak. Finally, the imperialist domination inherent in the attitude is unmistakable, due to Islas's word choice: their language "reigned supreme over all dialects." Mama Chona and her sister Cuca have adopted here a contrarian or oppositional stance. We might want to consider them examples of Pêcheux's "bad subjects" who challenge the

ideological supremacy of English in the United States, although such a classification is, as I explain below, problematic. For English-speaking readers, such an attitude might strike them as curious or noteworthy, but the fact that they are reading of these characters' Spanish-language bias *in English* appears to affirm, tacitly, their privileged position. Here, then, we encounter the first of many traps in an English-language novel written with a U.S. readership in mind: an ironic, knowing wink between the author and his audience. However, any complacency such readers feel when they believe themselves in favor with the author will help to exacerbate the eventual instability they will face upon realizing that these works actually play with and mock their own exclusively English-speaking identities.

Nevertheless, the characters' linguistic bigotry knows no bounds. Mama Chona and Tia Cuca look down upon low-class, uneducated Mexicans. It is unclear whether Chona and Cuca find the poorer, working-class group of people despicable because of the language they speak, or if the speakers of unschooled Spanish are despicable because they are poor. In either case the two are inextricably linked. Mama Chona's bigotry dehumanizes those she sees as below her. To Chona, the Mexicans who creep into the United States to find work as day laborers and domestics are "illiterate riffraff from across the river" (*Rain God* 15), and they speak "the kind of Spanish" that she "deplored" (*Rain God* 22). Hence, class and national status are, in Chona's mind at least, elided with linguistic ability. Ironically, Chona and her sister Cuca are blind to the ways linguistic bias works just as easily against them.

Linguistic bias (in tandem with ethnic prejudice) operates against the family, once they move north of the Rio Grande River into the United States. Chona and Cuca may disapprove of English, but it is the language the family's grandchildren are being taught in school. Chona and

Cuca consider it a regrettable necessity, since “English is the language of business” (*Rain God* 142). As such, it is required for survival in North American society, and so the third generation’s Spanish, the Spanish of Miguel Chico and his cousins, devolves into something Chona and Cuca would find abominable. English is clearly the language of North American imperialism, which opportunistically wheedles its way into Mexican life. In a narrative flashback, Chona admits as much when she laments the chaos Mexicans are inflicting upon their own country in the revolution of 1910: “they are not going to accomplish anything except the destruction of Mexico. If they don’t stop, we are all going to be forced to talk like the North Americans” (*Migrant Souls* 40). Given *gringo* imperialism, some of her antagonism towards the English language is understandable. But Chona construes practically every opposition she faces in linguistic terms. Even economic inequities, which could be traced more directly to exploitative capitalism and societal racism, become confused, in her mind, with language. For example, even though her God is a speaker of Spanish, she resents “the God who spoke English with a Texas accent” for looking more kindly on the Anglo “minions with better-paying jobs and more expensive homes in the nicer parts of town” (*Migrant Souls* 42 – 43). There is in this attitude, nevertheless, a respectable consistency: as Chona and Cuca cast their class and race biases in linguistic terms, they perceive their own disadvantage in Anglo North America, when they themselves become victims of class and ethnic bias, as a language-based struggle, too.

Regrettably, the Angel family’s chauvinism is perpetuated. Cuca and Chona transfer their biases and bigotry to some members of the next generation of Angels. Language operates for some of the second generation Angels as a mark of social hierarchy, just as it does for Mama Chona and Tia Cuca. Jesus Maria is truly Chona’s daughter, because she wields her language like



a weapon. Islas writes, “Jesus Maria spoke in a sophisticated border Spanish... She enunciated every word perfectly and projected it outward” (*Migrant Souls* 142). But as the generations age and the role of family matriarch passes from mother to daughter, the language gradually evolves. Jesus Maria’s Spanish is, in contrast to her mother’s, “pronounced the Mexican way... without lisp or affectation” (*Migrant Souls* 142). Much like her mother, however, Jesus Maria gives in to bigotry and bias. She allows her language bias to come between her and the spiritual communion of a Christmas mass, because the celebration is conducted “in an unpolished Spanish and English that catered to the working classes and greatly displeased her” (*Migrant Souls* 150). Some of Mama Chona’s other children, Jesus Maria’s siblings, inherit their mother’s prejudices, too.

Jesus Maria’s sister Eduviges seems almost *agringada* in her enthusiasm for celebrating Thanksgiving. As her daughters, Miguel Chico’s cousins Josie and Serena, prepare for their school’s Thanksgiving pageant, they begin to suspect an irreconcilable paradox in their mother’s attitude. In everyday life Eduviges hounds the girls for acting like Indians, by which she means being uncouth and ill-mannered. Yet she is happy to help them with their costumes for school. The girls are struck by the irony: “In the first semester of seventh grade, Josie had begun to wonder why being make-believe North American Indians seemed to be all right with their mother. ‘Maybe it was because those Indians spoke English,’ Josie said to Serena. Mexican Indians were too close to home and the truth” (*Migrant Souls* 24). As did Mama Chona, Eduviges conflates linguistic and ethnic difference. The untenable nature of her bigotry, moreover, is obvious even to her teenage daughters. And here again, Eduviges refuses to see the hypocrisy in her own prejudice. Despite the fact that her own family is descended from

Spanish-speaking Indians (i.e., the truth which must be avoided), Eduviges adopts her mother's bigotry and demeans an entire group of people as lower-class Mexicans, lacking dignity and unworthy of respect. To her mother, these folk are "illiterate riffraff," but to Eduviges and her brother Miguel Grande, the Mexican Indians are simply "wetbacks" (*Migrant Souls* 24; *Rain God* 142). Through characters like Miguel Grande, Eduviges, Jesus Maria, Tia Cuca, and Mama Chona, Arturo Islas conveys not only how ugly and despicable bigotry can be, but also how individuals can employ language as a marker of caste, socio/economic class, race, and ethnicity.

In his essay "What Is a Nation?" Ernest Renan indirectly addresses the misuses of language, the same polemic Islas undertakes in *The Rain God* and *Migrant Souls*. First, there is this issue of language as a marker of race or ethnicity. Renan dispels such a view without hesitation; he discounts any realistic correlation between language and race. He argues that, in actuality, "[l]anguages are historical formations, which tell us very little about the blood of those who speak them" (Renan 17). Race is a corporeal effect with no political meaning in and of itself.<sup>8</sup> Language, by comparison, is a wholly social construct. The two, Renan posits, have nothing to do with one another. Thus, the bigoted attitudes of some of the Angel family, which lead them to conflate race and language, appear not only unsympathetic but profoundly unsound as well. Second, Renan takes issue with moves towards—or away from—group affiliation based on language. The overarching point of his essay is that factors such as race, language, religion, geographic proximity, and kinship have little if any bearing on nation formation. Implicit in his argument, however, is the point that any one of these issues can

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<sup>8</sup> For rhetorical effect, I have employed rather reductive language. I do not believe Renan is contradicting race theorists who argue that race is a social construct. He seems, instead, to be modifying that stance in this essay to say that the *meaning* or *significance* of race is a social construct.

foster group affiliation. Regarding our topic here at hand, for instance, Renan comments, “Language invites people to unite, but it does not force them to do so” (16). As such, the tendency for select members of the Angel clan to view language as a divider seems especially regrettable, because it could be looked upon as a unifying commonality instead. Especially within a mono-lingual, Anglo context like the United States, Mama Chona and her children could have rallied with other Spanish speakers in a countering stance against linguistic domination. They could have become, in Pêcheux’s and Althusser’s parlance, “bad subjects” who face the English hegemony with “interrogation, challenge, revolt” (Pêcheux 157). Instead, Chona, Cuca, Jesus Maria, and Eduviges allow their own bigotry to obscure the fact that they themselves are subject to language-based discrimination once inside the United States.

As a Chicano in a predominantly *gringo* culture, Islas was all too aware of how language could be used against persons of Mexican descent. He did not limit himself to exposing pretentious Chicanos/as condescending to uneducated Mexicans. Islas also demonstrated through his fiction how the dominant Anglo culture in the United States employs language as a separator and mark of hierarchy. For example, Islas’s posthumously published novel, *La Mollie and the King of Tears* (1996), is narrated by Louie Mendoza, someone who has suffered this sort of linguistic discrimination firsthand. *La Mollie and the King of Tears* is, ironically, Louie’s oral ramblings to an unnamed academic studying vernacular languages. This novel is set in San Francisco and diverges from the Angel trilogy, although it is tangentially connected to the other novels. Louie, a musician originally from El Paso,<sup>9</sup> has brought his *gringa* girlfriend Mollie, the

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<sup>9</sup> It is interesting to consider whether this was an oversight or an intentional shift on Islas’s part. *The Rain God* and *Migrant Souls* are set in a border city called Del Sapó, which, although fictitious, is easily recognizable as El Paso, Texas. But in *La Mollie and the King of Tears*, the name of the hometown is changed to El Paso. Fictional characters

Mollie of the title, to a hospital emergency room with a serious head injury. He recounts to the nameless academic what has happened in his day to bring him to this point. Through his oration, we learn how Louie has suffered discrimination on account of his language.

We do not have to read very far into *La Mollie and the King of Tears* before we encounter situations where Louie Mendoza's language is used against him. The relationship Louie shares with Mollie is fraught with equal amounts of passion and prejudice. And even though she is his girlfriend, Mollie is not above making bigoted comments when the two of them are fighting. For instance, her epithets for Louie include "dumb Mexican" (*La Mollie* 25). But in a statement much more germane to our current investigation, Louie indicates his awareness of how language separates him from Mollie. After trying to convey a dialog he has had with Mollie, Louie corrects himself to the nameless academic. He explains that Mollie would not use a double negative, "cause la Mollie's been to college and talks English real good" (*La Mollie* 3). Language represents the social and hierarchical distance between the educated, Anglo Mollie and the uneducated, Chicano Louie. It is here, as well, that we learn how Mollie uses language for discriminatory purposes. Mollie, the bleeding-heart, San Francisco liberal, condescends to Louie through language. Louie tells the academic, "she gets a big kick outta correcting me in front of her big-shot Anglo friends" (*La Mollie* 4), so that language becomes a type of whipping post where Louie, the Chicano, is belittled by someone who supposedly loves him. In another exchange during one of their many arguments, Mollie exposes her own bias

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escape their novelistic bounds and move back and forth from the other two novels to *La Mollie and the King of Tears*. For example, in a quick, seemingly incidental exchange, Josie meets Mollie at a party in San Francisco in *Migrant Souls*. Also in *Migrant Souls*, there is a brief mention of Manitas the sculptor receiving a gift of incense from San Francisco from Louie Mendoza. Finally, Manitas is mentioned as a friend of Louie's, and Miguel Chico shows up as an English teacher in a Veterans Administration hospital in *La Mollie and the King of Tears*. Somehow the fictiveness wanes in this third novel, even though Islas was clearly still within the realm of the imaginary, and Del Sapo morphs into El Paso.

that the United States is for English speakers, by which, of course, she means standard, white English. In this context, Louie's non-standard, vernacular Chicano English does not qualify. To this end, Louie recounts how at one point in their relationship Mollie said he should "learn English," otherwise she would have him "deported" (*La Mollie* 26), as if Louie were not born in the United States. Repeatedly, the emotional intensity of Mollie and Louie's relationship is vented through bigoted discourse about language.

While Louie may suffer more acutely from Mollie's linguistic bias, since she is supposedly his lover, he faces it rather frequently in his casual interactions with many other Anglo North Americans. We learn how Louie has faced institutional and individual language discrimination throughout his life through his rambling narrative to the silent academic. Moreover, in a sensitive confession, surprisingly open for this macho poser, Louie drops his guard; he exposes his anguish and confusion over why people's language should be used against them. First, Louie mentions that his teachers in elementary school would lock him and the other Chicano/a students in a closet, if they were discovered speaking Spanish. Even though we do not have the biographical documentation to substantiate it, this account might have been an actual experience in Islas's life, part of the process of being "disciplined away from Spanish" he talks about in a speech published in *Critical Fictions*. Interestingly, however, this recollection comes out while Louie is making a different point entirely. He is not seeking the academic's sympathy for that mistreatment. Without belaboring the point, Islas demonstrates in *La Mollie and the King of Tears* how the dominant culture discriminates against linguistic Others and concurrently tries to control language difference.

The fact that this sort of language discrimination exists seems to be a rather regrettable fact of life, but what Islas appears to be concerned with, for the most part, is a larger, existential issue of motivation. He seems to be questioning *why* humans are motivated to use language against one another in this way. Louie asks the academic, who is silently recording his ramblings, why some accents are considered more acceptable than others. And later he becomes more direct and pointed with the academic. Louie meditates on the issue, saying, “I don’t want everybody to speak like me—that would be boring—but I don’t want no one telling me I can’t talk this way neither” (*La Mollie* 137). It seems that Louie is willing to grant individuals linguistic autonomy, but he expects the same consideration in return. Once again, it appears Islas is both identifying and criticizing the use of language to separate people, instead of bringing them together. And if this were as far as Islas went, he would have done nothing more than justify the oppositional stance of the cultural/linguistic Other. Instead, though, Islas goes one step further by disidentifying with the language debate, using an English that “operates as it were *in reverse*, i.e., *on and against itself*” (Pêcheux 159).

Louie Mendoza is not merely a discontented victim of others’ misuse of language; he also employs language for his own purposes. At times Louie affects a stereotypical Chicano persona to mock those whom he thinks are belittling him. Louie confesses, “man, when anyone—specially another guy—treats me like a dumb Mexican cause of the way I talk, I just go ahead and act like one. That lets em stay all smug, and I can laugh at em for being so stupid. I been conning the gringos like that for years and they never catch on” (*La Mollie* 22). Notice here that, once again, language and ethnic bias are elided. On account of his accent, white Americans think of him as foreign, Other; Louie, however, gets the best of them by playing

upon their gullibility. In a similar manner, Louie uses language as a counter-strike against Mollie. He does this in a patronizing way with Mollie, when he senses *she* is trying to tell *him* about Chicano/a life in the United States. Louie mocks her by thickening his accent: “Jes, baby, joor rye” (*La Mollie* 29). And at other times, Louie effects a type of posturing through his language; he uses it to convey his toughness, his machismo. For example, Louie recounts how he and his street gang chafed at the policing, controlling school system that tried to make them into “good little obedient Messicans” (*La Mollie* 9). The exaggerated mispronunciation is obviously intentional here and seems to serve as a defiant badge of honor, almost as if Louie and his fellow gang members want to flaunt their difference, their Otherness, their “nonstandardness.” Louie Mendoza employs language, that tool of oppression which is used against him, in his counterstrikes against bigoted Anglos, whether with biting irony or as a nose-thumbing gesture.

Through Louie Mendoza, Arturo Islas conveys how some individuals who are marginalized because of their speech do, in turn, employ the very means used against them by fashioning discourse into an oppositional device. And here we get to the point: in such a move, Louie, like his creator, disidentifies with the dominant, English-speaking culture. José Muñoz suggests that “[d]isidentification negotiates strategies of resistance with the flux of discourse and power” (19), and Louie Mendoza employs language, that very item which is, in the hands of the dominant culture, the fodder for his alienation, in his own unique response. Louie, and Islas through him, refine and distill Muñoz’s explanation of disidentification to its very essence. Muñoz claims, “disidentification is a step further than cracking open the code of the majority; it proceeds to use this code as raw material for representing a disempowered politics or

positionality” (31). For Louie, this raw material, this code is nothing more than speech itself. With language, he undermines the dominance of the dominant culture by showing how easily duped its representatives can be. Louie Mendoza’s heavily accented, grammatically incorrect English, when used as a mockery of those who discriminate based on language, demonstrates agency and dispels the prejudicial claim on the part of the bigots to more sophistication, keener thought, and greater erudition. And where, we are led to wonder, are the English-only readers in all of this? They might begin to question not only their assumptions about Spanish-speakers in the United States but also whether they themselves have been duped and mocked in such a way by a bilingual figure feigning a thickened accent or a limited understanding. Any complacency, any certainty they might have felt as English-speaking Americans in the United States is, albeit subtly, shaken and unsettled.

In one final instance of language being used to establish a social hierarchy, we might return to *The Rain God*. Surviving a serious illness leads Miguel Chico to reconsider his relationship with his family in the novel. As a matter of fact, he suffers through a near-fatal colostomy, just as Islas did. In the recovery room, following the surgery, Miguel is awakened by the nurse calling him “Mee-gwell.” Islas craftily illustrates, in this one brief passage, how the dominant culture can control the marginalized through the use of language. One’s name, in this case, is the metonym of one’s very identity, and Islas demonstrates how quickly the Chicano name is controlled and the identity enervated by the Anglo representative. Islas depicts Miguel Chico as fuming at the nurse mispronouncing his name: “‘It’s Miguel,’ he wanted to tell her pointedly, angrily, ‘it’s Miguel,’ but he was unable to speak. *He was a child again*” (emphasis added, *Rain God* 8). Literally, Miguel Chico is unable to speak because he is weak from



anesthesia and is choking on respirators and life-support equipment, but there is a thematic significance to his muteness, too. Miguel Chico is infantilized, robbed of his speech, and therefore his power to assert his own identity in response to the nurse, who becomes a representative of the mainstream culture.

Much can be made of this seemingly small, incidental occurrence in the framing device around the larger Angel family narrative in *The Rain God*, and the fact that Islas was able to execute this type of narrative detail with such significance speaks to his linguistic artistry. Marta Sánchez provides what is undoubtedly one of the best interpretations of this scene. For her part, Sánchez considers the passage as a cooperative engagement between Islas and his intended readers:

In the example of the nurse's mispronunciation, Chicanos—bilingual and non-bilingual—can identify perfectly with Mickie because they are among those who know what it is to have their names mispronounced by the dominant society. Non-Chicano, monolingual readers cannot really feel this situation, but they learn—through the narrator's mediation—to understand how Mickie feels. Without being able to pronounce his name correctly, they are encouraged to wonder about the desirability of being like this nurse who does not know she is mispronouncing a proper name. They learn, albeit momentarily, to see themselves as others see them and to be more sympathetic to the hero, but, again, only through the intervention of the narrator. (301-02)

In something as apparently incidental as a mispronunciation, Islas effectively depicts how language both designates and effects hierarchical difference between people. Whether through accent, idiom, or vernacular, language is simultaneously cause and symptom of the dominant group placing itself above those it deems subalterns. The powerful, Islas appears to be claiming, exercise their power through the medium of speech.

In this scene where Miguel Chico's name is mispronounced, we see Islas merging thematic and formalistic uses of language. The artistic rendering of the nurse's

mispronunciation propels the thematic point Islas hopes to make about language's alienating uses. Other, more impressive examples occur in Islas's fiction as well. Periodically in the novels, we encounter narrative interruptions that seem almost pedagogical in their function; they translate Spanish words and phrases. When one character refers to another character in *The Rain God* as "a *sinverguenza*," the narrator interrupts the narrative to explain, "The word is untranslatable; literally, it means 'without shame' and can be used as a noun" (56). It is possible, although unwise and irresponsible, to read past this sort of interjection and resume with the novel's plot; however, upon closer inspection, all sorts of issues arise from this single annotation. If, for example, the word is truly "untranslatable," how are we to take the narrator's translation? Is it a dependable, accurate translation? What might we be missing out on, if we accept this quickly tossed off translation of a concept that has no English equivalent? What are the possible puns, connotations, and associations for this term? And by merit of there being an offered translation, is Islas assuming a readership unfamiliar with and unable to speak or read Spanish?

Marta Sánchez proffers an insightful critical interpretation, which might help us resolve these kinds of questions. First, Sánchez hypothesizes that Islas envisioned three separate types of readers for *The Rain God*: "a Chicano bilingual and an Anglophonic monolingual" readership, as well as "non-bilingual Chicanos" (299). Second, Sánchez cautions that "[i]n some cases, the narrator deliberately 'mistranslates' in order to put his monolingual, Anglophonic readers in a complicated relationship to the text, creating discomfort within them so as to cause them to reflect about their own culture and their relationship to the culture they are reading about" (299). As persuasive as Marta Sánchez's argument can be, I wonder if we might not simplify the

readership a bit and just look at those “in the know” versus those linguistically isolated. For English-only speakers, whether an Anglo reader or a Chicano/a assimilationist, the need for translation is fraught with anxiety and peril, as demonstrated by the questions posed immediately above. In this literary endeavor the positionality of bilingual Spanish and English speakers shifts so that they, for a change, become the center, the knowledgeable, the powerful. The formerly central, English-only culture of the United States becomes acquainted with the space near the margins of society. The effect, if not the intent, of this disidentification is analogous to Reed Dasenbrock’s assessment of English-speaking readers experiencing an unexpected empathy with the culturally and linguistically marginalized hero of Rudolfo Anaya’s famous novel, *Bless Me, Ultima*.

Other examples of this type of bilingual inversion occur in *La Mollie and the King of Tears*, too. In a lengthy digression from the point of his narrative, Louie Mendoza reminisces about his favorite Mexican pastries. Six different pastries are named, and Louie provides translations for the names of three of them. However, Louie’s service to the academic—and, by extension, Islas’s relationship to his readers—abruptly changes. Louie claims there is no translation for the name of the sweet bread called *chamuco*; he shifts the responsibility onto the academic to figure out what the name of the pastry called *labertino* means; and he refers to a baked good purportedly called “nun’s fart” in Spanish. At this point in Louie’s catalog of pastries, his audience (the academic) and Islas’s audience (the reader) cannot tell for certain if Louie is being mockingly deceptive. After all, he has admitted to conning gullible *gringos* in the past, and he does admit that Mollie has never believed him about this issue. Islas, through Louie, strikes the decisive blow with this pithy comment, “Too bad you only know English” (*La*

*Mollie* 138). Once again, the English-only speakers, accustomed to a complacent superiority in the United States, are forced to recognize their linguistic disability after entering the world of Islas's fiction. As Sánchez describes it, they grow "closer to understanding a bilingual experience" through a formalistic device that threatens to "challenge them a bit, disorient them, and unsettle their comfortable cultural categories" (300). Formalistically, then, Islas repositions the English-only readers among his audience, evoking in them a sense of the linguistic marginalization he addresses in his fiction.

Perhaps most significantly, Islas unsettles the relationship that English-only readers, the benefactors of North American Anglo cultural domination, have with language, a medium hitherto stable and secure for them. Because Islas wrote primarily in English, these English-only readers might approach the texts with complacency, taking it for granted that they will understand effortlessly. Yet to enter into his novels and short fiction without a knowledge of Spanish is to risk an alienation from linguistic meaning, even from language itself, since that is the artistic medium of literature. This playful manner in which Islas uses language draws attention to one's own relation to language. Simultaneously, Islas performs some interesting and unusual feats with language. English-only readers who attempt to engage with Islas's fiction, even though it includes just a smattering of Spanish, are wise to approach it with a certain tentativeness. How Islas defamiliarizes language is interesting, multifaceted, and multilayered. In these ways, then, Islas demonstrated a disidentifying strategy: he was not an oppositional figure writing exclusively in Spanish, nor was he an assimilationist writing dutifully in English. Rather, Islas chose a third path that mimics the assimilationist approach while

actually subverting the entire debate and leads all readers to reexamine their relationship to language.

One final brief passage in *La Mollie and the King of Tears* warrants attention because it demonstrates both the kind of language play we have been examining, as well as an acknowledgement of a most serious aspect of North American life: racism. One of Mollie's friends actually tells Louie that Boston and New York have been made unlivable by minorities who now reside in the cities. Louie thinks to himself, "this whole country ain't nothing but minorities—your-orities, his-orities, her-orities" (*La Mollie* 23). Once we move past the playfulness of Louie's response, we get to the core issue of bigotry and discrimination in the United States, and Louie wonders who among his compatriots is entitled to dominate or disparage anyone else. The issue of race and ethnicity being used as a marginalizing aspect of one's identity is crucial to our consideration here; it is akin to Islas's investigation of the way language is deployed as a hierarchical marker. The connection between the two is unmistakable.

Louie Mendoza actually elides the two issues of speech and prejudice when talking about Eurocentric bigotry in the New World. But in so doing, he does not lay the guilt of racism totally at the feet of North America's Anglo culture; he also condemns the Spaniards for having bigoted, exploitative attitudes as well. As an example, Louie holds the priests of the Catholic Church in great disdain, for the clergy who officiated at his church in El Paso saw themselves as above the parishioners. Louie remembers how the priests "preached... in that pure Castilian Spanish of theirs that no one could understand, swallowing every word and lisp[ing] through... sermons that lasted an eternity" (*La Mollie* 115). And what became evident to him, while still a

young boy serving as an acolyte at Mass, was the disdain they had for the El Paso community. Louie tells the academic, “I began to see that in their Spanish eyes, we were Indians, man, or worse, cause Mexicans are a mixture of Indian and Spanish” (*La Mollie* 116). As was the case with Mama Chona, the priests’ pretentious language accompanies ugly, condescending attitudes about the Chicano/a community. Tragically, this condescension had extreme consequences in North American history, because the Spanish were able to convince themselves that the indigenous peoples were less than human. It is this history that Louie thinks of whenever he sees the Missions which dot the California coast and which are so popular with tourists. Louie admits to the academic, “When I look at those white adobe buildings, all I can think of are all the Indians who got whipped and killed putting em up just so some Spanish monk could lord it over em all humble-like and superior and get made a saint for doing it” (*La Mollie* 79). In *La Mollie and the King of Tears*, then, Islas employs Louie Mendoza as a mouthpiece to denounce racist attitudes and the forms of ethnic bigotry that foster condescension, marginalization, and exploitation—arguably, experiences Islas himself suffered as an ethnic Other in a predominantly white world.

Instead of either succumbing to the pressures to assimilate or making the decision to write exclusively in Spanish, Arturo Islas chose a third path, which was more than just code-switching. He employed English, albeit a multi-vocal English, in his novels as a counter-offensive to Anglo culture’s hegemony. His works *The Rain God*, *Migrant Souls*, and *La Mollie and the King of Tears* demonstrate a use of language that can best be described as disidentifying practice. By waging a “struggle *inside* the ideological state apparatuses,” including language, that “is at the same time also a struggle *against* their structure and their operation,” Arturo

Islas engaged in what Pêcheux deems “a disidentification” (170). As a matter of fact, Islas showed how language is used to marginalize some, and in a most artistic manner, he had his readers—his monolingual, English-speaking readers, in particular—perceive, through his use of language, how it feels to find oneself on the linguistic margin.

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## **Modernism and Contemporary Arab Fiction: James Joyce and Somaya Ramadan**

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In her article “The Integration of Western Modernism in Postcolonial Arabic Literature: A Study of Abdul-Wahhab Al-Bayati’s Third World Poetics” (2008), Saddick Gohar argues that Al-Bayati’s appropriation of modernist aesthetics, particularly T.S. Eliot’s, was not at all a measure of his allowing the colonizer’s voice to shape the post-colonial world, as many have claimed. Instead, Gohar deftly insists, the modernist Western poetics provide an avenue through which Al-Bayati’s poetry could break free of the restrictions of post-colonial Iraq and find its place in a larger sphere of human expression (378). As a scholar of modernism and as a reader newly attracted to Arab texts, I fully agree. If the original modernist movement was born of a need to engender a rapidly changing world, as is generally accepted, then why should we consider the genre tied to a particular time and place, between roughly 1890 and 1940 in the West? Susan Stanford Friedman’s excellent article “Periodizing Modernism: Postcolonial Modernities and the Space/Time Borders of Modernist Studies” (2006) argues just that point: In freeing modernism from its traditional restrictions, we find that writers from many periods are “modernist” in their expression of the interaction between tradition and change. Friedman writes, “Modernity involves a powerful vortex of historical conditions that coalesce to produce sharp ruptures from the past that range widely across various sectors of a given society [...and] interweaves the cultural, economic, political, familial, sexual, aesthetic, technological...” (433). Broadly speaking, the modernist aesthetic offers a vital and viable avenue for the postcolonial

writer to examine collisions and disjunctions among the colonial past, the postcolonial present and future, and the complexities of life within the global community.

Among the characteristics of modernism, we find allusions to texts from earlier periods, dislocation from family and community, fragmentation in events and format, ironic mythic parallels, and a challenging narrative approach that places significant demands on the reader. Egyptian writer Somaya Ramadan openly embraces the modernist art movement in her 2001 (2002, in English translation by Marilyn Booth) novel *Leaves of Narcissus: A Modern Arab Novel*, where the names of modernist writers James Joyce, Oscar Wilde, Virginia Woolf, T.S. Eliot, and W.B. Yeats appear regularly on its pages, alongside frequent references to Sylvia Plath. In fact, the subtitle speaks to the meaning of “modern” as contemporary, as well as the literary aesthetic of “modernism.” It seems clear that Ramadan, like many of us, regards Joyce as the preeminent modernist in fiction, as suggested by the frequency of references to him and the significance of his role in the novel. In fact, Ramadan has so fully appropriated Joyce’s modernism that *Leaves* bears striking resemblance to *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1914-1915; 1916) and *Ulysses* (1922), arguably the two most important texts from the early twentieth century. The resemblance manifests itself in both the style of the text and its contextual matter and mood, with the obvious and significant difference of the gender of the focal character: from Joyce’s young man, Stephen Daedalus, in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* to Ramadan’s young woman, Kimi. Ramadan anchors this difference in the text with recurring allusions to Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar* (1963).

Reflecting on the culture of the modern world, Joyce and other modernists rendered palpable the effect that colonization, which reached its height in the first half of the twentieth

century, had on the identity of the indigenous peoples. Unlike our contemporary Dublin, the late nineteenth-century Dublin of Stephen Daedalus's childhood remains fully under colonial rule, and one of the "nets" that trap him is the demoralization of the Irish under British rule, engendering in him very little respect for his own country and culture. Stephen Daedalus, of course, is not alone. Many of Joyce's characters express a preference for the European culture of the colonizers over their own homegrown culture. The rest, in contrast, mourn the loss of the pre-colonial Irish culture, one of music and literature sprung from the Gaelic past, and rage ineffectively against the British government. On a personal and emotional level, the colonial atmosphere also exacerbates Stephen's difficulties as he faces adolescence and young adulthood. As frequently occurs, the language of the colonizer takes precedence over the indigenous language. Indeed, the English culture and language have driven the Gaelic of Stephen's ancestors off the mainland and onto the Aran Islands, as Miss Ivors reminds Gabriel, the Irish master of the English language in "The Dead," the concluding short story in *The Dubliners* (1914). As a measure of the colonial effect on Stephen, in chapter five of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Davin tells him, "What with your ideas and your name—Are you Irish at all?" (202). As *Portrait* concludes, Stephen determines that nothing short of leaving Dublin and Ireland to "fly by those nets" (203) will allow him a measure of personal freedom and cultural growth.

Ramadan's protagonist Kimi, whose name means "Egypt" itself to contemporary Coptics, lives in a postcolonial Cairo that for decades had suffered similar economic and cultural decline under Britain's rule. Her mental illness, schizophrenia, while unacknowledged at home, represents at least three interconnected divisions within her culture. The first and most

prominent is between the colonial past and the postcolonial present. The second split finds its source in the difference between her two female role models. While Kimi's mother is educated and works outside the home, her grandmother, Amna, who is illiterate since her father refused to allow her education, has much more influence on Kimi's thoughts. Representing the Egyptian past, Amna's failed attempts at attending school resonate in Kimi's imagination: "No sooner has she put a modest distance between herself and the house she has left than from out of the tall reeds spring two men, who seize her arms and drag her back, as she screams" (17). Clearly, Kimi experiences both the relative freedom of her mother's generation and her own generation, and the subjugation of women from an earlier time as if they co-exist, which engenders another aspect of her schizophrenic psyche. Third, her own education, occurring before the return of conservative Islam and its stand against female education in the 1990s, seems to have been largely in English. Her native Arabic has been rendered useless in the study of important writers of the Western tradition, such as William Wordsworth. This duality of language shows itself when her usually reclusive, quiet demeanor suddenly yields to public confidence—in English significantly—when she is in Dublin for graduate education. Here, we see her in the local Dublin pubs, where she "[holds] forth on Joyce, Yeats, and Dylan Thomas" (Ramadan 30). Kimi says, "All homelands are mine and so I am without homeland or nation. All languages are mine and so I have no language" (63). Speaking and using the language of the colonizer have a powerful, complex impact on her search for identity, just as it does for Stephen Daedalus.

While she seems to escape—in ways that Stephen Daedalus aspires to at the end of *Portrait*—Egypt accompanies Kimi to Dublin, guiding her steps from 5,000 miles away, making her feel just as trapped as Stephen does in turn-of-the-century Dublin. Given the meaning of

her name, Kimi literally is “Egypt” in Ireland. Moreover, her family has arranged for an Arab professor, a family friend, to keep close watch over Kimi and report to them; frequent letters and calls from home further remind her that she must adhere to her Egyptian values and behaviors, not the modern Irish ones. Her affair with a married professor displays her protest against those values. Perhaps the dichotomy between her Western behavior and her family’s expectations explains her breakdown and long stay in St. Patrick’s Hospital. In fact, her mental illness is likely a metaphor for a strain of “homelessness,” a symptom of the global culture of the twenty-first century, which bears resemblance to the cultural life of colonized Ireland. Further, she is a minority in Dublin, an Arab, a Muslim, and an African, in a country where “everyone avoids [Africans] as if they had leprosy” (44), as her lover tells her to prove his own difference from the rest.

In relation to aspects of style, Joyce’s texts regularly acknowledge literary precursors, but as a modernist, he presents the ordered certainty of the past as an illusion that no longer speaks for the modern character. Joyce’s *Portrait* is a *bildungsroman*, specifically a *kunstlerroman*, where the focus character strives to fulfill artistic expression. The *bildungsroman* tradition, most notably Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship* (1796), explores the growth and development of a young character. In many such novels, the narration begins when the character is very young. For example, Charles Dickens’ *kunstlerroman* novel *David Copperfield* (1850) famously opens with the words, “Whether I shall be the hero of my own life, or whether that station will be held by anybody else, these pages must show. To begin my life with the beginning of my life, I was born...” (49). A clear, orderly progression through the growth of the artist follows that lead, told by an older version of the young boy. In Joyce’s

modernist version of the genre, however, the developing identity of the hero seems much less certain. To begin, the text opens with Stephen at a pre-language state of development, well before he could have said, "I was born." Further, Joyce's modernist technique makes the early chapters not so much a narration of those years, as the literary precursors do, but an evocation of the child's developing perception of language and family, where sound is fundamental. As Stephen matures, the narrative matures with him, playing out the processes of human development.

Joyce's rendering presents a challenge for the reader as anyone will admit upon reading the first sentence in *Portrait*: "Once upon a time and a very good time it was there was a moocow coming down along the road and this moocow that was coming down along the road met a nicens little boy named a baby tuckoo..." (7). Elsewhere I have argued in the article "Joyce's Textual Re-Creation of Bildung: Dialogism in *Portrait*" (2003) that as Stephen comes to think of himself as an artist, the narrative voice, rather than supporting his growth, calls attention to his lack of artistic aptitude. Joyce questions Stephen's literary promise further by presenting just two examples of his *kunstlerroman* hero's unmediated writing: a villanelle and the fragmented entries in a closing diary. When Stephen proclaims, "I go to encounter for the millionth time the reality of my experience and to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race" (253), the reader has good reason to question how much success he will have as an artist without the narrator at his side. In fact, when the reader meets Stephen again in *Ulysses*, he looks at Buck Mulligan's stolen, cracked mirror and proclaims it "a symbol of Irish art. The cracked lookingglass of a servant" (6), not a very promising vision of the young man as an artist.

The framework of the *kunstlerroman* also motivates Ramadan's plot, and, like Joyce's treatment, Ramadan's rendering displays the inadequacy of the traditional genre to capture the search for cultural and personal identity in the modern world. As in most examples of female *bildungsromane*, Ramadan's presents a mature young woman who explores her childhood only through memory.<sup>10</sup> Fittingly, the movement of the novel is decidedly not linear. It opens where it ends, with an adult Kimi back in Cairo following her breakdown. The next chapter finds her at the age of ten through memories of her math tutor, Miss Diana, and her grandmother. The third chapter brings her to the evening of her admittance into the Dublin hospital, after the voices in her head become too loud —Amna's voice being particularly prominent. Clearly, even though Ramadan's narration begins with an arguably mature character, the modernist style paints the portrait of this artist in a manner that challenges the reader as much as Joyce's does. In addition to the lapses in time and the lack of clear signals to the reader, Ramadan employs a disconcerting mix of first-person, second-person, and third-person narration, creating a text that blurs the line between the narrated-self and the narrator-self, a division Kimi experiences on a regular basis. One might be tempted to call *Leaves* a first-person narrative, given the appearance on the first page of the first-person pronoun: "The pill is barely inside my mouth when I spit it out" (3). That voice continues to narrate Kimi's breakdown and arrival at St. Patrick's Hospital for Mental and Nervous Disorders. But in the fourth unnumbered chapter, entitled "17 Westland Row," we find a very distant sounding third-person narrator in charge. We can feel the difference almost right away: "House Number 17 on Westland Row shares a

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<sup>10</sup> This is in keeping with many female *bildungsromane*. It is not until the focal characters reach a certain age that they are ready or able to pursue genuine development of self, rather than fulfill a societal norm. Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) is a case in point.

wall with the row house in which the gay master of irony, Oscar Wilde, was born [...]” (29). The “I” voice has already spoken of Wilde, but the tone is quite different here, ironic, in fact. Ramadan writes in the second paragraph, “Here there lived, for an entire and consecutive four years, an eccentric woman” (29). The reader has good reason to wonder who this woman is, although one comes to believe that she’s the “I” of page one. While the text is generally in the first-person, frequent shifts to second- and third-person narration, even within a single paragraph, rattle the reader’s confidence in the narrative voice, another attribute of the modernist aesthetic often practiced by Joyce.

The *kunstlerroman* traditionally ends with the artist-hero having found the medium for his art.<sup>11</sup> Joyce, however, calls Stephen’s artistic promise into question by presenting just two meager examples of his writing. Similarly, Ramadan provides one example of Kimi’s unmediated writing, a chapter that directly addresses the exile’s despair. At the close of “17 Westland Row,” Ramadan writes, “Inside for days on end the lamp hardly ever went out. She was writing. No one read what she wrote:” (30). That third-person sentence ends with a colon, an odd end-of-chapter punctuation choice that suggests we consider the next chapter as what she, in fact, wrote. To emphasize the distinctive role of this next chapter, Ramadan presents its title, “Parable of a Homeland,” in a bold font, a striking difference from the thinly outlined letters of all the other chapter titles in the novel. In fact, the entire chapter uses a different font from the rest of the novel. Tellingly, the chapter is a meditation on Egypt as viewed from the exterior, an Egypt as seen from the point of view Dublin. It begins, “On the wall is a map of exile,” which “[remains] as remote as could be from her homeland” (31). Unable to identify with the map of

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<sup>11</sup> We might consider Wordsworth’s *The Prelude* (1850) or W. Somerset Maugham’s *Of Human Bondage* (1915) as examples of the hero’s quest for the artistic medium in the *kunstlerroman* genre.



Egypt created by the West, Kimi then turns to a photo on another wall in which James Joyce “shoved his hands nervously inside the pockets of his loose trousers as he stood before a summer cabin...” (31).<sup>12</sup> Kimi wonders how to claim one’s homeland and thinks that it might be best if one would forget the cause of the exile and remain “in exile only to search for one’s homeland, like many did” (32), as James Joyce surely did in Trieste, Zurich, and Paris. However, the Egypt Kimi sees on the map and the one described through the words of her Middle-Eastern studies professor, which she quotes, are not the country she knows at all. Hers is a solitary voice when she prepares to respond, “Egypt is the cradle of civilization” (34), but she never does say the words. Using the second person, she says of the Egyptians, “They plundered you and became part of you. Have you now become part of them?” (34). Her condemnation of a “you” who allows another to rule provides an echo of Stephen Daedalus’s condemnation of the self-destructive behavior of the dispossessed: “Ireland is the old sow who eats her farrow” (203). The interplay between the map of Egypt and the photograph of James Joyce in the text highlights the layered nature of exile and influence on the character and artist, Kimi, and metafictionally and self-reflectively, on the novelist Ramadan, herself.

Another trait of the *bildungsroman* tradition that echoes in both Joyce’s and Ramadan’s “portraits” is the religious journey of the focal characters. For Goethe and Dickens, the journey ends in faith. Modernists, however, question the truth of religious texts and often place them beside the extant texts of the Greek myths for comparison, thereby subverting the long-held concept that faith brings meaning to human lives. Stephen begins *Portrait* firmly entrenched in his Catholic faith, the faith of his fatherland. He knows the works and words of Thomas Aquinas,

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<sup>12</sup> To view an uploaded version of this photograph on the Internet, visit the following *The Modern World* website address: [http://www.themodernword.com/joyce/jj\\_1904.html](http://www.themodernword.com/joyce/jj_1904.html).

follows the movements of the mass, and ponders becoming a priest himself. In adolescence, however, he begins to question both his father and the fatherland, and this brings a parallel questioning of Catholicism. He turns so far from church teachings that for at least one chapter he absolutely wallows in complete surrender to sin. Then the sermon that largely fills the pages of chapter four, during the church retreat, swings Stephen in precisely the other direction, as he fears the fires of hell with the scum and stink of rotting corpses found there. To rectify his sins, he makes himself prostrate before God, performing a number of self-denial rituals to cleanse himself. Within a short period, however, it seems that he returns to his state of non-believer for good and refuses to attend church, even when his long-suffering mother requests it of him. When his friend Cranly asks him why, he replies, “I will not serve that in which I no longer believe whether it call itself my home, my fatherland, or my church” (246). Instead, Stephen prays to his mythic namesake: “Old father, old artificer, stand me now and ever in good stead” (253). In place of his faith in God, his connection to mythic Daedalus, the master creator and brilliant prison escapee, provides a sense of security and confidence that keeps him hopeful through the years of his fictional life as we later see in *Ulysses*, Joyce’s modernist echo of Homer’s *The Odyssey*. At the end of *Portrait*, however, the reader finds Stephen still in Dublin, underlining the irony of his being named for the great artist/father of Icarus, Daedalus, while he is really much more akin to the son, with his real father a drunken squanderer of the family’s finances and his replacement father being a part-Jewish advertising canvasser and cuckold.

Much like Dublin and Catholicism, contemporary Cairo carries all the vestiges of the Muslim faith: the calls to prayer, the presence of Allah and Muhammad in everyday conversation, the power of the imams, and the traditions associated with Islam. Upon her

return to Cairo after ten years away, she finds “the city has turned into a beast, and parasites of every sort nourish themselves on its bulk” (72) and that even when speaking of past events, Muslims say, “‘If God wills’” (70). The culture she grew up in has also changed with the influence of the Taliban, bringing a conservative Islam to the daily life of Egyptians used to secular freedoms. While she continues to pray, it becomes an act of memory, not faith:

...how can I describe my prayers to you? A solitary trivial thing. A weak, faint voice, that has no effect on anything and changes nothing, that provides no illusions (not even to me), that brings no benefit to anyone. It is the memory of prayer; the performance of movements in which I was trained in childhood, a pretense; it doesn't deceive, for I know that faith is not regained through prayer. But I repeat it, clinging to the memory. (71)

Notably, neither Joyce nor Ramadan offers a substitute “father” for their characters’ lost homeland, the kind often found in the political realm. Joyce clearly frowns on the power the church holds over secular Ireland and distrusts politics to effect any change. As Stephen learns in *Portrait*, the one man who had the charisma and drive sufficient to lead the Irish out of their subjugation to Britain, a man of mythic stature, was condemned by the priests from their pulpits for loving a woman not his wife. The Irish people listened and condemned him, too. Charles Stewart Parnell (1846 – 1891) faced ruin and early death as a result. For Stephen, the loss of faith in the church, his father, and his fatherland creates an overwhelming sense of paralysis. The priests lie, the Irish turn against themselves instead of the colonizers, and his father is not the father of his soul. From that same Dublin a hundred years later, Kimi learns that al-Sadat, then-president of Egypt, was “assassinated in the military reviewing stand by Islamists who had disguised themselves as soldiers” (41). Further, she reports, “The Islamists: there were interminable lists of names, students, professors, and officers and soldiers. They were hanged” (41), providing an ugly, violent picture of her country’s response. The

assassination of the popular “Believer-President,” the representative of a new Pan-Arabism who represented a source of pride and unity with neighbors, by religious extremists once again endangers the future of Egypt, her fatherland. Extending this concept of the loss of the national father or leader, Ramadan has Kimi’s literal father die on the same day (41). Meeting “the eyes of the sailor in the picture on the wall-map” (41), Kimi sets out for a voyage home, not like Odysseus or Sinbad but more like Icarus, Deadalus’ son who fell to the earth, or Narcissus, whose own beauty lured him to his death.

Kimi’s religious journey, like Stephen’s, also follows a mythic trajectory: the myth of Narcissus. Ramadan’s title refers to the mythical Narcissus, who suffered so much in his love for his unembraceable reflection that he drowned in it, as told in Ovid’s *The Metamorphoses*, finished in 8 CE. Ovid says that the narcissus flower grew on the spot where the young man drowned, and the title *Leaves of Narcissus* alludes to a portion of this flower and extends the imagery further as a reference to the leaves of the book itself. Kimi’s grandmother, Amna, explicitly accuses her granddaughter of narcissism, saying, “All of your life, you’ve spent your time staring into mirrors” (110). These mirrors are the equivalent of the pond for Narcissus. Before shredding photos of her early life of luxury and travel, Kimi calls the pictures “Moments of narcissus” (84). Great emphasis, too, is placed on Kimi’s purchase of a poster copy of Salvatore Dali’s 1937 surreal painting *The Metamorphosis of Narcissus*.<sup>13</sup> Kimi spends hours studying the poster in which the young man gazes lovingly into the reflecting surface of the water. Dali’s interpretation of the myth includes the human-like figure of Narcissus on the left half of the painting, and a kind of duplicate on the right side. In the duplicate, however, what

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<sup>13</sup> To view a photograph of Salvatore Dali’s *The Metamorphosis of Narcissus* on the Internet, visit the Tate Gallery website address: <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/dali-metamorphosis-of-narcissus-t02343>.

was Narcissus's head becomes an egg out of which a flower rises, implying the metamorphosis. What remained of his body become fingers of a large hand, seemingly crafted out of stone, complete with small cracks and imperfections, as if it were a statue, an artistic rendering of the life and death suggested by the left side. Dali's surreal vision forges a connection between beauty, art, and death, one that matches Kimi's sense of herself as an artist.<sup>14</sup> Interestingly, Kimi does not notice the flower in the poster for a long time, and when she does, it bothers her deeply.

To deepen her portrait of a young female artist and the mu, Ramadan also references Sylvia Plath's autobiographical novel *The Bell Jar*, which extends Dali's juxtaposition of death and art. The novel tells the story of Esther Greenwood, a college student who suffers from a nervous breakdown, receives shock therapy in an asylum, and returns home to her mother and grandmother once she has "recovered." The parallels to *Leaves* are clear in even in this brief summary of the Plath's novel. Kimi is also a college student who suffers a nervous breakdown, receives shock therapy, and returns home after treatment to her mother and grandmother, her father having died while she was away. Ramadan's tribute to Plath's masterpiece echoes throughout the entire text, with frequent mention of bell jars, those glass domes that protect their contents from frost, dust, or age. The first mention comes during a session with Kimi's math tutor, a stone-like Miss Diana. In her frustration with Kimi's lack of aptitude with math, Miss Diana pulls Kimi's hair so hard that Kimi's head crashes into the crystal-top table, cracking the glass. Upset by the event, Kimi thinks longingly of her sanctuary from math, made of books and plays and films. Ramadan writes, "But even when cushioned away in my sanctuary, I

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<sup>14</sup> For a fuller discussion of Dali and the relationship between surrealism and modernism, see chapter twelve, "Death and Desire: The Surrealist Adventure," of Peter Nichols' *Modernisms: A Literary Guide* (1995).

remained aware that from glass they might craft great, isolating bells by which to distinguish those who know sums from those who do not” (10). Later, thinking that her family must have seen the signs of her mental illness throughout her early years, though they avoided using the words, Kimi says, “I did not notice then and they crafted around me a large bell of thick glass. I did not notice, because they worked it in an amazing way: word by word, every word a little crystal, skillfully and cleverly polished” (27). The bell jar protects, but it also isolates and creates a surreal environment, something like Dali’s landscapes.

The most direct reference to the bell jar, however, comes in the chapter titled “Mirror,” which opens with references to Dali but in the same paragraph shifts to Plath: “That was the moment in which the beady streams of crystal flows that made up the huge glass bell began to spread and creep. Until that moment the bell had been protecting her: she had been capable of laughing now and then, even when Tara had called her ‘Sylvia’ or even, ‘Hey, Plath’” (35). In a tangled web of murder and self-destruction that further suggests her self-image as a woman artist more akin to Esther Greenwood than Stephen Daedalus, Ramadan writes, “I silenced Amna, nine-year-old Amna, after I had given her a voice. I stifled and strangled her, and I killed little Maryam after I had seen her tears running down the Sunday Times. And before that, I cut Kimi into fourteen equivalent parts and threw her limbs into the waste bin” (45). Writing, then, is not only murdering her grandmother (Amna) and her lover’s daughter (Maryam), but it is also committing suicide. Further, her hospital treatment, shock therapy and lithium, distorts Kimi’s body, thereby altering the reflection in the mirror, a scene reminiscent of Esther’s experience; in fact, the nurses do not allow Esther to see a mirror for just that reason. Esther comments, “To the person in the bell jar, blank and stopped as a dead baby, the world itself is the bad

dream” (237). In a similar vein, when Kimi returns to Egypt, it is not home but a nightmare instead: “And I am no longer here, nor there. I stand in a purgatory from which no exit can be hoped” (59).

Ramadan’s final chapter, “Sirens,” is a Joycean symphony of allusions, imagery, and concepts woven through the web of the novel from the start. In an echo of the final chapter in *Ulysses*, also titled “Sirens,” Kimi becomes Homer’s Penelope in *The Odyssey*, just as Molly Bloom does for Joyce. Molly’s “Siren” chapter, with its distinctive lack of punctuation, weaves pieces of the preceding, disparate ten chapters into one strong, colorful fabric. Likewise, Kimi’s “Siren” chapter pulls threads from the previous seventeen chapters. In a surreal moment, James Joyce steps out of his photo from the “Parable of a Homeland” chapter and proclaims Kimi mad: ““You’re raving” (109). He also revises her unspoken words from this chapter, where in defense of her country, she wanted to announce to her professor, ““Egypt is the cradle of civilization” (34). Joyce clearly disagrees and proclaims, “Molly was Greek....And Greece is the cradle of civilization”” (109). While he has been her literary mentor throughout the novel, in his seemingly direct discourse he rejects her as an equal, making him significantly another lost father. The references to Plath also reach a crescendo when Ramadan writes, “All of us craft for ourselves those bells that protect us and we huddle beneath them for a spell until we begin to suffocate—and then we shatter the bell” (108). The shattered bell presents yet another level of psychic vulnerability as Kimi prepares to return to Egypt. Finally, the Narcissus/Dali references culminate when she looks into the mirror and sees that “the waters of the mirror are wavy,

billowing, playing with [her] image like mercury” (110).<sup>15</sup> Using nearly the same words as the Sirens use when they speak to Kimi in the beginning of the chapter (though broken by many more ellipses), the image says, “You only, alone, can...you apart from all others... you only...can...save me...save us” (110). In this final sentence, both the Sirens, who call sailors to their death by drowning, and the mirror reflection, like the one that called Narcissus to his death, seek to revise their tales with Kimi’s help.

Just as Stephen is still a lost soul seeking a new father and fatherland when he reappears in *Ulysses*, Kimi continues her search for a unified self, a search exacerbated by her Western education, as well as her struggle as a writer. In the one-paragraph coda, entitled “The Trace,” Ramadan begins in the first person singular, “I write, I erase. I write (111), but soon the voice speaks for all writers: “Being demands that we erase and return to writing and life once again, a writing and a life that might be” (111). The “might be” returns directly to the opening of the novel, with its title of the same name, “Might Be,” reminding us, too, of Joyce’s modernist, circular movement from the end of *Finnegan’s Wake* (1939) back to its beginning, as well as the circular life journeys of many Joyce characters. For Kimi, this movement duplicates the claim she makes in relation in writing: Writing means erasing and rewriting. In her 2006 article, “The Changing Image of the Heroine in the Arabic Female Bildungsromane,” Nedal Al-Mousa finds Kimi claiming a new cross-cultural self through the course of the novel, as one who can write for all. And that might be. The modernist irony and the echoes of Esther Greenwood’s experience, however, suggest instead that her writing will remain fragmented, a complex

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<sup>15</sup> In Sylvia’s Plath’s *The Bell Jar* (1961), after Esther breaks the doctor’s thermometers, she picks up a dab of mercury: “If I dropped it, it would break into a million little replicas of itself, and if I pushed them near each other, they would fuse, without a crack, into one whole again” (183).



chiaroscuro of erasing and rewriting, a vision of her divided East/West existence and selfhood, a modernist text.

Kimi's attempts at writing, then, are very much like the reader's attempts to read *Dubliners*, *Portrait*, *Ulysses* and *Finnegan's Wake*. Both must put forth significant effort to make sense of the fragments.<sup>16</sup> Each rereading of Ramadan's short novel brings new revelations for the reader, with new pieces adhering to the richly detailed skeleton of the first reading. Even after repeated readings, some odd shapes refuse connection, seemingly attached by fibrous strands, floating loose from the whole. Like all of Joyce's work, Ramadan's *Leaves of Narcissus* is, in fact, a modern novel, an exemplar of modernist aesthetics, an attempt to render palpable the collision between a traditional, isolated culture and a more and more global experience of the new millennium.

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<sup>16</sup> Recall the words of the king in the final section of T.S. Elliot's *The Wasteland* (1925) about the ability to derive meaning from the fragmentary: "These fragments I have shored against my ruin."

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## **A Hole in the World**

***Hannelore N. Rogers, Independent Scholar***

Lush green vegetation, washed clean and brilliant by the day's slow drizzle, had overgrown the place I remember, probably more from the telling than from clear remembrance. "Onkel Josef's" house and barn had stood here, in the Czech Republic, and served as my family's refuge for 17 months at the conclusion of World War II – from May 1945 to November 1946. (Onkel Josef was actually a cousin of my father's and occupied near-heroic status in our family for his sense of humor, native wit, unending resourcefulness, and all-around practical knowledge of everything.)

Today our former safe haven is a hole in the world, an empty space reclaimed by nature. Of the 37 houses and farms that had made up the little hamlet of Stiepanau only about five remain standing. All the others burned down long ago or collapsed and decayed, reabsorbed by the land.

In fall of 2010, my older sister Helen, my brother Heinz, his younger daughter Peggy and her husband Dan, my husband Gordon, and I went in search of Onkel Josef's house, though we had heard it no longer existed. I had been the driving force behind the trip; it hadn't been easy – for various reasons – to convince Helen and Heinz to participate. But I wanted to return to that place and wanted Heinz to see where he was born.

Because, in fact, Heinz *was* born in Onkel Josef's two-room farm house in a blizzard in January of 1946. That night is my earliest childhood memory. A little more than 3 years old, I remember that Helen and I were huddled together on a cot in the kitchen, while Mama suffered her daylong ordeal in the next room. The midwife had her hands full trying to keep my brother from choking to death during delivery. She forced her fingers between Heinz's throat and umbilical cord, which was wrapped around it three times. When things were looking even direr after the delivery of my 11-pound brother, Onkel Josef asked a neighbor to hitch up his ox to a sled (all horses had been requisitioned for the war effort) and fetch the German refugee doctor from the nearby town. Two hours later, the doctor arrived to sew Mama up, without benefit of anesthesia or painkillers, luxuries that weren't available during those chaotic days. Not a cry emerged from my stoic, courageous mother.

We had intended to lay low in Stiepanau for just a couple of weeks till things "calmed down" and then return to our native city of Leipnik, about 50 kilometers away. But that was not to be. We never saw our home again. Being German, my father had already been arrested by the Czech Communists who retook control of post-war Czechoslovakia in bloody reprisals, while my mother, sister, and infant brother were among the 3½ million Sudeten-Germans who were cruelly expelled—ethnically cleansed—to Germany, never to return. That was late November 1946. My father followed in 1948, after 3 ½ years in a variety of prison camps.

It was a moving experience to return to Stiepanau 64 years later. We had almost given up trying to find it—having asked several locals for directions to the obscure place. Finally we came upon

a small rutted lane, barely wide enough for our rented car. We drove slowly, and suddenly Helen began to recognize the landscape. “This is where it was,” she said. And we halted in front of an empty lot. I stood silently, staring, overcome by emotion.

We took a few pictures, and Helen pointed out where some of the other houses had stood and recalling Stiepanau’s former inhabitants. It’s amazing that she could still remember so much from her mid-teens.

And then another startling thing happened after we left Stiepanau, continuing on the same small road. Before long we came upon a pub and *pension*, where we decided to stop for lunch, partaking of local sausages, cheese delicacies (called “Quargel” in German), and tall glasses of Czech beer. As our family tends to be rather lively when we’re all together, a young man from an adjoining table (who had figured out that we used to live in the vicinity long ago) spoke to us in English, saying that the innkeeper wondered whether we’d like to see some old photos of the inn and the surrounding area. Sure, we said. And as we looked at the many images he produced from a variety of boxes, I saw a picture of the pub with the name of the former owner—“F. Neutzner”—painted on the side of the building.

Gesturing with a sweeping motion across our family members I turned to our host and said, “We are Neutzners!” The look on his face was somewhere between delight at the improbable odds of this encounter and panic that we might be there to reclaim property that had been

expropriated from Sudeten-Germans at the end of the war. We calmed his fears, and soon we were all in friendly conversation about what a small world it was.

There was no hole in the world at that moment. We had reached hands across the generations and connected with our past.

## The Muffin

*Hannelore N. Rogers, Independent Scholar*

When the nurse changed the bandages, I let Gordon see the stitches for the first time. I wanted to get that out of the way as soon as possible. Black, stiff, not very tidy-looking sutures decorated my suddenly girlish chest. Two 6-inch incisions matter-of-factly angled down my front – as though these were just any old wounds. I felt embarrassed, like the flat-chested teenager I had been many years ago. And I cried.

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It was Valentine's Day and scarcely three weeks since my doctor had discovered the beginning stages of breast cancer. Time had sped by between mammogram and biopsy, diagnosis, and sitting on my hospital bed, watching the surgeon paint lines on me to guide her scalpel. I made what, in retrospect, seems like a ridiculous request: "Be sure you make the incisions low so I can still wear my low-cut dresses." That was my goodbye to my breasts. And the emotions that, I assume, well up in any woman about to suffer this terror overcame me.

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Breast cancer is not just a disease of the body. And its cure leaves behind more than just physical scars. The fear of dying alternates with the fear of losing the man you love. Some men, no matter how much they want to, can't deal with breast cancer, can't love a woman without breasts. I was only 46. What would happen to me? Who would love me if I lost Gordon? Who would find me attractive? Would all the cancer be gone? How could I be sure? My mind raced with questions and dread.

Mercifully, anesthesia turned my fears into oblivion.

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Gordon and I had met in New York seven years before. Our first (blind) date stretched into a four-hour lunch at an Indian eatery. At our second rendezvous, dinner at a Chinese restaurant, I treated – a gesture that impressed Gordon. On our third date he prepared filet mignon and fresh green beans with garlic in the cutting board-sized kitchen of his cramped apartment. A man who cooked...it was my turn to be impressed. For dessert I had picked up passion fruit brownies from Bloomingdale's.

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Our romance evolved like an exquisite meal. Our fondest recollections always seemed to revolve around eating or drinking. Our conversations inevitably recalled things like the delicious coffee we'd drunk, the elusive ingredient we found for a recipe, or beloved comfort foods. Our travel journals listed in detail the names of restaurants, what we ate, the color of tablecloths, or the waiter who wanted to try out his English on us. Where and when we enjoyed our most unforgettable meals punctuated our memories.

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My four days in the hospital have by now dissolved into a blur, though I still remember the flowers – lots of flowers – and greeting cards. Friends and co-workers dropped by, nervous at first (what do you say to a woman whose breasts had just been removed?), but found me, much to their relief, in surprisingly good spirits. Though I had inherited my mother's



determined optimism and survival instinct, my cheerful temperament under the circumstances amazed even me. Perhaps it was relief that at least it was over now.

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As the painkillers began to wear off, the taste of the hospital food intruded on my consciousness. How disappointing that the cliché about mediocre fare for the convalescent – even in an otherwise pleasant hospital – contained more than a kernel of truth.

I had had great hopes at first. The staff distributed a menu from which I made my selections for the next day with great hope. Breakfast, lunch, dinner. They always sounded good on paper. One day (it must have been a Sunday menu) I could hardly believe my eyes when I looked at the offerings: filet mignon and a baked potato and a salad and chocolate cake! I checked each item enthusiastically. But sadly, the overcooked, salty reality proved to be another disappointment.

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Gordon visited me twice a day. Squeamishness registered on his face when we talked about pain, blood, I-Vs. But inevitably our conversation gravitated to food. I offered him my leftovers (never let food go to waste, I had been taught), but he declined. How could I blame him? “I can’t wait to eat at home again,” I said.

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When he arrived the next morning he was carrying a package wrapped in foil. I opened it and saw an English muffin snuggled inside, covered with butter and thick with blackberry jam – my favorite. As I savored every bite with immense pleasure I noticed that the muffin was still warm.

I asked Gordon how that could be on such a cold February day. “I carried it inside my jacket, next to my heart,” he answered.

I couldn’t help getting teary-eyed for love of him and sorrow for me, but that was the last time I cried about my operation. Grieving for my body was softened by the joy of having this man in my life. He had seen the stitches. He had put his arms around me. And he had brought me a warm muffin from home. I knew that everything would be all right.

Though he didn’t know it, the muffin was the perfect gesture – an expression of love in the special language of our relationship. It is one of the sweetest things he ever did for me.

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It’s what I remember best about that Valentine’s Day.

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## Selected Poems

*Noel Sloboda, Penn State York*

### Ghosts of Milos

Those Athenians  
might have been right

about the absence  
of old gods.

These are not divine  
eyes above us,

closed but bleeding  
broken promises

in new shades of blue.

### Sex Education II

Almost finished with what I believed  
my best *Dottore lazzi*—  
an act of misprision  
as mnemonic device—  
I cry "*hamartia*" but slide  
the "r" toward the front,  
then back, to complete  
with "harm" and "art"  
a lecture on flaws  
and what might be  
the last Shakespeare play,  
before I realize every student is  
mother at an age before I was  
born; I want to insist  
for Oedipal anxiety *Hamlet*  
outstrips *The Tempest*—

yet before I can say anything,  
one mother up front asks  
if *Coriolanus* will be on the final,  
spilling forward so I can't help  
but look down her blouse.  
I try to hide behind a syllabus  
snatched from the lectern—  
surely everything we need to know—  
find a laminated cocktail menu  
slick in my clammy right palm,  
and with my free arm wave down  
a waitress (also mother) to order  
a Dirty Bloody Mary.  
The server studiously ignores  
my desires as mother  
never did, so I maintain  
my salute, flapping as I rock  
like an uncracked egg  
upon a countertop, legs unsteady  
and bowed, as though I  
had borne some great weight  
pacing back and forth in front  
of this room that was never mine,  
when I remember mother never  
attended college, became pregnant,  
dropped out of high school—  
and I begin to worry I might be late  
for my second class of the day.

## Dystopia Debate

Technology obsessed the half  
who felt *Brave New World* predicted

what would come.

But the *Animal Farm* camp

reasoned our nature  
made us what we are—

and would be—regardless of  
how quickly we flew

across skies, or forward  
in time. For almost an hour,

ideas and rhetoric  
darted from desk to desk

like locusts. Nobody could  
agree what would result

in our inevitable ruin—  
but every eye glowed

during this hopeful spell  
that lasted till the period's end.

## Converting Stereotype to Archetype in August Wilson's *The Piano Lesson*

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Like all Wilson protagonists, both the brother and sister must take a journey, at times a supernatural one, to the past if they are to seize the future. They cannot be reconciled with each other until they have had a reconciliation with the identity that is etched in their family tree, as in the piano, with blood.

---Frank Rich

Within the imaginative world of the play, the piano also serves as a site of direct mystical connections with the ancestors, functioning similarly to sacred ancestral shrines or altars in many traditional Africa cultures. In the terms of Yoruba cosmography it is an *orita meta*, a crossroad between the world of the living and the world of the dead.

---Michael Morales

Growing up in Pittsburgh's Hill District in late 1940s and through the 1950s, August Wilson became keenly aware at an early age of how the racial, political, religious, and economic landscapes in which he dwelt largely determined his own path as well as the paths of the people living within his community. As a budding writer, Wilson was not only determined to represent those harsh realities in his poems and plays, he was also focused on a larger goal: to reconfigure the dominant cultural mythology—established by whites—into a mythology that is distinctly African American. In Wilson's emerging world, blacks would play the parts. They were to be the characters, their problems would be portrayed onstage, and they would be the writers, directors, and actors. Once we understand this philosophy, it quickly becomes clear that August Wilson is more than just a playwright seeking to entertain the masses; instead, he becomes a cultural mythmaker seeking to re-write the cosmology of African Americans.

The issue of black poet as cultural mythmaker is raised by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. in his book, *Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the "Racial" Self*, when Gates asks, "What is the role of the black poet?" (177). Gates answers this question as follows: "By forging value, by solidifying meaning, the black poet, in his or her own way, forges myth" (178). In this excerpt, Gates clearly sees the role of black poets as primarily those who configure cultural mythologies. My work applies Gates' notion to the work of August Wilson. By considering Wilson as cultural mythmaker, we begin to understand Wilson's tendency to delve persistently into the history of African Americans in order to re-inscribe the stereotypes, shatter cultural fallacies, and re-invent a dynamic mythology, making it relevant to those who inhabit it. In each of his plays, Wilson constructs characters, situations, and dream sequences, converting them into a sacred iconography, free from the bondage of racist references determined by white culture.

A key feature of this process is Wilson's tendency to convert stereotype to archetype. The rhetorical strategy is simple and consistent: Throughout all of his plays, Wilson retrieves dozens of pejorative, racist stereotypes and converts those stereotypes into sacred archetypes. The process has four basic parts, each functioning around the characters in each play. First, Wilson presents the characters as a stereotype. This, typically, is overt and involves such tropes as watermelon jokes, references to fried chicken, witch doctors, and other established racist stereotypes. Second, the detailed background of the character—which had previously been hidden—is then presented to the audience. This primes the audience for the conversions that are about to emerge. Third, the characters go through stages of growth, typically marked by some kind of difficult mythic encounter, such as a near-death experience, a complex dream sequence, or a harrowing physical encounter. Finally, the character achieves heroic or

archetypal status as he or she comes to embody communal concerns, universal human struggles, and/or collective cultural achievements.

Compared to the prolific, complex, and readily available mythological system offered by Wilson in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, the emerging mythology in *The Piano Lesson* seems somewhat more disguised—and somewhat more embedded—within the structure of the play. The didactic nature of the work, as signaled by the titular word, “lesson,” interferes to some degree with Wilson’s mythic explorations. As a result, the play vacillates between pedantic moral instruction and profound mystical revelation. John Simon has suggested that such conflicting elements might be a result of Wilson’s revisions of the play over a period of time: the play’s “long gestation period... [which] makes the play come across as palimpsest, with earlier versions distractingly discernible underneath”<sup>17</sup> (Simon 457).

Wilson’s tendency toward the didactic in *The Piano Lesson* has led several critics, in addition to Simon, to review this play harshly. Robert L. King complains,

In *The Piano Lesson*, August Wilson writes speeches of exposition and hangs out symbols as if he were a neophyte rather than a prize-winning dramatist

... Wilson seems to be manipulating a limited past of his own making only to gain sensational effects. He employs standard images of black culture like flashy clothing and one real watermelon from an offstage truckload. (452-53)

Instead of surrendering himself completely to the unconscious mythic impulses which had previously driven his dramaturgy (as he did so successfully with *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*), critics like King argues that Wilson is more consciously concerned with providing specific moral

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<sup>17</sup>Simon considers *The Piano Lesson* as three plays. The first, he claims, is “a drama about the conflict” between brother and sister (457). Second, he believes it is “a play of the supernatural” (457). Finally, he claims that *The Piano Lesson* is “Broadway entertainment with situation comedy, musical interludes, [and] halfhearted melodrama” (457).



instruction with his piano “lesson.” The result of this blending of didacticism and mythology has left some scholars searching for thematic closure. Robert Brustein—whose opinion of Wilson is biased due to what Brustein calls Wilson’s and Lloyd Richards’ use of non-profit institutions as “McTheater,”<sup>18</sup>—argues that Wilson’s blending of the didactic with the supernatural detracts from the play’s resolution. He writes, “What makes this piano unplayable, however, is the ending, which tacks a supernatural ending onto an essentially naturalistic anecdote” (458). For Brustein, “the supernatural element is a contrived intrusion,” which creates an insurmountable interpretive dissonance (458).<sup>19</sup>

Upon further consideration of the text, however, it becomes clear that although the didacticism certainly does exist, the mythological features are still present and powerful. The play carries both, and by blending the twin features of didacticism and the supernatural, Wilson has written a play that is both morally instructive and mythologically revealing. In other words, it is not as if the mythological conversions are irretrievably overshadowed by Wilson’s didacticism; instead, the mythological conversions in *The Piano Lesson* emerge as frequently as conversions of *concept* as they do as conversions of *character*. The piano itself, for example, functions as a repository for the history of the Charles family and, by extension, is

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<sup>18</sup> Here is Brustein’s statement on “McTheater”: “There are reasons why I didn’t review the three previous August Wilson productions that moved from the Yale Repertory to Broadway. Lloyd Richards, who directed them all and guided their passage through a variety of resident theaters to New York, succeeded me as Yale’s dean and artistic director eleven years ago, and protocol required that I hold my tongue about the progress of my successor. I broke my resolve in an article for the *New York Times* about the role of Yale and other resident theaters in what I viewed as the homogenization of the non-profit stage. I called this process ‘McTheater’--the use of sequential non-profit institutions as launching pads and tryout franchises for the development of Broadway products and the enrichment of artistic personnel” (457).

<sup>19</sup>Wilson has acknowledged several problems with the ending of *The Piano Lesson*. In an interview with Richard Pettengill, Wilson says that in addition to the problem of providing satisfactory closure for the audience concerning who is to possess the piano, “there was also another problem: you have an ending that is supernatural in that here’s a man wrestling with a ghost” (224). Various scenarios were discussed, including the enhanced use of special effects; however, none proved satisfactory.

representative of the spiritual history of all Africans living in America. In this way, Wilson converts—through the symbol of the piano—the archetypal *concept* of a collective history rather than focusing on converting each particular character.

Character conversions also exist. For example, Boy Willie is converted from possible thief, possible murderer, and extroverted comic figure<sup>20</sup> into a visionary who sees his position in life with great clarity and who eventually comes to reconcile his view of the family's history with his sister Berniece's position. Berniece herself is converted from a woman who has suffered for too long through her relationships with men.<sup>21</sup> In addition to suffering as a mourning wife, she has suffered as one who weeps for the souls of her dead family. Wilson converts this stereotype of Berniece as eternal victim of family circumstance into the archetype of a celebratory priestess who has the power not only to mourn the souls of her deceased relatives when necessary but also to summon those same spirits in order to exorcise Sutter's demonic threat. Meanwhile, Uncle Doaker's character is converted from the role of unremarkable railroad cook into a tribal elder who is one of the "men of memory" within his community (Morales 107). In this way, Wilson converts stereotype to archetype in *The Piano Lesson*.

The conceptual conversions begin and end with the piano itself. From a stereotypical perspective, Wilson initially constructs the piano as a device that casts blacks into roles as musicians. The tragedy of Wining Boy, we might argue, is the tragedy of a man attempting to fulfill a role, which is inherently stereotypical and which soon brings Wining Boy to the point

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<sup>20</sup>In his review, "Piano Lesson Hits All the Right Keys," Clive Barnes calls Boy Willie "a clown of iron, a man who boisterously determines to have his own way, and then laughingly has it" (455).

<sup>21</sup>Berniece, whose name suggests the "niece" who "bears the burden," has suffered the loss of her father, Boy Charles, who, after stealing the piano, was burned alive in a railroad car. She has also suffered the loss of her husband, Crawley, for whom she still mourns, and she still blames her brother, Boy Willie, for Crawley's death.

where he can no longer enter any bar without having to perform for hours at a time with his body and soul “chained” to the piano. He says:

Go to a place and they find out you play piano, the first thing they want to do is give you a drink, find you a piano, and sit you right down. And that’s where you gonna be for the next eight hours. They ain’t gonna let you get up! (41)

For Wining Boy, the piano comes to represent another form of slavery, a form of psychic oppression where, as far as the society at the time is concerned, Wining Boy’s ability to evoke sounds from the piano automatically links him to the self-described stereotype of black man as a “rambling, gambling man,” an entertainer whose proper role is to amuse a society that is more interested in him as a performer than as a person (47). When Boy Willie asks Wining boy to “play some piano,” Wining Boy responds by saying:

I gave that piano up. That was the best thing that ever happened to me, getting rid of that piano. That piano got so big and I’m carrying it around on my back. I don’t wish that on nobody. (41)

In addition to being a weight on Wining Boy, the piano is also a burden to Berniece, who sees reflected in the surface of the piano the blood, sweat, and tears of her mother who endlessly polished the piano while weeping over the death of Papa Boy Charles. Kim Pereira calls the piano a “millstone” around Berniece’s neck:

To Berniece—whose life has been spent in the shadow of violence and death—[the piano] is a millstone round her neck, trapping her in a vortex of painful memories, dragging her into the depths of a past she wants to forget. (90)

Eventually, this “millstone” will be converted by Wilson into what Pereira calls a “touchstone” and what Mei-Ling Ching identifies as “a relic of their common past, an icon of their inheritance” (71). Before the piano can assume its status as mythological archetype, however, the stories concerning the piano all must be told (71).

The first form of narrative that fuels Wilson's conversion of the piano from stereotype to archetype is the description of the physical piano in the "Play Notes." While the reader must keep this description in mind throughout the reading, an audience can discern the forms carved into the piano visually. Wilson writes,

Dominating the parlor is an old upright piano. On the legs of the piano carved in the manner of African sculpture, are mask-like figures resembling totems. The carvings are rendered with a grace and power of invention that lifts them out of the realm of craftsmanship and into the realm of art. ("The Setting")

This description, which invokes African sculpture, masks, and totems, begins the process of converting the piano from stereotype to archetype. Originally interpreted as a stereotypical musician's tool, which represents African Americans solely as entertainers and originally constructed for Berniece as representing a heritage of family suffering, the images carved on the piano link the instrument cosmically to souls both living and dead and prompt the piano to move, as Wilson writes, "out of the realm of craftsmanship and into the realm of art." When representations move into the realm of art, they move into the collective consciousness and assume a place within the cultural mythology of that group.

The images on the piano, however, cannot be fully appreciated by the audience until the characters on stage complete the storytelling process, because in order for the visual images on the piano to be converted into Wilson's mythological system, they must be accompanied by the oral narratives which emerge from the appropriate characters. In short, the piano, despite the fascinating carvings, remains at a distance from the audience until the family stories are revealed and the lives of the characters are connected (to each other and to the lives of the audience). Once the stories are told, the cognitive distance between the audience and the piano decreases as each story is contextualized. Once the pictographs on the piano are

understood, it becomes more than a musical instrument; it becomes a holy vessel, and moves easily from the realm of stereotypical mechanism into the realm of archetypal family and cultural symbol.

This storytelling technique is a significant feature of Wilson's process of converting concepts (frequently represented as static objects)<sup>22</sup> from stereotype to archetype. He combines the static image with an accompanying narrative in order to imbue the static object with mythological animation. In this way, Wilson's mission of writing a twentieth-century history for African Americans goes beyond the boundaries of recording historical facts: it moves into the realm of infusing the persons, places, happenings, and the very *words* of his African American characters, with mythical spirit and renewed vigor. In *The Piano Lesson*, the narratives concerning the piano have a mystical aura, which conjures images from the past and incorporates the realities of the present while pointing toward cultural goals of the future. Kim Pereira recognizes this mystical aura which lurks within the piano's carvings:

The power of art to transcend the restraining barriers of time and space is dramatically portrayed in the way these images have kept together a dispersed family. As it stands in this household, the piano seems to possess a mystical power that keeps alive the spirits of the dead, encouraging a communion between past and present. (89-90)

This mystical power of the piano is fully realized through Wilson's effective storytelling techniques, which not only serve to encourage "a communion between past and present," but also to encourage a communion between characters and audience so that the audience can come to appreciate the mythology that is emerging on stage before them.

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<sup>22</sup>Examples of static objects representing concepts in Wilson's plays include Seth's boardinghouse, which represents the concept of safety and shelter for African Americans, and Hambone's ham, which represents an African-American dream deferred.

Another device which Wilson implements in converting the piano from stereotype to archetype is the device of Sutter's Ghost. Each time Boy Willie and Lymon attempt to move the piano, the presence of Sutter's Ghost is heard or felt by one of the characters. Doaker reports to have seen Sutter's Ghost actually playing the piano one evening, although he claims he did not say anything about this because he did not want to upset Berniece or Maretha. The presence of a ghost laying claim to this musical instrument suggests a struggle that moves beyond the boundaries of the physical into the metaphysical. The conflict exists between the living Charles family, to whom the souls of the piano properly belong, and Sutter, physically dead yet reconstructed as ghost, who seeks to possess the souls of African Americans dead or alive. Through the mystical power of the piano, Sutter has the frightening ability to reach out from his grave in an attempt to disrupt the family unity of Boy Willie, Berniece, and Maretha, and through this disruption, bind their souls to the past.

The piano reaches its archetypal apogee during the final scene as it is transformed into the device through which the Charles family can symbolically reconcile its family history and exorcise its familial ghosts simultaneously. As Avery blesses the house and as Boy Willie is "working himself into a frenzy," it is Berniece who calmly comes to recognize the piano's potential in solving the family turmoil. In realizing that the piano is the holy vessel which carries the past, present, and future of the Charles family identity, Berniece experiences her *anagnorisis*, assumes an air of determination, and becomes the potent psychic force through which the piano's role in that history is finally reconciled. In short, she plays the piano, thus exorcising the demon of Sutter's ghost and binding the family together. Once the song has been played, the piano can fulfill its archetypal role, serving as a powerful icon that represents the

psychic reunion of the Charles family, and, by extension, serves as an heirloom, which binds together both family and culture.

Another powerful binding force in the play manifests itself in the form of a recurring Wilsonian symbol: the watermelon. *The Piano Lesson* opens with Boy Willie and Lymon Jackson driving a truck loaded with watermelons north to Pittsburgh. This is, indeed, a bold move by Wilson because he risks reinforcing pejorative, racist stereotypes as they connect to African Americans. After all, Wilson could have the men drive up a truckload of corn, apples, or tobacco. But Wilson has an agenda: He is intent on converting pejorative, racist stereotypes into sacred archetypes throughout his plays and this is a key element in his myth creation. Initially, it is easy for the audience to be shocked by the staging of the stereotypical connection between blacks and watermelons. However, we soon learn that Boy Willie plans to sell the watermelons, sell the family piano, combine this revenue with money he already has, and then buy the Sutter land in Mississippi. In this way, the watermelons represent hope for the future. They represent a connection between past and future. Wilson converts the image by creating a place for it within his emerging mythology.

Beyond the conversion of the watermelons into farmland, the conceptual conversions come to an end with an exorcism of the idea of legacy. In Wilson's plays, if a legacy is not a shared legacy, it leaves characters vulnerable to threats from external forces. Mei-Ling Ching suggests that the exorcism at the end of *The Piano Lesson* is a ritual where Boy Willie and Berniece join together and then, in turn, link themselves to their ancestral past through song in order to exorcise the demon archetype of Sutter's ghost. Ching argues that this ritual is a

“performance against the obsessions of the past, challenging nature’s demoniac potential” (1971). She adds,

Through a process of ceremonial evocation, the psychic shaman/priest becomes possessed by the spirit of Messianic stature. In a state of trance, [Boy Willie] engages himself with the Devil, accompanied by the music of the people who have gathered in support of this healing process. In their joint effort to exorcise the past, Berniece and Boy Willie are finally spiritually reconciled (1971).

At the beginning of the play, as each character is defined through his or her response to the piano, the concept of legacy is not shared, but scattered.<sup>23</sup> By the end of the play, the demons, both real and imagined, who have stood in the way of this reconciliation of legacy have been exorcised, and the characters, both living and dead, are now free to let go of the piano and move on with their lives.

In contrast to the conceptual conversions, the character conversions begin with Boy Willie, who brings with him an air of swirling disorder and chaos that will provide the energy to eventually catapult him into the realm of myth. As stereotype, Boy Willie begins the play by arriving at five o’clock in the morning and waking everyone in the Charles household.<sup>24</sup> He has driven a truckload of watermelons from Mississippi with his pal, Lymon Jackson. As noted, in a reversal of the existing stereotype, Wilson makes it clear that Boy Willie is not going to eat the watermelons himself; instead, he is going to sell them to white people so that he can raise enough money to buy Sutter’s land. The watermelon thus becomes symbolic of the ability of Boy Willie, as an African American, to convert portions of his cultural past into a positive future, but before Boy Willie emerges as a visionary, he is briefly established first as a stereotype.

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<sup>23</sup>This scattering of legacy parallels what has come to be known in the late 20th Century as the African Diaspora, the dispersal of Africans and African culture throughout the world.

<sup>24</sup>In the Hallmark Hall of Fame adaptation of *The Piano Lesson*, Doaker carries a gun to the door to greet Boy Willie, thus enhancing the interpretation that Boy Willie represents, at worst, a common thief, and, at best, a disruptive threat to the relatively peaceful lives of those who inhabit the Charles’ household.



Berniece serves Wilson well in constructing Boy Willie as stereotype. Throughout the play, she refers to Boy Willie as a “thief,” who probably stole the truck he and Lymon are driving (and who might have also, it is suggested, stolen the watermelons); as a “murderer” who is responsible for Sutter’s death; and as the irresponsible and downright dangerous cause of the death of Berniece’s husband, Crawley. Similar to the effect of Seth Holly looking through the window to interpret the reality of Bynum in *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*, Berniece looks through biased eyes in her attempt to interpret a reality for her brother. In constructing and distancing Boy Willie as stereotype, Berniece amplifies the major conflict of the play: the seemingly irreconcilable differences that exist between the two siblings.

As the play develops, however, Boy Willie is steadily converted from stereotype to archetype. His extroverted impetuosity, which originally can be interpreted as a fault, is slowly converted into an asset. Boy Willie bravely and unequivocally asserts his essential humanity, saying “Ain’t no difference in me and the white man” (38). Boy Willie is confident, impetuous and unpredictable, and these characteristics, when we see Boy Willie through our own eyes and not through the eyes of Berniece, are precisely the traits that become his strengths. The immense vitality of ego that makes him, early in the play, threateningly impulsive, is also that quality that enables him to summon the boldness to cast his lot upon a broken down truck, upon watermelons which he must sell before they begin to rot, and upon the hope that he can seize and sell a piano that does not entirely belong to him. This kind of bravery moves Boy Willie further from the realm of stereotype into the realm of archetype as Wilson transplants the nerve and strength of heart traditionally associated with white heroes of literary sagas into the chest of a black man selling watermelons on the streets of Pittsburgh.

Boy Willie's final act is to wrestle with Sutter's ghost. Much like Troy Maxson in *Fences*, Boy Willie must face the forces of physical death and psychic obliteration, as personified by Sutter, and defeat them. As Wilson writes, it is a matter of "life and death," and Boy Willie is clearly the man for the job (106). He is unswervingly courageous. Even as he is "thrown back by an unseen force, which is choking him," he struggles free and "dashes up the stairs" to press the battle (106). He knows directly, in a vital way, that he must fight this unseen force and not flee, just as Berniece intuitively knows that she must play the piano and call upon her ancestors if order is to be restored. The two siblings, working together, are able to exorcise the ghost and restore order to the family.

Like Boy Willie, Berniece's character also undergoes a conversion process. Berniece begins the play in terms of gender and racial stereotypes. At the start of the play, Berniece is still in mourning—after three years—for her late husband, Crawley. This suggests, on some level, a kind of obsession, which casts her as stereotypically irrational and overly preoccupied with her relationship to men (both of which are traditional gender stereotypes). In addition, she not only weeps for her lost husband, she weeps for her mother and father, and, indeed, all of her recent ancestry. She is cast as the character who psychically carries the burden of the past and who will fiercely preserve that past even to the point of developing unhealthy phobias.

When the play opens, for example, Berniece is so phobic of the chaos Boy Willie represents that she is unable to welcome him into her house. Instead, she heaps aspersions upon him and continually insists that he leave. She is so fearful of experiencing further pain that she refuses to play the piano and has not, to date, shared any of the piano's history with her daughter, Maretha. When Avery asks her for her hand in marriage, Berniece tells him, "I ain't

ready to get married now” (66). Knowing the pain that intimacy can bring, she withdraws from him. It seems the only reason she tolerates Doaker is because he, through his extraordinary self-sufficiency, offers her no threat of pain. Her fears are initially so strong that she squelches the enthusiasm Boy Willie shows for his heritage as she refuses even to discuss the possibility of selling the piano to forge a new future. As such, Berniece stereotypically represents persons whose views of the past are so rigidly entrenched that any suggestion of reinterpreting that past in order to form a new future is deemed impossible or irrelevant.

The problem, in terms used by the characters of Wilson’s mythos, is that Berniece has not yet found her “song” and must therefore begin playing the piano in order to find that song. For Berniece, finding her song is a step-by-step conversion process, and this process begins with her gentle encounter with Lymon. When Lymon returns from his night out with Boy Willie, he finds Berniece making tea. After some small talk, Lymon tells Berniece that his new suit is a “magic suit” and offers her some perfume that he was “gonna give to Dolly” but decided he “didn’t like her too much” (80). Berniece and Lymon exchange a brief kiss. Lymon gives Berniece the perfume, which she accepts, and she exits up the stairs. Wilson writes that Lymon “picks up the suit and strokes it lovingly with the full knowledge that it is indeed a magic suit” (80).

All considerations of “magic suits” aside, it is this physical encounter that begins to draw Berniece out of her role as mournful weeper into her role as a woman who can actively participate in life and even influence cosmological forces. She has returned the kiss from

someone who admires her, and she has accepted a token of his esteem.<sup>25</sup> She has risked connecting physically and emotionally with someone, even though only for a moment, and the encounter does not destroy her. She has survived intact, and she has made contact with the physical world as represented by Lymon. She has become grounded, and this “grounding” event prepares her for her most significant role in the play.

Berniece’s conversion from stereotype to archetype comes in the final scene of the play, as she emerges as a powerful goddess within Wilson’s pantheon. In an attempt to exorcise Sutter’s Ghost, Avery, with his own brand of Christianity, invokes the name of God, while Boy Willie, ever the reductionist, tries his hand at exorcism by grabbing a pot of water from the stove and throwing the water around. None of these efforts succeed, however. It is only when Berniece crosses to the piano and begins to play that results occur. Wilson writes,

It is in this moment, from somewhere old, that Berniece realizes what she must do. She crosses to the piano. She begins to play. The song is found piece by piece. It is an old urge to song that is both a commandment and a plea. With each repetition it gains in strength. It is intended as an exorcism and a dressing for battle. A rustle of wind blowing across two continents. (106)

She sings a song of incantation, where she calls upon Mama Berniece, Mama Esther, Papa Boy Charles, and Mama Ola to come together and drive Sutter from the house.<sup>26</sup> It is her song, the

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<sup>25</sup>In *The Rites of Passage*, Arnold Van Gennep writes, “Exchanges have a direct constraining effect: to accept a gift is to be bound to the giver... the rite involves a mutual transference of personality, and its operation is as simple as the mechanics of being tied one to the other, being covered with the same coat or veil, and so forth. Furthermore, although the exchange of blood may be coarser or more cruel than that of a piece of clothing, a ring, or a kiss, it is no more primitive” (29-30).

<sup>26</sup>Wilson’s original idea involved audience participation. In an interview with Richard Pettengill, Wilson says, “When Berniece is calling out the names... I always wanted people in the audience to toss out their grandmother’s names, somebody *they* were calling on” (224).

finding and singing of her own song, which reunites the ancestral unity and restores peace to the Charles family cosmology.<sup>27</sup>

The character of Avery is also connected to the Charles family cosmology, and the conversion of Avery from stereotype to archetype is closely related to questions of religion and spirituality. Through his embracing of organized religion and the symbolic rewards organized religion has to offer, Avery represents the outward forms of spirituality. Boy Willie and Lymon, therefore, interpret him in terms of stereotype. They catalog Avery as a con man, a “joker” who is posing as a preacher because, as Boy Willie says, “Lymon say preachers don’t have to work” (23). Recognizing some of himself in Avery, however, Wining Boy serves as reconciler, beginning the process that will also convert Avery from stereotype to archetype. Wining Boy says, “There ain’t nothing wrong with being a preacher. You got the preacher on the one hand and the gambler on the other. Sometimes there ain’t too much difference in them” (30). Through this exchange, Wilson both critiques Avery and allows for his existence, thereby signaling some degree of acceptance of the world that Avery represents.

If we consider one of Wilson’s statements on organized religion, it becomes clear that Avery’s brand of religion is not the preferred kind of spirituality necessary to those who would inhabit Wilson’s idealized mythological kingdom. August Wilson prefers a deeper, more personal and more culturally-aware spirituality than that which Avery represents. In her essay, “Father, Son and Holy Ghost: From the Local to the Mythical in August Wilson,” Pamela Jean Monaco writes that while Wilson recognizes the need for the political and social empowerment which churches provide, he objects to the rigidity that some forms of organized religion offer:

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<sup>27</sup>Notably, it is Berniece’s response to a subconscious impulse that prompts her to play the piano.

Although some have taken issue with Wilson's depiction of Christianity, Wilson does not deny the important role religion has in bringing order and stability to the lives of many... What Wilson does reject is the prioritizing of religious tradition over cultural traditions, particularly if the religious belief numbs one to this world. (93)

Despite any theological differences between Wilson as author and Avery as character, Wilson provides for Avery and allows for his style of worship within this emerging mythological system. Avery is driven to build a church, to have a wife, and to be a leader of his people: all outward expressions of spirituality. Through his church, Avery also wishes to make materialistic and symbolic progress, and this kind of enterprise, while not entirely condoned within the play, is neither condemned. Avery's dream provides both affirmation and critique for Avery's situation.

Avery tells his dream to Boy Willie and Lymon:

I was sitting out in this railroad yard watching the trains go by. The train stopped and these three hobos got off. They told me they had come from Nazareth and was on their way to Jerusalem. They had three candles. They gave me one and told me to light it... but to be careful it didn't go out. Next thing I knew I was standing in front of this house. Something told me to go knock on the door. This old woman opened the door and said they had been waiting on me. Then she led me into this room. It was a big room and it was full of all kinds of different people. They looked like anybody else except they had sheep heads and was making noise like sheep make. I heard somebody call my name. I looked around and there was these three hobos. They told me to take off my clothes and they give me a blue robe with gold thread. They washed my feet and combed my hair. Then they showed me these three doors and told me to pick one.

I went through one of them doors and that flame leapt off that candle and it seemed like my whole head caught fire. I looked around and there was four or five other men standing there with these same blue robes on. Then we heard a voice tell us to look out across the valley. We looked out and saw the valley was full of wolves. The voice told us that these sheep people that I had seen in the other room had to go over to the other side of this valley and somebody had to take them. Then I heard another voice say, "Who shall I send?" Next thing I knew I said, "Here I am. Send me." That's when I met Jesus. He say, "If you go, I'll go with you." Something told me to say, "Come on. Let's go." That's when I woke up. My head still felt like it was on fire... but I had a peace about myself that was hard to explain. I knew right then that I had been filled with the Holy Ghost and called to be a servant of the Lord. It took me a while before I could accept that. But then a lot of little ways God showed me that it was true. So I became a preacher. (24-25)

The dream is mixed with conflicting symbols heavily drawn heavily from Christian mythology, and perhaps not heavily enough from African mythology to constitute an authentic African revelation (as with Herald Loomis' "bones" dream in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*). The dream, a thinly disguised Christian myth, does make sense as far as Avery is concerned. Avery's character is constructed in such a way as to blend more seamlessly into the white Northern world. Sandra Shannon writes,

Avery sees that by building a church and serving as minister he will be set for life, and he comes to Pittsburgh prepared to conform to the system and establish a home there. Unlike Boy Willie, he is working within and around the myriad societal constraints placed upon black men of this day. In his hopes to be a minister and husband, he follows a safe course to assure that he does not offend the powers that be and jeopardize his plans to settle down and prosper in his new environment. (156)

In this fashion, Avery walks a thin line between his personal dreams and the cultural reality that exists just beyond those dreams. By providing support and critique for Avery, Wilson signals his awareness that an emerging mythological system must have its preachers as well as its entrepreneurs (i.e. Boy Willie).

Avery's dream is thus constructed by Wilson so as to connect Avery to his people in ways that are different from those of other characters. For example, where Herald Loomis' dream in *Joe Turner* takes him back in time to ancestral Africa and through the Middle Passage, Avery's dream, which is equally archetypal in its revelatory impact, takes him forward in time, toward a definable future with real material and spiritual goals. In this way, Wilson converts the stereotype of Avery as a businessman with a collar into an archetypal leader who is able to work within the system to promote change and provide opportunities for African Americans.

Doaker's character is originally presented as an unremarkable railroad cook, who lives with his niece in Pittsburgh. For years, Doaker has cooked for and served mostly white

passengers. While working as a railroad cook is not necessarily to be interpreted as a pejorative racist stereotype,<sup>28</sup> Doaker's role as a railroad man portrays him, like Wining Boy, within a functional role, which essentially has been determined for him by white society. When this role is contrasted with how we eventually come to see Doaker Charles, it becomes clear that working as a railroad cook does not come close to tapping the extraordinary skills that eventually become evident in his character.

The conversion of Doaker comes primarily through his storytelling ability. He is the keeper of cultural knowledge. An oral historian who has the ability to weave disparate tales into a comprehensible story without difficulty, he tells the story behind the piano perfectly, with the appropriate details and the fitting emphases supplied at the proper times. In addition to revealing the content of the narrative flawlessly, Doaker is also intuitively aware of the forms and protocols of traditional storytelling technique as he asks Wining Boy, the other "elder" who knows the entire story behind the piano, "Now... am I telling it right, Wining Boy?" (44). To which Wining Boy replies, "You telling it" (44).

As the Charles family cosmologist, Doaker serves as the preserver of the family myths, and this role is reflected in his ability to maintain some semblance of balance between Boy Willie and Berniece. Kim Pereira compares Doaker to Bertha from *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*:

In *Joe Turner*, Bertha, with her nurturing ways and calming presence, has a similar function to that of Doaker. Both of them maintain the balance of a household threatening to go awry. It is significant that Doaker also is a cook and that this play, like *Joe Turner*, also takes place mainly in a kitchen, perhaps the most important room in a black household. (96)

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<sup>28</sup>According to Sandra Shannon, working as a railroad cook identified Doaker as a "member of a very honorable group of black men: The Pullman porters who serviced various railroads during the Depression" (156). This role, however, while providing limited opportunity for Doaker, did not enable him to achieve his potential professionally.



In addition to functioning as a calming presence, Doaker also serves as a link between the past and the present. Sandra Shannon argues for the “importance of ancestral linkage to the South and, by extension, to Africa is an underlying message in *The Piano Lesson*” (147). Within this context, Shannon posits that Doaker Charles serves a role “much like the African griot [who] is a reservoir of knowledge” for his or her community (147).

At the end of the play, Doaker is the character who prompts the cosmic confrontation between family and ghost. He says to Avery, “You need to bless that piano. That’s what you need to bless. It ain’t done nothing but cause trouble. If you gonna bless anything go on and bless that” (104). Doaker realizes that in order for the family conflict to be resolved effectively, there must be a confrontation. Therefore, while Berniece will do nothing to evoke spirits from the piano and while Boy Willie claims that the only ghosts that exist are the ones in “Berniece’s head,” Doaker, through his archetypal role as one who seeks to balance and restore order, prompts the characters to press for, and eventually discover, a solution.

The solution in question involves reconciling the family’s past by exorcising the character of Sutter’s Ghost. The character of Sutter also converts from stereotype to archetype as he is transformed in the play from a living white slave owner to a dead white slave owner, and finally into the specter of a dead white slave owner. This action occurs offstage early in the play and serves to move Sutter almost immediately into the role of archetypal devil/thief. The archetype of Sutter represents a hideously oppressive slave tradition. He was physically huge: 340 pounds. He has become physically and symbolically corpulent, feeding upon the lives of the subjugated. Now that he is dead, he continues to haunt those who do not actively work to exercise his presence and influence in their lives. As devil/thief, Sutter is the archetypal

representation of hundreds of years of physical and psychic oppression. This personification emerges from the collective unconscious of an African-American ancestry and is communicated through Wilson as he functions as a cultural medium for an African-American consciousness. In

*Figures in Black: Words, Signs and the "Racial" Self*, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., writes,

Thus, the black poet's primary task has been to create, by definition, reality for the members of his or her community, to allow them to perceive their universe in a distinctively new way. This new way is built on tradition, only now reformed to be valued anew. This is the black poet's mythopoeic role: to predict our future through his or her sensitivity to our past coupled with an acute, almost intuitive awareness of the present. (177)

By inventing an archetypal ghost who haunts the Charles family's collective consciousness, Wilson has served as a psychic conduit, channeling the anxiety, suspicion, and fear associated with such collective memories and infusing those memories with life on the stage.

The rumor of the death of Sutter and the rumors concerning the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog also emerge from a collective desire on the part of African Americans, as interpreted by Wilson, for justice, coupled with the human need for vengeance against an oppressor. This ghost lore has a conversational effect within the play as the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog are collectively converted from rumors (which are themselves, words, or, more specifically, *logos*), into a psychic energy force, which is powerful enough physically to kill. In this way, the rumors existing within the African-American culture in *The Piano Lesson* are a collection of narrative prayers, which have extraordinary physical consequences. The eventual death of Sutter signals a kind of cultural *katharsis*, and once the emotions are expurgated, life can begin anew. In *The Piano Lesson*, Wilson, like all poets, serves as the psychic nexus through which the dreams, hopes, myths and rituals of a culture find expression. By providing a supernatural ending to a

naturalistic conflict, Wilson himself becomes the trickster, and succeeds in converting everyday images of family and heritage into sacred cultural relics.

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**“In Geography and in geography”:  
Mapping the Form, Subjectivity, and Determinism of  
Gertrude Stein’s Geographical Imagination**

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At the end of the Nazi occupation of France, Gertrude Stein was ecstatic over the arrival of the American soldiers. The GIs brought with them an end to the turbulence, worry, fear, and deprivation that had defined her and Alice Toklas’s days since May of 1940. In the weeks leading up to the liberation, she could hardly contain her anticipation of seeing Americans. As Stein recounts in *Wars I Have Seen*, her memoir of the war years, upon meeting the first Americans to arrive in Culoz, she “had to know *where* they came from and *where* they were going and *where* they were born” (emphasis added 246). Where, where, where—Stein casts her thrill over the allied army’s presence in explicitly place-conscious terms. Indeed, throughout the war geographic ideas had occupied her thoughts. When the Italians had entered the war, she worried that her and Alice’s position in Southeastern France would expose them to the dangers of passing armies avoiding neutral Switzerland and the Alps. Likewise, while walking miles each day in search of food, Stein observed that the French are *terrien*, of the earth, and thus, by her reasoning, capable of withstanding occupation. Yet most importantly, throughout the occupation she had felt cutoff from the land to which she believed herself most connected—America. “There is something in this native land business,” she explains, commenting that during peace time living abroad is hardly notable, “but where there is a war and you are all alone and completely cut off from knowing about your country well then there it is, your native land is your native land, it certainly is” (250). Compounded by the Nazi threat, this feeling of

exile was new to Stein, in spite of her many years abroad. Thus, the arrival the American GIs represented for her and Alice liberation from the horrors of the Nazi and Vichy regimes, creating a boundary, as she says, “between us and danger.”<sup>29</sup> The arrival of the army signified in a very real sense the much desired reconnection with her native land, because for Stein the GIs were living embodiments of their home states. She wanted to know the boys personally and to reconnect with the states she loved through them. She writes, “What we always wanted to know was the state they came from... the thing I like most are the names of all the states of the United States. They make music and they are poetry, you do not have to recite them all but you just say any one two three four or five of them and you will see they make music and they make poetry” (249). This passage registers her craving for social contact with Americans and, crucially, it brings this desire together with a heightened sense of geographical imagination that had occupied Stein not only during the war but indeed throughout her writing career. In this passage the liberation of France, discovering soldiers’ origins, and ideas about personal geography all converge in a confirmation of a key element of Stein’s literary aesthetic. The idea that speaking place names is a method for making literature and building a sense of the spatiality of existence epitomizes one of Stein’s principal literary occupations that has largely gone overlooked.

In fact, so much do geographic categories and questions guide and define her thinking, which is deeply rooted in the geographic thinking of her day, that it is possible to read much of Stein’s work as a formally innovative mode of geography or, in other words, as a genre of

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<sup>29</sup> Stein downplays her awareness of the holocaust in *Wars I have Seen*, but certain passages like the one cited here suggest that she had some awareness of Nazi atrocities and was deeply frightened and remorseful. Janet Malcolm’s article, “Gertrude Stein’s War; The Years in Occupied France,” outlines Stein’s connection to Bernard Fay who was a Nazi collaborator and likely responsible for keeping Stein safe during the occupation.

writing which elucidates the locationality of existence. Stein was deeply invested in theorizing the influence of environment on subjectivity and culture, and her geographic ideas resonate with the thinking of contemporary professional geographers. Thus, explication of Stein's geographic thought and contextualization of her thought among that of contemporaries reveals her investment in such inquiry. Moreover, Stein did not only theorize geographic questions, but her geographic thinking drove her formal innovativeness in the creation of four modes of spatial form in her writing—her continuous present tense, her cubist poetry, her landscape plays, and her later autobiographies.<sup>30</sup> Obviously geography is not the whole story, but I submit that geographic ideas play such a vital role in Stein's thinking that an understanding of the role of geographic imagination in Stein's formal experiments is essential to understanding her work.

Among the body of Stein's writing that is inflected by her geographic imagination, one work stands out. Written in 1935 upon her return to France after her extended lecture tour of the U.S., *The Geographical History of America or The Relation of Human Nature to the Human Mind* (hereafter *The Geographical History*) reflects Stein's ideas on the relationship between location, subjectivity, and form in culture, art, and literature. When read alongside her explanations of her own work in *Lectures in America*, this book, written at the height of her powers, reveals the grounding of Stein's formal experimentation in her singular sense of geography. Close reading of *The Geographical History*, makes clear how Stein's remark in *Wars I Have Seen* about saying State names to make poetry indexes the aesthetic of her geographic

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<sup>30</sup> These modes I am identifying are merely broad generalizations; however, identifying modes in Stein's spatial writing is a convenient way of charting the general trends in spatial form which span her career. As my analysis of *The Geographical History* should make clear, she returned to these ideas and forms consistently in her work, constantly revising and reworking them in new formal and intellectual contexts. My object is not to reduce the variety of Stein's formal innovation; it is, rather, to identify a set of basic patterns by which the relationship between Stein's geographic imagination and her formal experimentation can be illuminated.



imagination. To draw all this out, I will explicate Stein's geographic thought in three geographic poems, briefly compare her thought to that of contemporary geographers, and then demonstrate the connections between her geographic imagination and her major formal innovations as reflected in *The Geographical History*.

**What is seen in between in between:**

**Pseudo-scientific anthro-geographies and Stein's poetics of environmental determination**

Stein's geographic imagination is based on analysis and comparison of difference. She isolates differences between populations, identifies the physical characteristics of inhabited places, and proceeds to draw conclusions about how the characteristics of place contribute to the cultural differences between populations. For example, in one cubist poem, "Wherein Iowa Differs from Kansas and Indiana," Stein compares three American states in search of some understanding of the differences between them.<sup>31</sup> Starting with Iowa, she decides, "in there in there and in Iowa it is noticeable the difference in there the difference in Iowa"(223). Her close examination quickly reveals similarities among points of differentiation, however. All three states, her inspection confirms, are certainly different; yet, surface differences only highlight more fundamental similarities. The question that the piece originally pursues, how are these three states different from each other, evolves into the recognition of relative difference within

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<sup>31</sup> Stein parodies academic or scientific discourse in these "essays" and also, notably, in *The Geographical History of America*. Mimicking authoritative voice, citing evidence, and formulating generalized claims, Stein plays with the language of authorities who describe the world. On the one hand her discursive play embraces academic language and rigor, but she clearly also challenges some of the fundamental assumptions of contemporary academics and scientists like the ability of certain discourses to represent the complexities of existence in the world. This challenge is revealed in the fact that her essays seem to go nowhere, but that upon closer inspection quite sophisticated theories about the world and literature emerge. Even though she mimics the language of authoritative cogency, Stein's writing cannot be read for concise authoritative statement because such a posture reduces the richness and complexity of her subjects. Rather, Stein needs to be read as endeavoring to represent the paradoxes within experience, conceptualization of the world, language, and existence. In this thinking, I follow Robert Chodat in his essay "Sense, Science, and the Interpretations of Gertrude Stein."

a fundamental unity, the unity of the Midwestern United States. Like their physical landscapes, the cultures of Iowa, Kansas, and Indiana share more commonalities than differences. The piece insists then that the states' differences be seen then in a new way: "seen the difference seen otherwise" (223).

In another cubist poem entitled "The Difference between the Inhabitants of France and the Inhabitants of the United States of America," Stein enumerates the distinctive characteristics of each culture: "Five examples of each will be given so that the difference will be as well understood as ever" (513). After citing a number of examples (more than five) of distinctive features of the two cultures, the essay becomes anxious for a concluding generalization, but such a conclusion is as elusive here as in the case of the Midwestern states. Stein's bold assertions of difference dissipate. She writes, "The difference between there is a difference between, what is the difference and their difference" (517). Statement becomes question as she struggles to separate points of comparison from difference. The essay concludes somewhere between assertion and doubt. While on the one hand points of distinction are obvious, "And there and there and not as here," confusion remains: "Which is which" (518). Differences are evident, but they do not necessarily outweigh the similarities. In the final analysis she implies that France and America, Western nations, are like friends and brothers, different but ultimately very similar for sharing cultural origins: "This is the story of a friendship, two sons two and two sons" (514). Paradoxically, they are different but the same, like two brothers. The stamp of continental European origins marks both cultures just as the landscape of the Midwest marks Iowa, Indiana, and Kansas.

In a third cubist poem, "Wherein the South differs from the North," Stein broadens her geographic scope to compare hemispheres, yet she arrives at a similar conclusion. In this piece she seeks a sense of what distinguishes north and south, yet she is as concerned with language as with concrete difference. Neither north nor south, she affirms, is merely a name. "What do you think," she begs, "what do you think when each one has a name. Do you think that it indicates the place a place" (246). This question exposes the deceptive simplicity of Stein's linguistic play, and puts pressure on the intuitive or habitual answer. The implied answer is no, but the obvious answer is yes. No the word does not indicate the difference, empirically demonstrable differences exist with or without naming, but then yes the names do affirm geographic differentiation. The naming is not the difference, and the difference is difficult to name. So she complains of the names, "This makes it north as much as south. This makes it south as much as north. A struggle to say so" (246). Where language fails, she takes recourse to something more tangible. She invokes a geographic explorer:

Not only but also the explorer should be able to know how to and also to recognize the spots he has seen before and which he will recognize again as he occupies as he successively occupies as he occupies successively the places he recognizes and not only that he occupies them successively but also that he will later be able to make maps of the region which he has traversed. Such is the duty of an explorer. In short it depends upon him in short he is to realize that he is to acquire knowledge of the directions of the direction of a direction of previous visits. It becomes necessary therefore that he indulges in active plans and map drawing and also in constant observation and relative comparisons. In this way he easily finds his way. (252)

Stein's explorer serves a significant function. The activity of exploration confirms and even maps the very relative differences between south and north. The geographic explorer confirms that north is north, south is south, and neither are merely words. Thus the explorer maps and/or *signifies* the regionality implied in these geographic names. Yet, constant observation

and relative comparisons cannot answer what tangibly separates south and north. "What is seen in between in between," she asks (255). With no clear and evident "between," but rather only an infinite number of relative comparisons, north and south are, as she stated in the opening, merely names in a relation that is always in flux. North and south are names with differences and unities to explore. Stein's own writing acknowledges exploration of physical environment, but emphasizes the linguistic.

All three of the above pieces highlight Stein's efforts towards isolating a sense of the roots of geographic differentiation. In all three, she pits inductive generalizations against the critical outlook which she developed during her philosophical and scientific training at Radcliff College and Johns Hopkins. These essays represent her attempts to come to terms with empirically visible differences of terrain and culture while acknowledging that differences are not absolute but constitute rather a field of relativities. The relative differences between ethnographic and geographic categories cannot be adequately isolated in a concrete sense, and language invariably interferes with the identification of difference. In all of the above pieces Stein concludes that locational difference exists, it is empirically demonstrable, but it is difficult to test and verify precisely where the watersheds of difference lie. Nevertheless, in her analysis of difference, and as a student of scientific method, Stein constructs an explanatory model for environmental influences on cultural differentiation.

Exploration of the relative differences of place led Stein to deterministic conclusions about the relationship between cultural and ethnographic differences and a people's origins; cultural differences, she reasoned, have their root in physical geography. For example, in her essay, "What is English Literature," Stein attributes the unique qualities of Chaucer,

Shakespeare, Pope, Browning, and Tennyson to the fact that England is an island. She maintains, "And so the poetry of England is so much what it is, it is the poetry of the things with which any of them are shut in their daily, completely daily island life" (198). This accounts, furthermore, for the difference between American and English literature even though both nations write in the same language. Toward the conclusion of the essay, introducing American literature as distinct, Stein argues, "I said I certainly have said that daily life was not the daily life in America. If you think of the difference between England and America you will understand it" (219). The differences of literature, she affirms, are the manifestation of differences of location. Similarly, Stein turns to the landscape of Spain to explain Picasso's artistic genius:

One must never forget that Spain is not like other southern countries, it is not colorful, all the colors in Spain are white black silver or gold; there is no red or green, not at all. Spain in this sense is not at all southern, it is oriental, women there wear black more often than colors, the earth is dry and gold in color, the sky is blue almost black, the star-light nights are black too or a very dark blue and the air is very light, so that everyone and everything is black... everything that was Spanish impressed itself upon Picasso when he returned there after his second absence, and the result is what it known as his blue period. (500)

Stein's argument here is that there is something essentially Spanish about the origins of Picasso's blue period. She then also argues that Picasso discovered cubism by getting in touch again with Spain. She notes that Picasso had returned to Spain in 1909, and on that trip was baptized as Spanish, figuratively, and so discovered cubism: "he brought back some landscapes which were certainly were the beginning of cubism" (502). When the world was ready for twentieth-century art, there was Picasso, the Spaniard: "So there was a world ready for Picasso who had in him not only all Spanish painting but Spanish cubism which is the daily life of Spain" (497). Bringing this theory all together in *Everybody's Autobiography*, Stein asserts, "art is inevitable everybody is as their land is everybody is as their food and weather is" (198). Time

and again in her work, Stein presupposes that cultural difference is based on environmental difference.

Habit is the mechanism for the formation of cultural difference in Stein's formulation.<sup>32</sup> Daily living in an environment develops habit, and habit wholly influences custom and world view. Just as the French are *terrien*, English literature is of its island, and Picasso's cubism derives from the Spanish landscape. The answer then, for Stein, to the question of national difference is rooted in differences of physical space. Like her explorer, through constant observation and comparison of relative differences, Stein's writing maps the various cultural forms of her world. Writing about spatial distribution, comparison of cultural forms, and explanation of causal factors, Stein's writing is a mode of geographic exploration. She employs the various tools of literature to *write the world*, as it were. Thus, geography is one of Stein's many genres, and as a geographer, she examines the impact of factors of physical geography on life and culture. She studies the relationships people and populations develop to the land they inhabit. And while Stein's deterministic conclusions smack of embarrassing and often racist pseudo-science, in her observations and conclusions she was not alone.

Many of the leading professional geographers of Stein's day examined similar questions to those which occupied her. Stein's ideas resonate, for example, with those of the highly influential German geographer, Freidrich Ratzel who took an early Darwinian interest in biological diversity. Ratzel developed systematic ideas about human geography, which he termed *Anthropogeographie*, to shed light on the impact of environment, which he saw as

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<sup>32</sup> Liesl Olson explores the way in which habit serves as a unifying principle for Gertrude Stein's work in his essay "Gertrude Stein, William James, and Habit in the Shadow of War." See also Lisi Schoenbach's "'Peaceful and Exciting': Habit, Shock, and Gertrude Stein's Pragmatic Modernism."

influencing human history, particularly the development of cultures. Among the more controversial of Ratzel's geographic theories was the analogy he posited between human societies and organisms: "the state [is] an organism attached to the land" (qtd in Martin 169).<sup>33</sup> Coining the term *lebensraum* (which would be misrepresented and exploited by Nazi propagandists to justify German expansion and atrocities), Ratzel insisted upon deterministic correlations between culture and environment.

The English speaking world was largely introduced to Ratzel's ideas by his influential American proponent and popularizer, Ellen Churchill Semple. In *Influences of Geographic Environment* (1911), Semple declares, "The roots of geographic influence often run far underground before coming to the surface, to sprout into some flowering growth; and to trace it back to its parent stem is the necessary, but not easy task of the geographer" (23). Modeling this geographic work, Semple argues in *American History and its Geographic Conditions* (1903, reissued 1933) that the nation's ascendancy to domination in the Americas and as a world power is attributable to a combination of temperate climate and the concomitant agricultural abundance, its isolation from Europe, and the impression its size has made on the national character.

Likewise, influential American historian Frederick Jackson Turner reflected the era's environmentally deterministic turn of mind when he argued that the unique qualities of American character and institutions are attributable to the landscape of the American frontier rather than to European cultural influences. Taking a geographic view of history, he posits, "The

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<sup>33</sup> Very little of Ratzel's work has been translated into English and there is very little recent scholarship on Ratzel's ideas and influence in English. My presentation of Ratzel's thinking here draws on Semple's presentation of Ratzel's thinking in *Influences of Geographic Environment, on the basis of Ratzel's Anthro-geography*, Harriet Wanklyn's *Friedrich Ratzel* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP. 1961), along with Geoffrey Martin.

existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development” (199). Narrating the development of the U.S. as a unique civilization in terms of the stages of development distributed along the contact zone with the open frontier, Turner explains that the nation’s expansion influenced cultural institutions by stripping frontiersmen of European customs and forcing them to adapt to the new environment. Historically, he reasons, this process has produced an original, composite, American nationality: “In the crucible of the frontier the immigrants were Americanized, liberated, and fused into a mixed race, English in neither nationality nor characteristics” (216).

Finally, in France, the thinking of Ratzel was revised by Paul Vidal de la Blache. When Vidal assumed the chair in geography at the Sorbonne, he took up Ratzel’s concern for making sense of the relationships between human societies and their environments, but he distanced himself from Ratzel’s insistence on the determining factors of geographic conditions. In *Principles of Human Geography* (1926), Vidal termed his revision of Ratzel’s determinism *possibilism*, suggesting that cultural forms are not determined, but become possible as a result of environmental conditions. Vidal focused his attentions on describing regions, or *pays*, of France, endeavoring to explain the relationship between *genre de vie* and the *milieu* of the natural region. In *The Personality of France* (1928), Vidal explains, “a geographical individuality does not result simply from geological and climatic conditions... It is man who reveals a country’s individuality by molding it to his own use... Only then does a country acquire a specific character differentiating it from others” (14).

This brief sketch of the geographic thinking in the work of major thinkers shows the significant overlap between Stein’s geographic thought and that of professional geographic



thinkers of her day, and it highlights the timeliness and seriousness Stein's ideas. However, unlike the geographers of her day, Stein was only partially interested in universalizable explanatory models and descriptive reports of regional difference. Stein's principal interest was to accurately formulate the subjective experience of the world, which included the individual experience of places and regions, the perception of regional cultural variations, and awareness of the way modernity was changing everything. Thus her geographic ideas were modern, but her geography was modernist. That is, Stein was a writer of space inventing new modes of geography, or world-writing, and like her explorer, she saw herself as *writing the world*. She self-consciously developed new ways of representing the world because, as she explains in "Composition as Explanation," its composition had changed with the close of the nineteenth century.<sup>34</sup> In true modernist fashion, in her writing Stein sought to both reflect and compose the manner in which the objective reality of the modern world was perceived, interpreted, and used by a subject. Her geographic imagination informed her literary thinking and thus made for the contours of some of her more radical and exciting stylistic innovations. Because different places seemed to be producing different cultures and different artistic responses to the changes in the modern world, in her writing Stein strained the boundaries of language and literature to compose her ideas about subjectivity, spatiality, cultural difference, and environmental determinism, and this propelled her in the development of the formal innovations that would keep her at the cutting edge of the modernist *avant garde* for forty years.

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<sup>34</sup> In "Composition as Explanation" Stein explains, "Composition is the thing seen by everyone living in the living they are doing, they are that composing of the composition that at the time they are living is the composition of the time in which they are living." The artist, she claims, creates her time, and contemporaries either refuse or accept her creation (*Gertrude Stein: Writings 1903-1932*. New York: Library of America, 1998).

**Their Theres Where:**

**Writing the Modern World Modern in *The Geographical History of America***

The work of experimental geography, which Stein wrote upon her return to France after touring the United States in 1934-5, provides a lens for viewing the breadth of Stein's geographic imagination and the four basic modes of her spatial forms. *The Geographical History* illuminates the relationships between Stein's ideas about subjective experience, physical space, and art. Two facts are key to representing the significance of *The Geographical History* in this context. First, prior to touring the United States, Stein had taken time to survey her entire writing and art collecting career in order to compose the essays compiled in *Lectures in America*. This survey put Stein in a position to revisit all her earlier works and to review the tendencies of her work, and one thing made very plain in the lectures is how she believes she had revolutionized literature through reorienting spatial form and geographic imagination to represent better than anyone else the composition of modern existence. For example, "What is English Literature" examines the history of literature in England, connecting the development of the country's national literature to its geography and daily habits. The essay ends with a comparative summary of the differences between English and American literature based on each country's relationship to its physical space. "Pictures" builds on Stein's collecting career to summarize her theories about modernist painting, particularly cubism where the "idea of action always has to do with something else moving rather than the center of the picture" (243). "Plays" describes and defines her approach to the landscape play as presenting not action but relations in space. In "The Gradual Making of The Making of Americans" Stein describes her development of the continuous present tense in narration as an effort to represent "a space

that is always filled with moving” (286). “Portraits and Repetition” explains the spatiality of her portraits, comparing them to a moving car: “As I say a motor goes inside and the car goes on, but my business my ultimate business as an artist was not where the car goes as it goes but with the movement inside which is the essence of its going” (336) Finally, “Poetry and Grammar” explains Stein’s work with trying to replace the noun by the thing itself in literary form. Such poetry, she posits, will advance the motion-in-space of prose narrative beyond seeking “inner balance” and into evoking the thing itself without naming it (336). That is, the elimination of nominals disrupts syntax, creating unexpected connotations and supposedly achieving in poetry the thing itself as moving in space.

The second key point for reading *The Geographical History* as a lens for Stein’s geographic imagination is that returning to the States opened Stein’s eyes to the importance of her native land to her outlook, her ideas, and her writing. While Stein was in America, she had occasion to fly in an airplane for the first time. Looking at the world below from the airplane window confirmed for Stein so much of the understanding that she had developed during her overview of her own work in writing her *Lectures in America*. In *Everybody’s Autobiography*, which she wrote about her American tour after *The Geographical History*, Stein remarks, “The more I think of everything the more I realize that what worries everyone is that the earth is round. That is what I liked in being in an airplane the earth does not look round as it does on the ocean. It looks flat, but is it, everything seems to tell everybody that it is not. It is round” (122). Later, Stein articulates the pleasure and significance flying in America holds for her; she liked “most of all the looking down and finding it a real America. Straight lines and quarter sections, and the mountain lines in Pennsylvania very straight lines, it made it right that I had

always been with cubism and everything that followed after” (192). The explanation of the perceived flatness and the real roundness of the earth and having always been with cubism and everything after are indeed the subject of *The Geographical History* (155). Reviewing her work and seeing the planet in a new way solidified the spatial ideas which had been circulating through Stein’s work up to that point in her career and determined the geographic focus of the work which would follow. In short, *The Geographical History* registers Stein’s ideas on the locationality of individual experience, regional cultural difference, environmental determinism, and art, and it reflects them in innovative, modernist literary form.

*The Geographical History* is nonlinear in arrangement and is, therefore, itself formally spatial. It must be read for connections between ideas and motifs distributed throughout the text rather than for linear or logical progression. Joseph Frank defines spatial form in modernism as an aesthetic which needs to be comprehended “in a moment of time rather than as a sequence” (9).<sup>35</sup> *The Geographical History* is nonsequential, atemporal and, therefore, spatial in Frank’s sense. Yet, Stein’s spatial form diverges markedly from the methods that Frank outlines in that she mixes versions of distinct modes of spatial aesthetic that she had developed throughout her body of work (modes she had reviewed in the writing of her American lectures), and then she links these multiple spatial forms to her geographic imagination of difference, determinism, and the spatiality of human life. The basic argument of the book is that subjectivity is rooted in the experience of physical geography. Self and being, writing, social interaction, culture, and all the things which interest Stein are grounded in and

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<sup>35</sup> For a reconsideration and extension of Frank’s idea of spatial form see *Spatial Form in Narrative*. Jeffrey Smitten and Ann Daghistany eds. In addition, many significant analyses of space and time in narrative discourse have been developed in narratology, far too many to list here. However, I maintain that Stein’s approach to spatial form is singular and that categories that are very useful for talking about more conventional narratives start to break down when applied to Stein’s work.

explicable through geographic history. Neither being, nor subjectivity, nor geography are simple matters, however, so Stein's nonlinear, spatial approach complicates and destabilizes reductive explanations—even her own pithy statements—of the interplay and investments of human nature, human mind, and geographic history. Formally, the piece mixes multiple genres and registers of discourse to mark numerous perspectives on establishing a sense of the interconnectedness of being, mind, environment, and time. She moves seamlessly from familiar speech to elevated philosophical language within her cubist and collage approach to lyric, drama, autobiography, and narrative, building her tendency toward repetition and linguistic play into the dynamic shifts of discursive register. The numerous variations throughout the work link the form of the text to her rich conceptualization of subjectivity within geographical history.

Stein's famous comment from *Everybody's Autobiography* about her childhood home in Oakland, California, "there is no there there" (289), offers a way into the spatial and ontological concerns that drive *The Geographical History*. Stein opens *The Geographical History* by noting that Washington, Lincoln and she herself were all born in the month of February. Shortly afterward she explores the larger implications of birth and death, generations, and geographical history implied in this opening observation. She states, "If nobody had to die how would there be room for any of us who now live to have lived. We never could have been if all the others had not died. There would have been no room" (367). This connects to her comment that "there is no there there" because Stein's return to Oakland revealed to her how disconnected she had become from that place. In the interim of her absence her childhood home, the physical structure itself, had been removed. The elimination of the building made

the place seem unreal to her. The subjective reality of memory contrasted with the actuality of locational erasure, and the feeling of being untethered from a place that only belonged to a past moment heightened Stein's sense of mortality. She realized that if people, like herself, never leave or never die, then there is no room for others to occupy a space. Had the generations of Washington and Lincoln not passed, there would have been no space for Gertrude Stein. Significantly, for Stein the passing of generations confirms that "geography" is not a stable and secure background for action, but something inside individual subjects. Through experience subjects manifest their "theres." So when she writes that "there is no there" in Oakland, the point is not that the house is missing, but that the place *does* exist, only it does not exist in Oakland, rather it exists in her memory. This realization, for Stein, represents an intellectual, artistic, and ontological crisis. For example, in *Everybody's Autobiography*, she remarks that occasionally imagined places become unreal when we actually visit them: "These things do happen, that is what it is to feel like history a place is real to you but it is not there and then when it is really there then it is not real anymore. It is that that gives anybody a historical feeling" (214). History, thus, is the sense that material places change faster than the places that fill the imaginary, Washington and Lincoln pass away to make a place for Gertrude Stein, and "geography" is real only in the imagination of an individual subject—real geography is only historical.

Stein's point of departure for *The Geographical History* is America's difference from other countries. She notes, "In the United States there is more space where nobody is than where anybody is. / This is what makes America what it is" (367). As she does so often in her writing, Stein details certain particularities which make America different from other places,

and grounds these particularities in locational terms. Recalling that generations pass to make room for new generations, “This,” she claims, “makes propaganda and politics and religion... A Geographical history is very important when connected with all this” (368). Propaganda, politics, and religion are metonymies for culture, and provide the link between environment and the specific histories of passing generations. This is all tied to America’s unique abundance of unpopulated space. For instance, Stein contrasts the presence of birds and wildlife in Europe and America. “How many animals birds and wild flowers are there in the United States and is it splendid,” she asks. The implied answer is that splendidly there are lots of birds, animals, and wildflowers. But Stein’s reply is that “There are some places in the United States where they almost do not have any” (377). The upshot of noting the presence and absence of wild birds, animals, and flowers is revealed a little later when Stein acknowledges that she is writing this text in France and that birds in France are different from in the states: “There are birds in America but I have not noticed them not as much as I have noticed them here... / I do notice them here. You notice birds when you sit with them” (386). This observation leads Stein to a definition of wild nature as the absence of people and human attention, a point which distinguishes the European from the American relationship to birds, animals, and flowers. She states, “there in America wild ones are as if they lived there with nothing to happen to them as if they lived there which they do so that nobody thinks they die there which they do” (386). Here, not only does Stein identify a difference between America and Europe in the quantity and quality of wild nature as well as places absent of people, she links this point of distinction to the original observation that death, by making space for new generations, defines geographic history. The fact of her writing is the connection to culture and art. The text is rife of such

comparisons bearing on the relative size and terrains of various countries and the connections between these phenomena and culture.

Recognizing national uniqueness, Stein formulates in *The Geographical History* an explanation of cultural difference as, just as it was for her geographer contemporaries, rooted in environmental determinism. Physical space influences behavior, custom, and culture. The size and shape of a country determines—how strongly or weakly she neglects to specify—customs, art, and writing. She writes, “What has excitement got to do with geography and how does the land the American land look from above from below and from custom and habit. / Are there any customs and habits in America there is geography” (383). For her, questions about “excitement,” “custom,” and “habit,” find answers in geography itself, geography as a mental/cultural construct. She sees geography in all aspects of society. The expression of this relationship between habits and customs and geography is based on experience. To elucidate this, Stein draws on her own experience. She explains she would never have written had she never heard a nightingale sing but, she notes, “in America there are no nightingales although there are mocking birds.” Her writing, then, is born of a coincidence of location. She goes further. American mocking birds, she suggests, do not sing, but they disperse regionally. They used to be found only in the Southeast, but now they are seen now in the North and are spreading west. So, “someone who was born in California had never even heard one before.” The someone is, obviously, Toklas, who doesn’t write as Stein does. She reasons that the birds she heard in her life, through accidents of location, made her the writer she became. Considering, then, the relative sizes and shapes of countries, Stein concludes, “in a small country where the land is not flat and where as you look you see what it is if it is as it is is a



great deal of poetry can and will and shall and must and may be written... But in a large country and even in a small one if it is flat not everyone can see what it is when they see what it is." This leads her to the assertion that in flat countries content is more important than form, and that masterpieces are possible but are not likely to be poetry in which form precedes content. Her conclusion, then, involves tying literature to environment by indicating that an understanding of masterpieces is dependent upon knowing *where*. Identity and the literature borne of it are the marks of "I am I where" (401). For Stein, "geographical history" is the basis of subjectivity and the key to understanding modern existence, especially as it manifests itself in writing, habit, custom, politics, propaganda, and religion. In this Stein is formulating in her own original way the deep roots of geographic influence on human history, which Ratzel, Semple, Turner, and Vidal all also theorized.

For Stein, geography is tied to culture through subjectivity, a point she explores at length in *The Geographical History*. "To know what ideas are," she writes, "You have to think of geographical history and the relation of the human mind to human nature" (370). The distinction between human mind and human nature is key, but like the boundary between south and north it is elusive. Subjectivity is the implied link between the two. On the one hand Stein casts human nature as that which is physical and instinctual in humanity. It is the animal reality of human life. She compares her own behaviors to that of her little dog. The little dog sleeps, as does human nature. "The dog listens while they prepare food," as does human nature (403). "He wants to turn away and he wants to be there with you," as does human nature. She looks to the dog to learn the outlines of her own animal existence (369). "I am because my little dog knows me," she repeats throughout the text, lampooning Descartes'

famous phrase. Being, she implies, is not a result of thought, because Gertrude Stein and little dogs *are* whether or not they think. Stein does acknowledge that there are differences between her and her little dog yet, “any way any man that is women and children can talk all day or a piece of any day, dogs do too not in the same way not quite in the same way and that does make some difference between human beings and dogs” (375). The nature of the dog gives Stein insight into her own human nature.

The key difference between her and the little dog is human mind: thinking, imagining, wondering why and, significantly, writing geography. She suggests, “You can say to a dog look and long and he does, he even does without your saying so but and that is true human nature can look and long but not the human mind” (375). The difference between Stein and the little dog is that though he eats, and cries, and talks, and sleeps, and plays tag, he never wonders about his existence. The source of this wondering is the human mind. It is imagination, and it is informed and defined by geographical history:

The relation of human nature to human mind makes everybody indifferent to remembering and forgetting to age and living to knowing that everyone can die so that there may be room for all who are here now and so many people expect to prepare otherwise but they do not know what the human mind is.

If there was no geography no geographical history would there be any human mind not as it is but would there be any human mind. (376)

The human mind is able to know elemental things like geographical history without seeing them. It is outside of time. Everything for human mind exists in a state of timeless present, because “there is no time and no identity in the human mind” (450). And most importantly, human mind is the quality in humans that writes. “The human mind writes what it is... because what it is is all that it is and as it is all that it is all it can do is write” (399). Crucially, in Stein’s

thinking neither human nature nor human mind are capable of knowing their other. Subjectivity, for Stein, then, is precisely the indefinable relationship between human nature and human mind which defines human existence—and spatiality is both the ground and the proof. For human nature environment is a relational field in which the individual is simply located. For the human mind, however, geography is the imagining, the sense making, and the writing of the spatiality of existence. For Stein, geography can be imagined without ever having been seen, it encompasses history and death, and it is created through writing and painting which, so to speak, put the “there there.”

It is on this point that Stein’s overview of her writing and art-collecting career for her *Lectures in America* and her airplane view of America converge. Paralleling her overview of her career of geographic and literary thinking for *Lectures in America*, seeing America from above revealed for Stein what she believed she had known and represented in her writing all along—a new way of relating to the world. In the land forms below her, she saw geography and subjectivity as exquisitely inter-invested. She recognized that her modern writing, like modern painting, was the product of human mind. As such its geographies are imagined and thus situated outside of time. She claims that like Picasso created camouflage with his cubism, she anticipated the modern way of making art by imagining the modern world and writing it as geography before actually seeing its relations and contours from above—meaning both in overview of her body of work and the landscape as seen from an airplane. Relating modernist painting to seeing physical landscapes from above, she writes:

I know well the relation of a simple center and a continuous design to the land as one looks down on it, a wandering line as one looks down on it, a quarter section as one looks down on it, the shadow of each tree on the snow and the woods on each side and

the land higher up between it and I know so well in spite of the fact that the human mind has not looked at it the human mind has it to know that it is there like that. (387)

This is because the painter or the writer does not see the world with the eyes of human nature, but with the human mind. It is, then, the human mind that creates the geography of the world as a set of relations beyond what the eye of human nature simply sees. Geographical history is written by the human mind as “when anything looks like it is and it is land and anybody writing or painting says it is that no one needs to remember that... That is why [modernists] make it like that not because they look at it but because it is like that. Yes the human mind” (382-3). The human mind depicts the world, she suggests, and then human nature begins to see it the way the human mind has made it appear. This is “how looking at it does not make it different from what it looks like,” because it is the human mind that makes geography visible and knowable. Those who only have been able to see with human nature “saw the land they could use but they could not use land as they could not use land they could see land” (420). In other words, writing, which is the process of the human mind manufacturing itself, makes certain people see the world as they do; writing creates human nature’s relationship to the world, and the shape of the world determines the writing:

Why the writing of to-day has to do with the way any land can lay when it is the particularly flat land. That is what makes land connected with the human mind only flat land a great deal of flat land is connected with the human mind and so America is connected with the human mind, I can say I can say so but what I do is write it so. Think not the way the land looks but the way it lies that is now connected with the human mind. (388)

Thus, she implies that it is necessary to know geographical history so that the ways in which the world changes will be made visible to human nature. Here is the convergence. She claims that the difference between a big country, or a little country and the difference between human

nature and the human mind make content now more important than form and, most importantly, “that is why in this epoch a woman does the literary thinking” (475). The woman is of course Stein herself, and the form is the content because, she avers, her spatial forms finally make geography visible in the same way her repetition gave the rose color for the first time in centuries. Modernism is, then, according to Stein, geographical history, and she herself is the geographic explorer mapping its contours for the new generation of movement and flight.

### **Reading *The Geographical History* as a Map of the Spatial Poetics of Stein’s Career**

Because it articulates, as Stein saw them, the relationships between cultural difference, environmental determinism, art, and individual subjectivity, *The Geographical History* provides insight into Stein’s experimental spatial forms. When reading for the spatial poetics of Stein’s writing, it’s useful to identify four general modes of spatial form she developed and worked in: the continuous present of *The Making of Americans*, the cubist poetics of her portraits, her landscapes in plays and prose, and finally the personal geography of her autobiographies. As with *The Geographical History*, throughout her career Stein’s spatial forms are all in some ways similar to that described by Joseph Frank in his seminal essay “Spatial Form in Modern Literature.” Frank posits that some instances of modernist, *avant garde* literature can be read as spatial rather than temporal because their structures flout attempts read them linearly, demanding rather a simultaneous and, therefore, spatial interpretation of the multiple motifs operating in the text. Although Frank does not mention Stein in making his case for spatial form in modernism, some of Stein’s writing conforms to Frank’s model of spatial form, but not all of Stein’s work is spatial in the same way Frank defines it.

In *The Geographical History*, Stein revisits the idea of the continuous present tense, which she claims she had perfected in *The Making of Americans*. Her continuous present tense is spatial in that it constantly defers interpretation and, thus, the reader is compelled to assume a dual position both within the diegetic narrative and outside the world of the text. Its repetition with variation impels the reader to imagine both the local moment of the narrative and comprehensive history simultaneously. In her lecture “The gradual making of the making of Americans,” Stein describes this early phase of her spatial thought as her attempt to depict “a space that is filled with moving, a space of time that is filled always filled with moving” (286). Here Stein registers her efforts at depicting the combined impact of generational difference with personality differences which result from daily living in American spaces and places. Her point is that generations move in time, and people move place to place, and this is the process by which Americans are “made.” The continuous present tense returns in *The Geographical History* as an innovative incorporation of human mind into writing. In the human mind there is no concept of time, “there is nothing in it about minutes” (381). Because there is no time in the human mind, then there need not be chapters which “should succeed each other because nothing succeeds another, not now anymore. In the old novels yes but not now anymore” (390). Sequential events are a product of literature and recognized through habit by human nature, so modern writing, working from the human mind, has no use for chapters, she asserts. Histories of events have to be written and rewritten over and over, but a history of everything and all types, like *The Making of Americans* or *The Geographical History*, is different; it is “writing that has to do with writing does not have to be written again again is in this sense the same as over” (407). The continuous present “is neither remembering nor forgetting neither

beginning or ending" (428). Writing without end, outside of time, is what makes for great literature of the modern era, and it is the mark, she proudly asserts, of her own genius. She states, "In writing not anyone finishes anything. That is what makes a master-piece what it is that there is no finishing" (480). She echoes this and represents it in this text by concluding with the line, "I am not sure that this is not the end," implying that *The Geographical History*, like *The Making of Americans*, contains all types in all places at all times (488).

Stein revisits also her cubist writing in *The Geographical History*.<sup>36</sup> In "Portraits and Repetition," Stein explains that her portraits represent "a movement lively enough to be a thing in itself moving, it does not have to move against anything to know that it is moving, it does not need that there are generations" (290). This so called "moving movement" defines her generation, and this is what the cubist poems write. "The composition in which we live" she attests, "makes the art" (287). Repetition is her method of writing the motion of movement, a subjective experience, into the composition (both make-up and writing) of the day. Moreover, Stein's literary cubism is formally spatial in the sense that the reader is forced to constantly reorient to the shifting sets of significations, syntactical arrangements, and tropological figures of the poems. Compounding this constant textual reorientation, her cubist poems commonly depict real spatial arrangements. For instance, drawing on terms of homemaking for "Objects," "Food," and "Rooms," *Tender Buttons* evidently depicts a domestic space. Portraits like "Portrait of Mabel Dodge at the Villa Curonia" often evoke the spaces around her subjects rather than their physical countenances. And her geographies and nationality portraits

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<sup>36</sup> Stein's cubist poetics are discussed in Richard Kostelanetz's introduction to *The Yale Gertrude Stein*, Dietrich Scheuneman's "Cubism, Automatic Writing and Gertrude Stein," and Jamie Hilder's "'Afterall one must know more than one sees and one does not see a cube in its entirety': Gertrude Stein and Picasso and Cubism."

("Americans," "France," "Italians," "In the Grass (On Spain)," and "England") combine the formal spatiality of her cubist writing with geographic interest in the character of place to make up the "geography" of her collection *Geography and Plays*. *The Geographical History* includes a portrait of Thornton Wilder which evokes Stein's spatial poetic technique. Wilder's portrait opens with the line, "In china china is not china it is an earthenware. In China there is no need of China because in China, china is china" (379). The passage combines bold assertion with repetition to disorient reader expectations, engage in word play, deploy place names, and defy syntactical patterns which compels constant spatial reorientation within the syntax and referents. This portrait demands spatial reading because its meaning, both internally and within the larger work, can only be determined from the removed aspect of simultaneous apprehension. At another level, the conflation of the place name China with the china tableware situates her subject within a complex matrix of cultural and economic exchange. Somewhat similarly, a passage in *The Geographical History* on reading a masterpiece reads, "if you read about it as if it is there and its being there. If you hear about it as being there then it is not really there not as there as when you read about it being there" (486). Here, the repetition of *there* conflates being and place, exploiting the ambiguity of the term to introduce and call attention to the layering of linguistic valences. This repeated deictic amplifies the significance of emplacement for Stein herself in America.

Stein also revisits in *The Geographical History* the spatial forms of her landscape plays, which are formally spatial because they eschew linear, plot-structured drama in favor of



representing an atemporal set of relations within a field.<sup>37</sup> In the lecture “Plays,” Stein explains why she calls her plays landscapes:

The landscape has its formation and as after all a play has to have formation and be in relation one thing to the other thing and as the story is not the thing as anyone is always telling something then the landscape not moving but being always in relation, the trees to the hills the hills to the fields the trees to each other any piece of it to any sky and then any detail to any other detail, the story is of importance if you like to tell or like to hear a story but the relation is there anyway. And of that relation I wanted to make a play. (264)

In other words, Stein emphasizes the atemporal connections between all the elements of a drama, particularly those of the locational field in which the action takes place, and she deliberately does this at the expense of conventional narrative drama. Precisely such a play is inserted into the middle of *The Geographical History*. The characters in the play are Stein, her little dog, and a chorus. Temporality and plot are irrelevant in this play where “the necessity of ending is not the necessity of beginning” (405). Literally, the play is a dramatization of the writing out of the relative differences between human nature and human mind while Stein interacts with and observes her little dog. A chorus initiates a dialogue that probes the differentiation of nature and mind. The ideas presented here evoke a deep pathos in Stein’s persona, prompting her to weep. In dialogue with the chorus then, Stein’s tears speak, saying, “The land is flat from on high and when they wander,” and the chorus responds, “There is flat land and weather and money for the human mind” (402). Directly referencing the airplane ride and the view of the earth below, Stein’s tears speak for human nature, and the chorus for human mind. The former sees only land, and the latter “geography.” As such, this play pursues “the question of identity.” “I am I why,” she asks, and then answers, “So there. / I am I where.”

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<sup>37</sup> Jane Palatini Bowers’ essay “‘The composition that All the World Can see’: Gertrude Stein’s Theater Landscapes” provides an exceptional analysis of Stein’s landscape play aesthetic.

The landscape of the play of geographical history is the *there* of Stein's existence. The *there* of her identity answers what she is, human mind and human nature in a landscape, by noting where she is "so." Stein's landscape, indicated with the deictic *there*, is the innovative writing of the state of existence within relation to other things like weather and money but without narrative progress. In other words, the play is a mise-en-abyme figuration of geographical history in America.

Finally, in her later career Stein worked with autobiography and her personal relationships to places and landscapes, and these also resonate with Stein's geographic imagination as presented in *The Geographical History*.<sup>38</sup> Although Stein did not write about autobiography in *Lectures in America*, clearly Stein's later autobiographical writing is deeply concerned with locationality and its influence on her and her writing: *Everybody's Autobiography* with her return to America in 1934-5, and in *Wars I Have Seen*, as noted above, with the French countryside, exile, and reunion with the states. *Everybody's Autobiography* and *Wars I have Seen* adapt the spatial techniques of repetition, distorted syntax, and simultaneous interpretation of the text as a whole to present Stein's personal geographic history.<sup>39</sup> For instance in *Everybody's Autobiography*, Stein explains that visiting America and flying led her to the realization that "After all it is very simple, we are on the earth and we have to live on it and there is beyond all there is and there is no extending it because after all there it is and here we

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<sup>38</sup> For an analysis of Stein's autobiography, see Gerri Reaves' cogent account of Stein's hybridization of geography and autobiography in *Everybody's Autobiography: Mapping the Private Geography* and also Hugh English's essay "By Being Outside America: Gertrude Stein's "Geographical History" of Gender, Self and Writing." Finally, see also Karla Murphy, "The 'Convincing Lies' of Gertrude Stein: Cubism in The Autobiography of Alice Toklas."

<sup>39</sup> *The Autobiography of Alice B Toklas* bases its form on Alice's austere, clipped manner of speech, and is therefore less formally spatial. While I would argue that it does describe a time and a place of experience, which would fit in with Stein's sense of geographic history, because it is not so clearly an example of spatial form I have elected to leave it out of this analysis.

are, and we are always here and we are always there and any little while is a pleasure" (154). Together the affirmation of pleasure in located presence and play on the word "there," coupled as they are with the documentation of her travels throughout America, make *Everybody's Autobiography* not simply biography but a biographical construction of Stein's America as modernist "geography." Autobiographical passages in *The Geographical History* confirm the relationship between the two works and reveal Stein's awareness of the significance of her geographic thinking on her writing. Clearly recalling the airplane rides, she writes in *The Geographical History*, "when you look at anything and you do not see it all in one plain, you do not see it with the human mind... because there is no identity in the human mind" (450). Seeing anything as flat, seeing the world as flat, is a point Stein makes much of in *Everybody's Autobiography*. When she flies she says she was suddenly able to see the world from a perspective which is, for her, outside of the earth-bound relations of location, of the landscape, and so she claims to have recognized ideas she had explored heretofore in her writing about the intersecting relationships of being. "Flat land," she notes, "is seen from above" (437). The autobiography embedded in *The Geographical History* explains that by flying Stein was able to fully recognize the significance of location and "geography" to the human experience of the world, the theorizing of which had occupied her throughout her career. She narrates episodes from her childhood in California, her education in philosophy, psychology, and medicine, and her efforts in writing *The Making of Americans* in a continuous present. All of this explains, "geographically," why she writes the way she does: "Let me tell the history of my life which makes any identity not be away because there is no identity that is not *there to stay*" (emphasis added 453).

Geographers teach us that maps are imperfect tools for knowing the true contours of terrain and the distribution of things over the surface of the earth. This can as well be said of *The Geographical History* if, in reading it as a map of the relationship between Stein's geographic imagination and her career of formal innovation, we try to make the map replace the real thing. Maps distort our pictures of the earth. Stein, of course, knew this. Indeed, it is this awareness that makes for the difficulty of much of Stein's writing, and in particular this awareness makes for the difficulty of *The Geographical History* in that Stein is writing about environmental determination and the locationality of individual experience at the same time she is describing the contours of attempts to write about determinism and the locationality of experience throughout her career. If we see this, however, we give ourselves of way to navigate the shifting tenses, overlapping genres, tidal repetition, and slippery referents that would tend to leave us lost in her work. In other words, using *Lectures in America* as a legend, and *The Geographical History of America* as map, Stein shows us how to be geographers in her geography.

**Conclusion: "As geography return to geography"**

"As geography return to geography, return geography" (509): this phrase opens an essay entitled "Geography," which did not appear in Stein's lifetime. It is another cubist poem. However, when read in light of Stein's continuous present tense in *The Making of Americans*, her cubist portraits of people and places, her landscape plays, her autobiographical geographies, *Lectures in America*, and *The Geographical History of America*, this line highlights the point that Stein saw herself returning again and again to "geography." We are, the essay

suggests, deterministically “In geography and in geography” (511). Stein’s geographic imagination can be read then as a touchstone for both her ideas on existence and the inspiration for her formal creativity. The mixed genres of *The Geographical History* are, she indicates, “going to be a detective story of how to write. / A play of the relation of human nature to the human mind. A poem of how to begin again / And a description of how the earth as you look at it is perhaps a play” (409). Thus, like the lectures, *The Geographical History* is a manual for how to read much of Stein’s corpus because she had made a studious overview of her life’s work to that point, had returned to her native land, had flown and seen the world from above, and then she conflated all of these experiences into the one book that in turn influenced her later work.

Her geographic imagination and “geographies” are not the whole story of Stein’s career. And the four categories of her spatial form identified here are merely useful generalizations meant only illuminate basic patterns within the vast interplay of formal experiments in a tremendously prolific writer’s body of work. The object of this essay has not been to reduce Stein’s writing to simple formula, but rather to illuminate the way in which Stein drew on the geographic ideas of her time, decomposed them in the crucible of her energetic mind, and recomposed them to show, as she saw it, how environmental factors, the individual experience of location, and subjectivity defined the way people live in the world, and because she understood the modern world as changed and changing she saw her experiments with form as the most apt way to explain the modern world’s emerging compositions.

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## Selected Poems

*Mike Downing, Kutztown University of Pennsylvania*

### **The Future of English**

The ardent English major  
Her dark hair falling into her eyes  
She turns the pen in her fingers  
And considers today's speaker.  
She is here alone today  
Bravely representing so much:  
Her school, her mentors,  
Her family, her friends,  
Her hopes and dreams.  
Absorbing the moment  
All dressed up in a jet black sweater  
And a pretty yellow dress.

### **Nicodemus and the Cat**

The speaker gestures into the air  
His voice rising and falling  
With great authority  
He speaks of codex and hypertext  
Spines and splines  
Dazzling his audience  
With choice and chance  
Painting pictures with his words:  
Obsidian. Knives. Sculpture. Light.  
Juxtaposition. Rhythm. Water.  
His energy is boundless  
His points of reference endless  
The parable of Nicodemus  
Edges fading out of sight  
He is infinity committed  
Continually kept afloat  
Buoyed by words, potential,  
And white cats in snow.



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