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Marginalia . . .

“We make our writers into something very strange.”
—Hemingway, The Green Hills of Africa

As a teacher of American literature, I spend much of my time in the company of the certified “greats” of our literature—the Hawthornes, Whitmans, Hemingways, and Faulkners. These figures who live in fat anthologies and overpriced paperbacks have about them the air of the establishment that would have made them uncomfortable when they were alive. Yet my students, who, like all young people, date everything as beginning from the moment when they first became aware of it, simply assume that Faulkner was always what people studied in American literature classes. In the artificial world of the classroom, Hemingway was always the legendary “Papa,” never a struggling young man looking for a publisher. The writers that college students encounter in textbooks seem far removed from the flesh and blood sufferers and neurotics that we discover only in authors’ notebooks and letters. They have now officially made it: they have been canonized, anthologized, and mythologized.

Perhaps because of my dual role as editor and teacher, I feel closer to the image of the writer who has not had “success” yet. My sympathy is with poor neurotic Poe, fondling his fifty dollar prize for “Ms. Found in a Bottle” or his ten dollar check for “Ligeia” and dreaming of a chance to get out of the hole by writing fiction that would sell. I like to think of Walt Whitman walking along the ferry slips in Camden, limping a bit from his stroke, and inwardly hurting from his failure to sell his epic of the people to the people themselves.

In my mind’s eye, too, I can see Hawthorne in his third floor workroom, writing a preface in which he describes himself as “the obscurest man of letters in America.” A few years later, another young writer, Herman Melville, was to write Hawthorne in exasperation, “What I feel most moved to write, that is banned,—it will not pay. Yet, altogether, write the other way I cannot. So the product is a final hash, and all my books are botches.” Such words of discouragement and despair can be found somewhere in every writer’s background.

There was a touching little item in the Small Press Review
Continued on Page 47
Whitman and Eliot: Two Studies in The Religious Imagination

VICTOR STRANDBERG

SOMEONE sometime should gather together the worst criticism ever written, on all the great masters, in a collection to be titled The Return of the Screw (title borrowed, with many thanks, from an essay by Eric Solomon). Here splenetic critics and bad reviewers, like the scum in Dante’s hell, would be forever remembered to the upper world—a punishment rightfully eternalized in the name of Keats and Melville and Twain and Joyce and Faulkner and the other heroic spirits now gone to their rest on Olympus. And above all in the name of the great Walt Whitman, who must surely have suffered more than any other the slings and arrows of outrageous criticism, things like: “[he] roots like a pig among a rotten garbage of licentious thoughts” (The New York Times); “We leave this gathering of muck to the laws which ... must have the power to suppress such obscenity” (The New York Criterion); “the man who wrote page 79 of the Leaves of Grass deserves nothing so richly as the public executioner’s whip” (The London Critic); “Nobody can force us to drink from a polluted bucket a maniac has filled” (The Harvard Advocate); “[Whitman has] fouled with excrement the doorstep of civilization” (Theodore Watts-Dunton, Swinburne’s guardian); “He is morally insane” (Max Nordau’s Degeneration); “[His] is the little nursery game of ‘open your mouth and shut your eyes’” (Henry James); “The best claim that could be preferred for him [is] a seat beside such writers as Ebenezer Elliott” (Algernon Charles Swinburne); “Whitman is poetry’s butcher. Huge raw collops, slashed from the rump of poetry, and never mind the gristle—is what Whitman feeds our souls with” (Sidney Lanier); and “His political, social, religious, and moral ideas are negligible” (T.S. Eliot). 1

To be sure, Eliot's statement, although a very sweeping dismissal indeed, is not in the scatological category of some of the others, but on the other hand it was made in 1927, and by the high priest of modern poetry, which is grounds enough to secure Eliot a place in our prospective volume of immortal criticism. What is more, as it is the intention of this paper to show, Eliot's own poetry sufficiently resembles Whitman's in technique and meaning so that if one is negligible in its ideas, the other can hardly escape a similar description. Proceeding upon Eliot's own dictum that "Comparison and analysis are the chief tools of the critic" ("The Function of Criticism," 1923), we shall find that image by image and theme by theme, in both the practice and theory of poetry, the differences between the two are less striking than what they did and thought in common.

To begin with, a few studies in comparative imagery may be instructive. Considering Whitman's "Lilacs" for a start, it is worth noting that Whitman's four main images in this poem—lilacs, star, cloud, and bird—reappear carrying precisely the same meaning in some of Eliot's most celebrated passages. "When lilacs last in the dooryard bloom'd, / . . . I mourn'd, and yet shall mourn with ever-returning spring" are lines that exactly anticipate in mood, setting and imagery the most famous first lines in twentieth century poetry: "April is the cruellest month, breeding / Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing / Memory and desire. . . ." The reason why Whitman mourns is exactly the same as Eliot's reason: like Eliot, he mourns the burial of the dead, made especially intolerable by the ironic upsurge of new life in the springtime:

Passing the yellow-spear'd wheat, every grain from its shroud in the dark-brown fields uprisen,
Passing the apple-tree blows of white and pink in the orchards,
Carrying a corpse to where it shall rest in the grave,
Night and day journeys a coffin.

("Lilacs," section 5)

Whitman knew all about April being the cruellest month; even his sorrowing trochaic cadences here are similar to Eliot's meter, though Whitman gets extra weight and dignity from his grand style, piling up line after line on the awakening life of spring so as to point with periodic force towards the concluding main statement: "journeys a coffin."

A second major image common to Eliot and Whitman is
the distant star referring to the inaccessible realm of the dead, a “drooping star” in Whitman, mainly signifying the loss of a man (Lincoln), and a “fading star” in Eliot’s The Hollow Men, signifying every man’s loss of immortality. The two poets’ images show further similarity in the darkness that blots out the star in each poem; Eliot speaks more abstractly—

\[
\text{Between the idea} \\
\text{And the reality} \\
\text{Between the motion} \\
\text{And the act} \\
\text{Falls the Shadow}
\]

—while Whitman, the man whose ideas are negligible, puts it this way:

\[
\ldots \text{[I saw]} \text{the fields all busy with labor,} \\
\text{And the infinite separate houses, how they all went on,} \\
\text{each with its meals and minutia of daily usages,} \\
\text{And the streets how their throbings throb’d, and the} \\
\text{cities pent—lo, then and there,} \\
\text{Falling upon them all and among them all, enveloping} \\
\text{me with the rest,} \\
\text{Appear’d the cloud} \ldots \text{the long black trail,} \\
\text{And I knew death.} \\
\]

(“Lilacs,” section 14)

(While a modern reader might prefer Eliot’s brevity of statement, Eliot himself does not complain of Whitman’s versification—indeed, he calls Whitman “a great master of versification”; it is only the ideas that are negligible!) So Eliot’s lilacs, his fading star, and his cloud or Shadow (Burnt Norton makes it a black cloud—“The black cloud carries the sun away”), for all their symbolic effectiveness, may appear less than a novelty to Whitman readers.

The thrush image completes this set of parallel symbols. Whitman’s star, distant as the dead beyond all apprehension, and his lilacs, fragrant and lovely but transitory like all life on this planet, are reconciled into unity by the hermit thrush singing in a swampy borderland where life and death visibly mingle. In a typically symphonic structure, Whitman’s main images here interact like leitmotifs, separately introduced in stanzas 1-4, pulling against one another in stanzas 9 and 14, and gathered into perfect harmony in the coda—“Lilac and star and bird twined...
with the chant of my soul, / There in the fragrant pines and the cedars dusk and dim”—after the bird’s song has shown life and death to be complementary halves of a totally benevolent reality. This bird-voice of visionary consolation finds a counterpart in the concluding section of The Waste Land, although Eliot is only wishing for the consolation that Whitman achieves (hence the initial “if”): “If there were the sound of water only / Not the cicada / and dry grass singing / But the sound of water over a rock / Where the hermit-thrush sings in the pine trees.” As Eliot’s outlook changed to include the possibility of mystic experience, the bird-image appears more positively as an instrument of spiritual discovery. A “woodthrush singing through the fog” (no mere “if” of desirability) does appear in “Marina,” and the bird’s voice is even more significant in Four Quartets for announcing epiphanies—“Quick now, here, now, always—.”

Like Eliot, who endures “dung and death” in each Quartet before moving toward acceptance, Whitman’s speaker in “Lilacs” cannot accept the bird’s consoling vision until he has purged himself of his personal grief (especially by adorning “the burial house of him I love” with pictures of a united country—“the varied and ample memorial land, the South and the North in the light”—the perfect memorial picture for Lincoln’s martyrdom), but once he does go forth to receive the thrush’s carol of death, one of the supreme lyrics in world literature ensues. Like the classical philosophers of old—we may remember Socrates offering a cock to Aesculapius, the god of health, on the occasion of his death, and Petronius referring to his imminent death as merely his “going over to the majority”—Whitman sees death as a welcome fulfillment, not a horror; to die is to sleep at the end of a beautiful day, or to return to the ultimate mother—“Come lovely and soothing death . . . Dark mother always gliding near with soft feet, . . . And the body gratefully nestling close to thee.”

To Eliot, no doubt, Whitman’s view of death seemed sentimental or, after the Ash-Wednesday watershed, heretically pagan. Eliotic phrases like “I stiffen in a rented house” (Gerontion), “[he] saw the skull beneath the skin; / And breastless creatures under ground / Leaned backward with a lipless grin” (“Whispers of Immortality”), or “I think we are in rats’ alley / Where the dead men lost their bones” (The Waste Land) do not show much affinity with Whitman’s “Come lovely and soothing death . . . Have none chanted for thee a chant of fullest welcome? / Then I chant it for thee, I glorify thee above all.” And
it is true that Whitman’s “praise! praise! praise! / For the sure-enwinding arms of cool-enfolding death” remind us more of Faulkner’s Quentin Compson, “who loved death above all . . . as a lover loves . . . the waiting willing friendly tender incredible body of his beloved,” than of Eliot. But on further reflection, Whitman’s image of “the dead, / Lost in the loving floating ocean of thee . . . O death” may remind us not only of Quentin’s death by water but of Eliot’s “Death by Water,” in which Phlebas has escaped the profit and the loss and the burning sexuality of the Fire Sermon into an enviable tranquility— “A current under sea / Picked his bones in whispers. As he rose and fell . . . / Entering the whirlpool.” Presiding over the entire Waste Land, moreover, is the headnote from the Sybil, the aging sage whose sum of wisdom, “I wish to die,” is a death-wish not greatly different in its line of reasoning from Whitman’s concluding vision of the dead in “Lilacs”: “But I saw they were not as was thought, / They themselves were fully at rest, they suffer’d not, / The living remain’d and suffer’d . . .”

The later Christian Eliot agrees most positively with Dylan Thomas’s line that “wise men know that dark is right.” Striking an attitude comparable to Whitman’s “no array of terms can say how much I am at peace about God and about death” (Song of Myself, section 48), Eliot conveys his mood of acceptance through a movie metaphor: to die is nothing more than to wait for the start of the next feature (or next act of a play)—

I said to my soul, be still, and let the dark come upon you
Which shall be the darkness of God. As, in a theatre, The lights are extinguished, for the scene to be changed . . .

(East Coker, III)

The resemblance in outlooks is at least close enough to justify a return to our central question: whose ideas are negligible?

One could point to a number of other recurrent themes and metaphors with similar effect. In some of their best poetry, for example, both poets speak of the ocean to indicate death and eternity. “You sea! I resign myself to you also—I guess what you mean, / I behold from the beach your crooked inviting fingers,” says Song of Myself (section 22), and even more explicitly, in “Out of the Cradle, Endlessly Rocking,” the poet asks for “The word final, superior to all, . . . / Whereto answering, the sea . . . / Lisp’d to me the low and delicious word
death, / And again death death death death death,” while Eliot speaks in *The Dry Salvages* of “the drift of the sea and the drifting wreckage, / The bone’s prayer to Death its God.” “We cannot think of a time that is oceanless / Or of an ocean not littered with wastage,” he goes on to say, and asks, “Where is there an end to the drifting wreckage, / The prayer of the bone on the beach . . .?” That line, one of Eliot’s best, evokes a parallel in Whitman: “In vain the mastodon retreats beneath its own powder’d bones” (*Song of Myself*, section 31). The fact that Whitman’s extinct creature takes permanent identity from Whitman’s grand vision of an osmosis of being, while Eliot’s takes his from the “barely prayable / Prayer of the one Annunciation,” should not seem too seriously a discrepancy. What Eliot and Whitman hold in common here is again larger than their distinctions, and neither poet’s philosophical recourse can be rightly called negligible.

Moving from these specific images to issues of larger moment, what of the gathering of opposites that serves both as theme and technique in both these writers? Probably influenced by the Bhavagad-Gita in this respect, as Emerson suspected, Whitman sought above all in his work to be the Great Unifier: the spokesman of the body and of the soul; the uniter of here and hereafter; the poet who bridges past and future; who makes a passage from modern America to ancient India; who embraces prostitute and President in one easy sweep, and spreads the table “equally set . . . for the wicked just the same as the righteous . . . the kept-woman, sponger, thief . . . The heavy-

lipp’d slave . . . the venerealee is invited; / There shall be no difference between them and the rest”; who even binds God and Satan as parts of the one Square Deific; and who consigns his identity to the totality of all time and space, marking his connections with an infinite past and future: “Afar down I see the huge first Nothing, I know I was even there . . . / For it [my embryo] the nebula cohered to an orb . . . / And I say to any man or woman, Let your soul stand cool and composed before a million universes.” (Eliot objected, in “Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca,” that “A man does not join himself with the Universe so long as he has nothing else to join himself with . . ., and Christians have had something better,” but one wonders if there is a meaningful distinction here: is not the Christian, in worshipping the Creator of all, joining himself to the universe, and establishing that satisfactory relationship between himself and eternity which all major religions predicate, and which Whitman’s poetry too tries to conceptualize?)
Clearly, even a casual look at Whitman’s work will establish its place within the scope of Coleridge’s definition of poetry as the reconciliation of opposites. And again, Whitman’s lifelong effort at gathering opposites into unity meets a parallel in the poetry of T. S. Eliot, whose work is dominated by seemingly irreconcilable opposites in the earlier poems—Sweeney and Prufrock (comparable to Whitman’s “body” and “soul”) contrasting against each other, and Eliot’s wish for “an infinitely gentle, infinitely suffering thing” (the Christ to be) set off hopelessly against naturalistic wasteland reality—but whose *Four Quartets* takes as its master theme the thesis that man must live both on the naturalistic plane and on the level of epiphany, until “the fire and the rose are one.” (The fire and the rose refer to spiritual and natural reality, respectively.) Eliot’s Incarnation, then, his achievement of the “impossible union / Of spheres of existence [where] . . . / the past and future are conquered, and reconciled” (*The Dry Salvages, V*), is not so different from Whitman’s grand synthesis. Again, neither poet’s ideas are negligible. (In passing, one might note how both poets see music as a way of attaining this deepest mode of perception, Eliot gaining his Incarnation during “the unattended / Moment, the moment in and out of time, / . . . lost in . . . music heard so deeply / That it is not heard at all, but you are the music / While the music lasts” (*The Dry Salvages, V*), and Whitman feeling “the puzzle of puzzles, / And that we call Being” while “The orchestra whirls me wider than Uranus flies, / It wrenches such ardors from me I did not know I possess’d them”—*Song of Myself, section 26.*)

As further evidence of Eliot’s and Whitman’s affinity, on grounds of similar techniques in this instance, we have Eliot’s dicta on “The Music of Poetry” (1942) wherein Eliot notes parallel principles of organization in music and poetry. “The use of recurrent themes is as natural to poetry as to music,” he says, perhaps seeking to justify such titles as “Preludes,” “Rhapsody on a Windy Night,” *Four Quartets*, and Prufrock’s “Love-song” (cp. Whitman’s Songs, Chants, Carols). But further, in the matter of technical construction, Eliot goes on to say: “There are possibilities for verse which bear some analogy to the development of a theme by different groups of instruments; there are possibilities of transitions in a poem comparable to the different movements of a symphony or quartet; there are possibilities of contrapuntal arrangement of subject-matter.” To be sure, Eliot’s poetry from the beginning used the principles of symphonic structure: the recurring leitmotif, subtle instances of counter-
point (especially the epic past versus mock-epic present, Michelangelo versus Prufrock), points of gathering and falling intensity, crescendos and decrescendos, multiple masks and voices, repetitions and variations on a theme. But—as I have already suggested in connection with "Lilacs"—Whitman was master of symphonic structure just as largely. His Song of Myself uses counterpoint (the gathering of opposites); rising and falling intensity of emotion, corresponding to the expanding or contracting of vision in his catalogues; the idee fixe (the widening identity of "I" or self); and the recurrent leitmotif, especially that of grass, which as the "beautiful uncut hair of graves" (section 6) joins the living and the dead, which as the "journeywork of the stars" (a scientifically valid assertion, section 31) links geologic eons past and future, which unifies all castes and races by "Growing among black folks as among white" (section 6), and to which Whitman finally commits his decomposing body—"And as to you Corpse I think you are good manure. . . . / I reach to the leafy lips, I reach to the polish’d breasts of melons" (section 49). Symphonic structure, or "contrapuntal arrangement of subject-matter," as Eliot put it, is also evident in "Chanting the Square Deific," "To Think of Time," "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," and many other of Whitman’s poems. Neither Whitman nor Eliot was a lifelong devotee of music for nothing.

In addition to these comments on the music of poetry, other Eliotic statements, familiar now but taken as revolutionary novelties in their time, tend to justify Whitman even more than Eliot himself, in the light of Whitman’s greater daring and isolation seven decades earlier. "Every revolution in poetry is apt to be, and sometimes to announce itself as, a return to common speech," said Eliot in "The Music of Poetry," and further, in the same vein "Milton—II" (1947): "it was one of our tenets that verse should have the virtues of prose, that diction should become assimilated to cultivated contemporary speech. . . . Another tenet was that the subject-matter and the imagery of poetry should be extended to topics and objects related to the life of a modern man or woman; that we were to seek the non-poetic, to seek even material refractory to transmutation into poetry, and words and phrases which had not been used in poetry before." All of Walt’s poems and Prefaces are so plainly assumed under this canopy as to not even require demonstration. Likewise, Eliot thought himself to be defending a pioneering spirit in saying ("The Metaphysical Poets," 1921), "to look into our hearts and write" . . . is not looking deep
enough. . . One must look into the cerebral cortex, the nervous system, and the digestive tracts.” But to any reader familiar with Whitman’s aesthetics, Eliot’s claims seem mild and redundant; compare Whitman’s complaint to Emerson, which was printed in the second edition of *Leaves of Grass* (1856): “This tepid wash, this diluted deferential love, as in songs, fictions, and so forth, is enough to make a man vomit. . . . I say that the body of a man or woman . . . is so far quite unexpressed in poems; but that the body is to be expressed, and sex is.” While poems like “A Woman Waits for Me” may have pursued this ideal a bit over zealously, earning Whitman such epithets as “bestially sensual” and “morally insane,” no one can doubt that Whitman explored the fullest range of experience, as Eliot prescribed, writing out of cerebral cortex, nervous system, and all. Such passages as the millennial vision at the end of “The Sleepers,” bespeaking the healing powers of the unconscious, and the tender lyric projecting a female sexual fantasy in *Song of MySELF*, section 11—“Dancing and laughing along the beach came the twenty-ninth bather”—compare favorably with anything out of Eliot’s cortex and nervous system, it seems reasonable to say.

A few further specimens from Eliot’s criticism call for comparative judgment, showing affinities that are not negligible. Eliot’s statement that “The great poet, in writing himself, writes his time” (“Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca,” 1927) nicely echoes Whitman’s creed that “The direct trial of him who would be the greatest poet is today” (1855 Preface), and in writing himself and his time, each poet adopted a disregard for his audience reception. “The question of communication, of what the reader will get from it,” said Eliot in “Poetry and Drama” (1950), “is not paramount: if your poem is right to you, you can only hope that the readers will eventually come to accept it,” while Whitman declared, “I have had my say entirely my own way, and put it unerringly on record—the value thereof to be decided by time” (“A Backward Glance,” 1888). What difference here separates the two poets consists mainly in the price that was paid for following these principles, Eliot following a string of popular triumphs towards a Nobel Prize and elder statesmanship, whereas Whitman in his seventieth year was obliged to write the following: “That from a worldly and business view *Leaves of Grass* has been worse than a failure—that public criticism of it yet shows mark’d anger and contempt more than anything else—. . . is all probably no more than I ought to have expected” (“A Backward Glance,” 1888).
Concerning the ultimate purpose of poetry, substantial agreement is evident between Eliot’s statement, in “Poetry and Drama,” that “. . . it is ultimately the function of art, in imposing a credible order upon ordinary reality, . . . to bring us to a condition of serenity, stillness, and reconciliation,” and Whitman’s statement of his purpose, in “A Backward Glance,” “I say the profoundest service that poems or any other writings can do for their reader is not merely to satisfy the intellect, . . . nor even to depict great passions, . . . but to fill him with vigorous and clean manliness, religiousness, and give him good heart [emphasis Whitman’s] as a radical possession and habit.” (Faulkner likewise wrote, “To uplift man’s heart: . . . we all write for this one purpose,” in his Foreword to A Faulkner Reader, 1954.) And concerning the limitations of poetry, both Eliot and Whitman continue to express similar convictions. Once having achieved this condition of “serenity, stillness, and reconciliation,” Eliot says, art should “leave us, as Virgil left Dante, to proceed toward a region where that guide can avail us no further,” while Whitman likewise limits his image of the artist-guide in Song of Myself, section 46: “. . . each man and woman of you I lead upon a knoll. / My right hand pointing to landscapes of continents and the public road. / Not I, not any one else can travel that road for you, / You must travel it for yourself.” Perhaps this is why Whitman says, with impeccably Eliotic logic, that “The word I myself put primarily for them [Leaves of Grass] . . . is the word Suggestiveness. . . . The reader will always have his or her part to do, just as I have had mine” (“A Backward Glance”).

There is finally the matter of language development. In “A Talk on Dante” (delivered at the Italian Institute, London, July 4, 1950), Eliot called The Divine Comedy “a constant reminder to the poet, of the obligation to explore, to find words for the inarticulate, to capture those feelings which people can hardly even feel, because they have no words for them; and at the same time, a reminder that the explorer beyond the frontiers of ordinary consciousness will only be able to return and report to his fellow-citizens, if he has all the time a firm grasp upon the realities with which they are already acquainted.” Here is another splendid touchstone for Whitman’s poetry, beyond a doubt, as is also Eliot’s concluding statement in the above commentary: “The task of the poet, in making people comprehend the incomprehensible, demands immense resources of language; and in developing the language, enriching the meaning of words and showing how much words can do, he is making possible a
much greater range of emotion and perception for other men, because he gives them the speech in which more can be expressed.” How strange that Eliot could be so generous about Dante, yet not notice the obvious relevance of these statements to Whitman, the great experimenter in contemporary language, the emancipator of poetry from its straight-jacket of conventional rhyme and rhythm as well as the singer of bold new themes.

But I think there is finally an explanation for Eliot’s strange obtuseness concerning Whitman’s gifts and his vision, and it should begin with Eliot’s statement in “Religion and Literature” (1935) that “Literary criticism should be completed by criticism from a definite ethical and theological standpoint.” From that standpoint, Eliot himself found “the whole of modern literature” corrupted by what he called “Secularism,” a charge not applicable to Dante. But how does Eliot himself stand compared to Whitman in the light of an ethical and theological standpoint? First, as to the ethical problem: if it is the writer’s task, as Joyce and others have supposed, to forge the conscience of his race, and the largest and most generous conscience at that, then Whitman’s is by far the greater achievement. Being large and containing multitudes, after all, requires that very highest level of imagination which can assume another person’s identity—the kind of imagination evidenced in Tolstoy, Shakespeare, and Faulkner, whose own identities become totally immersed in that of their characters, as opposed to those lesser writers who write primarily about themselves, like Donne and Milton and Hemingway and Eliot and Wallace Stevens. These latter may be very great writers, but yet they lack that ultimate ethical and religious dimension that enables a man to live, so far as anyone can, the life of another person, preferably drawn from the ranks of outcasts and losers, as are Faulkner’s idiot Benjy and Emily Grierson and Wash Jones, or Twain’s Nigger Jim or Jonathan Swift’s starving Irish.

A large and compassionate imagination, not to be confused with mere sentimentality, may very well be the highest product of human evolution, better than intelligence or heroism, and Eliot fares rather badly on this point. His portraits of class inferiors like Bleistein and Sweeney, inevitably sketched against a house of prostitution for a setting, contrast lamentably against Whitman’s limitless powers of empathy, especially notable in his continual reaching downward: to a lunatic (“carried at last to the asylum a confirm’d case”), to a common prostitute (“Not till the sun excludes you do I exclude you”), to criminals and
traitors ("For me the keepers of prisons shoulder their carbines," "I and nobody else am the greatest traitor"), to beggars and pariahs ("I project my hat, sit shame-faced, and beg," "To cotton-field drudge or cleaner of privies I lean, / On his right cheek I put the family kiss"), and to all "them the others are down upon." As a Christian, in his later so-called "wisdom" period, Eliot did try manfully to develop generosity of spirit like this, but it never permeated his art as it does Whitman's. Indeed, except for the Crucifixion—a very special category—Whitman's work transcends the prophets and Gospels; it is larger and more generous, freer from the principle of exclusion that marks off the sheep from the goats even in the Sermon on the Mount ("depart from me, ye that work iniquity"—Matthew 7:23). Above all, it is free from the malice that leads the Redeemed to rejoice in the out-pouring of God's wrath in Revelations just as the Israelites had exulted in witnessing the fourteen plagues on Egypt, lingering deliberately in Goshen to watch their slavemasters get in full what was coming to them. If there is a god, one must protest. He should rise above the all too human malice of such Biblical episodes; He should rather aim to be as generous of spirit as Walt Whitman, as large and inclusive.

Which brings us from ethical to theological criticism. About the time of Eliot's nervous breakdown (or near breakdown), when he was writing The Waste Land in a Swiss sanatorium, his search for a sustaining belief had led him nearly to become a Buddhist (hence Buddha's Fire Sermon, "shanti shanti shanti," etc.). Quite reasonably, he settled on Christianity instead within a few years, but the point is that he was at least as well acquainted with the sacred writ of India as Whitman. Without questioning Eliot's wisdom in becoming a Christian, one might wonder all the same how he would, while still deeply appreciating Hindu thought, have dismissed Whitman's religious thought as negligible. Whitman's osmosis of being, his sense of participation in a larger being or process that goes on and on—and this sense is what animates all those expanding catalogues—is visibly descended from Hindu writ like the Bhagavad-Gita, which Eliot himself was to quote admiringly in The Dry Salvages. Mahatma Gandhi, who in a reversal of Eliot's development almost became a Christian, would have understood Whitman's ideas perfectly, as is obvious in this quotation from The Essential Gandhi: "I believe in the absolute oneness of God and therefore of humanity. What though we have many bodies? We have but one soul. The rays of the sun are many through refraction. But they have the same source. I cannot, therefore, detach
myself from the wickedest soul nor may I be denied identity with the most virtuous.”2 Whether in Whitman or Gandhi, this theology and its ethic are hardly deserving of the epithet “negligible”; one can only conclude that it was Eliot’s comprehension of Whitman that was negligible—a transgression made less pardonable by Eliot’s role as a Pied Piper in the making of modern literary taste.

Whitman’s religious position, like the rest of his nature, was large and multiple, but it did, I believe, have a center which he hoped his poetry would advance: to carry forward the historic process of the humanization of God. Since primitive antiquity, all the great advances in religious thought have been in this direction, from earliest man’s worship, out of fear, of the naked power of nature; to the later worship of animals, and semi-human animals like the Sphinx, out of admiration for their brute strength or fertility; to the worship of the fully humanized gods of Olympus or Valhalla, who embody human traits both good and evil; and on to the worship of man-gods, like Christ or Buddha, who embody the highest ideals of humanity—justice and compassion and sacrifice and discipline—unlike their Olympic forebears. (Aeschylus’s Prometheus Bound and the Orestes were written for just this purpose, to bring an outdated image of God—Zeus the Oriental despot and Zeus the Avenger—up to date with man’s evolving soul.) Whitman incessantly called his work religious poetry precisely because it advanced this refining process to keep pace with the evolution of a larger soul in humanity, divested now of the chosen people mentality and of all malice and ill-will and spurious selectivity whatsoever.

Under his principle of gathering opposites, then, Whitman quite properly enlists himself in all religious movements, in his splendid section 3 of Song of Myself, “Enclosing worship ancient and modern and all between ancient and modern” while careful not to exclude “Down-hearted doubters dull and . . . dishearten’d, atheistical, / I know every one of you, I know the sea of torment, doubt, despair and unbelief.” But while “Making a fetch of the first rock or stump, . . . / Helping the lama or brahmin as he trims the lamps of the idols, / Dancing yet through the streets in a phallic procession . . . , / Accepting the Gospels, accepting him that was crucified, knowing assuredly that he is divine,” Whitman at the same time observes the limitations of all these “rough deific sketches” of orthodoxy in section 41, “Admitting

they were alive and did the work of their days” but refining them in the direction of humanizing the divine. Accordingly, scenes and characters from ordinary contemporary life may assume a godlike superstature, conveyed through Biblical phraseology; Whitman’s Madonna becomes “the mechanic’s wife with her babe at her nipple interceding for every person born”; his Christ figure is “The snag-toot’d hostler with red hair redeeming sins past and to come, / Selling all he possesses, traveling on foot to fee lawyers for his brother and sit by him while he is tried for forgery”; and his angels are anyone doing productive work for his fellows—“Three scythes at harvest whizzing in a row from three lusty angels with shirts bagg’d out at their waists” (emphasis mine). One is reminded of the humanist theology of William Blake in poems like “The Divine Image” (the vers libre chant of Blake’s prophetic books also seems to have influenced Whitman’s style) and again of Gandhi’s theology: “I know God is neither in heaven nor down below, but in everyone.”

But this humanization of the gods does not make Whitman a rational materialist only; his theology does have a mystical dimension, which is best exhibited in his incomparable threnodies on death and its significance, on what it means to die—

I do not know what is untried and afterward,
But I know it will in its turn prove sufficient, and cannot fail.

And here is where Whitman’s ethics and metaphysics form a perfect whole, for Whitman’s generosity of spirit is never more evident than when contemplating lives wasted and ruined, redeemable only by “what is untried and afterward” (comparable to Eliot’s “prayer of the bone on the beach”)—

It cannot fail the young man who died and was buried,
Nor the young woman who died and was put by his side,
Nor the little child that peep’d in at the door, and then drew back and was never seen again,
Nor the old man who has lived without purpose, and feels it with bitterness worse than gall [cp. “Gerontion”],
Nor him in the poor house tubercled by rum and the bad disorder,
Nor the numberless slaughter’d and wreck’d, nor the brutish koboo call’d the ordure of humanity,
Nor the sacs merely floating with open mouths for food to slip in,
Nor any thing in the earth, or down in the oldest graves of the earth. . . .

(Song of Myself, section 43)

Much more could be adduced to define and justify Whitman’s religious position, but why bother when one may dip into his verse almost anywhere and find evidence of the same large and comprehensive soul, basing its ethics and theology on a profoundly religious imagination? Whitman’s mystic osmosis of being, like Eliot’s Christianity, may rely on erroneous assumptions, but it is in no wise negligible.

To conclude, Eliot’s dismissal of Whitman appears in retrospect to have been another of his infamous blind spots, like his praise of Milton merely for his “auditory imagination”—as though Milton were utterly lacking in symbolic or philosophical imagination—and his failure to consider Hamlet’s bad mood, or Shakespeare’s, properly motivated by an objective correlative, as though the loss of a father, on Hamlet’s part, or of an only son, on Shakespeare’s, were insufficient motive for regarding one’s existence with a corrosive sick joke mentality. The best Eliot can say of Whitman is that “he was, in my opinion, a great master of versification, though much less reliable than Tennyson” (and having, moreover, an “intellect . . . decidedly inferior to that of Tennyson”), comparable to Tennyson mainly in serving as a rather inferior poet laureate for the idea of America as Tennyson did for England.

But in seeing Whitman merely as the American laureate, the poet of his national epic, Eliot was only repeating a vulgar error that persists to this day in American classrooms. It is not widely enough realized that Whitman’s truest worth resides in the religious nature of his poetry, in his ethic of a generous spirit and his metaphysic of an osmosis of being, transcending all barriers of time and place and origin. What Whitman lacked of Eliot’s personality—his Puritan guilt, his class snobbery, his sardonic masks—redounds mainly to Whitman’s credit; what he shared with Eliot—a sensitivity to suffering, a literary pioneering spirit, a great willfulness and intellect and talent and energy—is to the credit of both. And in their literary achievement, what they held in common, ranging from their concepts of the theory and structure and purpose of poetry to an impressive list of specific recurrent themes and images, is much too large for Eliot to dismiss his predecessor as in any wise negli-
gible. Not to detract from Eliot's achievement, which is great, these arguments will constitute, I hope, a persuasive protest against Eliot's bad criticism—will provide, that is, one good twist in the return of the screw.

High

ALBERT GOLDBARTH

To write a prayer for America
I ask for the 100th floor, to be as close to heaven
as citizenship allows, to rise in the elevator
like carbonation, and at the top
burst, and release my air
into the air, one pore
of the great political body
crying for help with its exhalation.
I want a prayer for America.
I want a poem for my generation,
the paupers, the potheads, the women
too lovely, the men too lax.
Their fists weigh their pockets down like holsters.
I want a novel for their parents
one-hundred floors below me
hanging limp all day on the downtown bus
like an unused trousseau.
I want a drama. One act long,
and nothing happens: everybody sleeps
one night while whatever breathes
on the dank underside of the brain
slithers out. We remember it only
in ropes, rolls of bandage, and long leather thongs
tied around all the breakage and suture.
I want that kind of Creative Writing.
And how can I begin, so high,
what prayerbook, what compendium, what anthology
could absorb it all? My tears,
like suicides, leap from my eyes.
They fall down all the stories I know.
To The Outer Banks

T. ALAN BROUGHTON

I  CROSSING

The ferry leaves the salt marsh 
where gray boats cant in mud 
and draws the raucous spindrift of its gulls. 
Bumper to bumper, passengers stare 
then eddy from their cars 
to cling and bunch along the rail. 
A toy dog pulls his master by a leash, 
cameras snap, and someone sights a buoy.

Passage to the outer banks, 
crossing to the shifting, sickled land: 
a boat that bluntly takes the sound, 
wails once at the sun 
and settles to a complacent hum 
while crabs near the surface slip sideways 
down, beyond quicksilver light.

They turn their backs 
on Verrazano's error: 
the centuries it took 
to fill that blank, non-Asian land 
he stood and gaped upon 
exulting in the narrow passage 
to wealth and ancient culture, 
blind to how far there was to go 
before, toppling like a drunk, 
the final lurch to jungles 
and rich mire of monsoons.

A couple, deaf and dumb, 
turn from the crabs 
and point, their faces twisting, 
at the sky. Others turn 
but cannot see what they see 
gabbling with fingers on each other's palms.

Ahead the sand will bunch up like a scar.


II PILGRIMS

The packet Home
fleeing the storm
turned for the beach
and wrecked herself on shore—
ninety tumbling to the surf,
ninety touching land too out of breath,
ninety leaving one home for another.

Bodies of this and that
make flotsam wealth.
The timbers wash to shore
and stranded whales are boiled
for ambergris and oil.
It's best to be expedient
and grow rich.

Because you can’t kill Captain Teach.
They shoot and hack him
where he stands, and still
he bellows, swings his sword,
his bright brass buttons
flashing through the smoke.
How can Governor Eden’s man go down?
He’s rich, he’s rich,
he glows with teeth of gold
and seven times his singing head
swims round the ship
and no man there is lashed secure
or has wax in his ears.
Dig for his chest,
dig for the oil and grain and ore—
his head sings dizzy circles on our shores
and when wind blows
see the chalked, gaunt bones,
the wreck that all our needs expose.

Fenced to themselves
in graves at Ocracoke
lie three drowned British sailors.
Some ship that sank at war,
some nation’s argument with another
spewed them up on Hatteras.
The melting pot boils on
and renders bones.
You can’t kill Captain Teach.

His voice is in the palings of the gate,
the sailors are his chorus in the shingles.

Two lovers curtained against
the morning light
hear rainy wind
and drift toward each other.
The ferry whistles once.
The old bones shift,
a flecked gate casts itself upon its hinge,
and somewhere a whale, misguided,
heads for shore.

III MAKERS

They rested from building bikes.
Tinkering, wrench-handed
and resolute, they measured wind
and parceled out the air.
The tent flapped around their ears,
windsock to the force they used.

They ate out of cans.

The moon was nothing to them
but a welcome light
that pulled the water
up or down.
No visions of white lines
in the sky,
all those elements of earth
(the shiny and elegant steel)
flung higher and higher
by the hand until they no longer
even descend, or circle in jugglery
until the fiery end.
Trajectory to the maker of the tide,
orbit on orbit and epicycling ripples
wash out from those insect-ridden nights
when brothers dreamed of tightening the last nut.
Sing the lyric for these Dayton garage mechanics,
praise for all the practical
who brick by brick lay aqueducts across the sky.
We fly beyond this crawling space,
the pale crabs in their holes
and small birds pecking at the fleas.
Orville and Wilbur,
our cleareyed Gemini,
crouch beneath the she-wolf of our empire
fondling with purpose the monkey wrench and screwdriver.

IV  THE LAND

This was the lavish ocean's fringe,
the foam encrusted with grass and tree
where bear would nose the dolphin after storms
and air was flecked with eagle, gull, and wren.

Ocean, lush maker, flowing into forms,
that tolerates itself and then returns,
was once "so full of grapes
as the very beating and surge
of sea o'erflowed them."

Fish darkened water
like a passing cloud,
and leaping over nets
they filled attendant boats,
crushing each other where they writhed.
The fishermen soaked their smocks in blood
and tired before the harvest could be done.

On Ocracoke the ponies graze in pens.
Visitors climb the tower
to look down on wild, domestic beasts.
Out from the ramps
the tire marks slash
past dogs and cans and broken surfboards
waiting for release of tide.
Where are the grapes, the eagles, and the bear?
No beautiful damage but in the sea
whose splintered shells are fragments of itself.
Break us, brute ocean,
or bend us back to shape.

V THE VOICE OF WIND

Cut by the give and take of salt and fresh,
long rush of pent-up inland force
that strikes the deep weight drifting back and forth,
how can this land survive such counterthrust?
At night the lighthouse glints fixedly
as though a torch is held against the dark
and someone turns to stone by what she sees.

The ferry twists and rubs its ropes
and ponies lift their noses seaward to the breeze.
Somewhere a tired voice sings
and the deaf-mute couple,
bored with passing notes,
turn out the light
and read the braille of bodies.

Who is it that sings?
Not Blackbeard, or some drunk.
No troubador telling lies on moons
or garage attendant keeping himself awake.

This is the song that Whitman heard,
the long wind from the prairies and the peaks
that plays now on the tufted flutes of grass.
The exile from its home
and twisted passage of the march
make it weak.

But listen, finally, how it chants
when after long passage
through a troubled land
it reaches new heights
and cries, "The sea, the sea."
Tired of squealing tires and diesel engines, I moved into a quiet neighborhood. At first I thought it might be too quiet, that I might get lonely for the old noises and for my friends in the apartment house. I live in a house now, the downstairs, and still haven't seen the lady who lives upstairs. But I met some of the neighbors and they were eager to talk about her. The retired plumber next door said she has been separated from her husband for eleven years.

"Eleven years?" I asked, hoping to find out more. But that was all he could tell me. Later I heard a different story from a different neighbor. She was married at thirty-eight, her husband died after four years, and she has been living here alone, upstairs, for three years since then. Someone else said that she has never been married but has one daughter, twenty-five, who hasn't spoken to her in six years. Everyone has so many numbers on her, but no one tells me what she looks like. I have picked up a few numbers myself—she has two street numbers nailed above her door bell, the top one, since I live downstairs but share her numbers and the front hallway. The numbers are both 609.

She has a '68 Buick which I've heard is always clean but which I've never seen because she parks two blocks away for $3.50 a month and walks the final distance home every night at five. The owner of John's Mini-Mart across the street told me that, and I have no reason not to believe him. She parks two blocks away, while I get the garage next to the house because I live downstairs and have to cut the grass and shovel the snow. It's an arrangement, and no problem to me since I am strong and only twenty-five.

But I never see her. She gets up to go to work at seven a.m. and gets home at five p.m. I go to work at ten a.m. and return
at six-thirty p.m. so I never see her—coming or going. It is one of the differences between working at an accounting office and selling shoes. I sell shoes. I never see her, but at night I hear her walking. I know that at nine every night she changes from a low, wide heel to soft slippers, I think of the leather moccasin sort. Even in her slippers I can hear her. She walks on her heels and always makes a loud THUMPING. I know the thumper type—they’re among my best customers. And you cannot tell them by just watching them walk because they walk no different from other people. You have to listen to know—or examine the shoe. The outside edge of each heel will always be worn. It will show after just a few weeks of wear on the average leather heel.

She never goes out at night. Never. I have been living here six months, yet I know only what I hear, and I hear very clearly—especially now that I have the storm windows on and the sound is channeled down to me even louder. I know that her name is Betty Matthais from the neighbors and because I peeked at her mail once. But I have not seen her in person, not once.

And I don’t want to see her. Believe me, I don’t ever want to see her. It would ruin everything I’ve learned in the past few months.

Shortly after I moved in I was walking to the kitchen and began to suspect it. I was stepping through the doorway from my dining room to my kitchen when I heard the distinct change of sounds above, a change from the muffled thump of her slippers on her dining room wool rug to the louder shuffle when she stepped onto the linoleum in her kitchen. She was one step behind me. When I returned to my living room, I could hear her returning too, just one step behind, almost in perfect time with my feet—like an echo.

That night changed everything. I had been going out at least three nights a week to parties, to bars, always looking for something I couldn’t find. Not that I thought the sound of her feet was what I was looking for, but there are good reasons why I found it so fascinating. Part of it was that my whole life had been spent following people around. Following customers around my shoe store: “Could I help you, madam?” “Have you found what you’re looking for, sir?” Following women around bars: “Haven’t I seen you in here before, miss?” “Could I buy you a drink?” Now someone was following me for a change. Wherever I went in my house, Betty was just a step behind me, one story above. She didn’t try to hide the fact. Wherever I went, she followed me in her usual hard THUMP THUMP THUMP. That first night when I was preparing for bed, I heard even more than
I expected, or hoped. When I was hanging my trousers in the closet, I could hear a hanger squeaking on a clothes rod upstairs. Of course, there is no way that we could be doing exactly the same thing because we wear different clothing, but I know that she was ready for bed only a few seconds after I was. When I was pulling the covers up over my chest, I could hear the springs of her bed giving in to her body.

I was skeptical that first night—but not very. The next evening I hurried home from work, and when I slammed the door I was sorry that I must have surprised her. I could hear her scrambling from the other side of the house, tripping over furniture to get back in step. I walked to the bathroom; Betty followed. To the living room; Betty followed. Wherever I went, Betty followed.

During those first few nights, I became obsessed with power. Sometimes I would stop short in the middle of the room and back up a few steps. This seemed to confuse Betty, and she’d continue on a few steps past me before realizing what had happened. Then she’d scurry to get back where I was, sometimes tripping over her own feet. Or I’d go to the bathroom even if I didn’t have to, just to hear if she’d follow. She always did. Once I ran as fast as I could from one end of the house to the other. I was surprised to hear how fast her old legs could carry her, though she did have trouble stopping and bumped into the far wall when she got there. The storm windows on my level rattled from the impact. Playing games like that only showed how childish I was during those first nights after my discovery. But Betty was patient with me, so very patient, and she played my little games without breaking step.

I was not drunk with power very long. Soon I started to feel bad for what I was doing. It was like selling somebody shoes that didn’t fit. I reminded myself that I was a good salesman, one who knew what was best for his customers, but, just the same, one who didn’t take advantage of them. Instead of playing follow-the-leader games, I became more and more concerned with what would be best for Betty. What would make her happy? Sometimes, sitting in the living room, I would wonder to myself, “Betty, are you thirsty for a cup of coffee?” I would check my watch to see how long it had been since I was in the kitchen. When I did walk to another part of the house, I listened very closely to her footsteps, trying to detect whether she was happy or disappointed with what I was doing. And in a few nights I think I could tell the difference. When she was happy, she stepped lightly; the thumping was almost gone. When she was
sad, her footsteps grew louder and heavier. I tried to share her moods, and when I was happy I hoped she would share mine.

The next weeks were the most exciting ever. In the morning at work, I would start thinking about the evening. I was eager to get off work and come home to Betty. For the first time in my life, there was something to look forward to. Betty, in low heels or slippers, following me wherever I went. Betty, eating when I ate, drinking when I drank, sleeping when I slept. The fact that our lives during the day were separate made the evenings all the more exciting. I didn’t ever want it to change. I didn’t want anything to ruin it.

We continued to get closer and closer. She got used to the way I moved. She was learning more precisely how to follow my steps. At times I thought she was directly above me, in my very footsteps, instead of one step behind. When I went to bed, she got into bed with me. I could hear her springs squeak at the same time I sat down on the edge of my bed. I would lie awake, staring at the ceiling, wondering if she was breathing in time with my breath.

Then I began to worry. I was afraid that she might see me soon and that she would be embarrassed, or that I would be, and everything would be ruined. I began to fear that one day she might go to work late and we would meet in the hall or that in a foolish moment of curiosity I would come home early and watch for her through the front window. I got nervous every time I saw a ’68 Buick on the street, fearing that I would see her. Once I thought I heard her coming down the plaza corridor toward my store, and imagined that she would be with another man, an elderly gentleman with an expensive pin-stripe suit and shark skin shoes. She would walk into the store, point at me, and laugh. The elderly gentleman would laugh too, and together they would turn away from me and my inexpensive shoes. Betty would look back over her shoulder. She would look beautiful and cruel. I would have to move.

But when I came home that night my fears and suspicions dissolved, for there was Betty, right above me, and eager to follow me around. I realized that she no doubt was looking forward to me as much as I for her. And I was certain too that she would not peek, did not need to see me.

I am almost ashamed now that after a few weeks of her following me I started to feel some discomfort—not because she was following me but because I sometimes didn’t even notice that she was there. She was becoming an echo that I didn’t notice any more. At times, I was actually bored. Then it would strike
me, and I would think to myself, “How can I be like this after every thing we've done together?” I wondered if Betty knew that I was ignoring her. I didn't want to hurt her.

I sat down and tried to understand myself. For some reason, I kept remembering my days in paratrooper training. Before breakfast we were made to run four miles, strict formation, eyes front. In just gym shorts and jump boots, those beautiful, bulbous-toed jump boots. The cadre would be running alongside, watching to see what we stayed in step and kept eyes front. All the while the entire platoon was chanting “AIRBORNE ALL THE WAY!”—AIRBORNE ALL THE WAY!” until someone glanced to the side and one of the officials would yell “DROP!” to the offender. Down he'd go for ten push-ups while the rest of us ran on, chanting. I remember the sound of the offender counting his own push-ups as we ran on chanting, and his voice faded out behind us: “AIRBORNE ALL THE WAY—ONE!—AIRBORNE ALL THE WAY;—two;—AIRBORNE ALL THE WAY!—three!—AIRBORNE ALL THE WAY!—four!—AIRBORNE ALL THE WAY!” The sound behind us slowly faded out of ear-shot. For weeks I was fascinated by the sound of the counting as it faded and our chant remained loud on my ears as we ran on. I think it was because I wanted to hear what it sounded like from the other side that I once deliberately looked to the side and into one of the official's wrap-around sun glasses. And I did hear “DROP!” “AIRBORNE ALL THE WAY!—ONE!—airborne all the way!—TWO!—airborne all the way!—THREE!—airborne all the way!—FOUR!—airborne all the way!” until the platoon faded out ahead of me. I sat and wondered why I kept remembering. Then it occurred to me—I wanted to know how things sounded to Betty.

One night I was sitting in the living room watching television. Suddenly I found myself walking toward the kitchen and, half-way there, couldn't remember what I was going to do. I tried to stop and think of what it was. But I couldn't. I couldn't stop. Then I heard Betty upstairs, very clearly—a full step ahead of me. I wanted to laugh, but the sensation was too painful. I was in the kitchen and still didn't know what I was going to do. “Of course,” I thought, “a cup of coffee.” But no, instead, I found myself helplessly following Betty to the refrigerator, taking an ice cube, and dropping it into a glass of water. Then I went back to the living room and sat and drank it. I don't like ice water. I wanted a cup of coffee. And when I finished, I just sat there, not knowing what was coming next. It was agonizing. It was dreadful. It was not like doing ten push-ups.
That was three weeks ago. The adjustment was excruciating. It was more than a matter of getting used to the footsteps being ahead of me rather than behind, it was a matter of learning a whole new way of life. But after the first week, I was determined to try, just as Betty must have tried to keep in step with me. I learned fast. And it paid off. I have begun to understand what Betty was doing all the while—letting me lead and then making me follow. She might have known that this is the only way, for last night I knew that I was neither leading nor following. Betty was with me, her great warmth filling my empty bed. Filling my empty life. I knew that we were truly together, for when I moved I could not hear her above me and I knew that she could not hear me. Our sounds were the same, were one. There aren’t any numbers in unison; there are no echoes. Nothing could be better. What a love! She is a beautiful person. And how she must have suffered to know that this is the way. The agony she must have known of lovers. Eleven years? Twenty-five? How well she knew my suffering and knew the importance of giving. It was a difficult course to follow, but we have listened and we have learned.

Hyperbole of Fact

SISTER MARY ELLEN, S.S.N.D.

The dentist explains the logic of my fear. The tongue is sensitive. Nerve intensity creates hyperbole of fact; a broken tooth becomes a mountain in my head.

To justify this truth, he takes the prongs of tweezers to my tongue. “How far apart are they?” he says. I understand. Yet in the dark belly of my mouth, my tongue swells to the hollow of this tooth. I touch the pain as though it were the woman in myself uptrapping birth cries from an earth defined mathematically.
Christmas Gift

JOHN WHEATCROFT

After presents, before our circle breaks, to kill, assuage, indulge the pain of come-back Christmas mornings when my church-mouse father, providing barely bread crumbs, clowned off humiliation before mice kids at cheesetime, I put a flute concerto (Christmas gift), attributed to Pergolesi, on the stereo.

David, at fifteen Samson-haired and more defiant of the Philistines and me than Samson Agonistes—I’m Laius, not Manoa—highjacker of my liquor and bootlegger, forcibly retired, for a clientele of teeny-boppers, bongos against the solo flute upon an ashtray (an in-law’s present destined for the next St. Andrew’s charity bazaar) upsidedown upon his lap while sweating out the minutes till we cut him loose.

Nursing a tyrant fury I watch the burning of a rolled-up mile of Christmas wrappings in the fireplace. Again we’re at the crossroads, son and father—my tongue a goad with barbs. Before it can lash out, draw blood, I check a “Cut it!” swallow so the points prick in my throat.

My self-inflicted hurt begets a wonder: those tom-tom hands concerto in the orchestra just as the virtuoso flute trills out—a tempo so contagious even the flames are twisting to its beat. The contretemps of Lovin’ Spoonful David and rococo Battista Pergolesi drives home how fierce I love this rebel boy.
Orwell's Reception in America

JOHN P. ROSSI

Of the many literary figures to emerge as major forces after World War II, few made as deep an impact on the English speaking world as George Orwell. Little known outside of certain intellectual circles in England before the war, he became, along with Arthur Koestler, the outstanding popularizer of the dangers of Soviet totalitarianism in the post war years. Orwell's success, even more than Koestler's, was largely a by-product of the Cold War. He presents us with the curious paradox of an admitted Marxist who became a cult hero among conservatives throughout the world. Nowhere was this more true than in the United States. In a sense Orwell made a more lasting impression on an America just awakening to the Soviet danger in the world than on his native England.

Despite his great success in the United States, Orwell's attitude toward the American people and their society remained ambivalent. He admired certain aspects of America, especially the vitality of her people, while at the same time he was offended by the violence of American life. Although he never visited the United States he showed surprising knowledge of her culture and her society. Aware of the relationship between the people and the language they spoke, Orwell was fascinated by American slang. He observed how in the 1930's and 1940's through the movies and then the war American slang became popular in England. He believed that it was more expressive and spontaneous than English slang, which in his view was marred by having a definite lower class connotation to it. With all his reservations about the United States, his commitment to Marxism, and his distrust of unrestrained capitalism, Orwell claimed that if he were faced with a choice between the Soviet Union and the United States he would choose the latter as a land in which to live and work. Unlike so many of his compatriots he
never adopted the facile anti-Americanism that was, and still is, so fashionable in intellectual circles in England.

Orwell did not gain an American audience until after the second World War. Some of his earlier works—*Burmese Days, A Clergyman's Daughter,* and *Down and Out in Paris and London*—were published in the United States by Harper's in the 1930's but they were generally ignored by critics and public alike. Occasionally some reviewer would comment favorably on Orwell's gift for vivid character sketches or on the concreteness of his prose style, but even when his books were reviewed they were poorly received. He remained unknown on this side of the Atlantic throughout the war despite the fact that he wrote occasional pieces for American liberal magazines, as well as contributing a "Letter From England" to the *Partisan Review.* Orwell's failure to win a following among American leftist intellectuals was directly traceable to the fact that he did not fit into any recognizable political category. He was a confusing bundle of contradictions to them. A Marxist who had fought with the anarchists in the Spanish Civil War, a socialist who took special pleasure in denouncing his fellow socialists as hypocrites and faddists, a foe of nationalism who nonetheless remained a fierce English patriot, Orwell was regarded by those who knew him as an interesting but harmless eccentric. When towards the end of World War II he began to castigate the Soviet Union as something less than a disinterested, gallant ally of the West, he became suspicious in the eyes of those American leftists who knew his work. His largest following at this time was among the American Trotskyites and pacifists, men like Dwight MacDonald and Philip Rahv who felt that he was an honest man and not an apologist for either Stalinism or capitalism. Orwell was one of the first writers to recognize that the real danger to Western society was from totalitarianism, not simply from fascism. In an essay on Arthur Koestler he made this point with characteristic directness. "The sin of nearly all left wingers from 1933 onwards is that they wanted to be anti-Fascist without being anti-totalitarian." The American left had not yet reached this stage in their thinking.

Orwell's achievement of popular success in the United States came in 1946 while the first signs of the Cold War were beginning to appear. In fact the book that made his American reputation, *Animal Farm,* was published at approximately the same time that Winston Churchill's "Iron Curtain" speech brought home to the American public the reality of the Russian threat. Orwell directly benefited from this growing awareness of Com-
munist designs on the free world—it is difficult to imagine a political fable like Animal Farm, harshly critical of the Soviet Union, being adopted by the Book of the Month Club as one of its choices at anytime before 1946.

Orwell had first conceived of the idea for Animal Farm after fighting against General Franco’s forces in the Spanish Civil War. He fought with the anarchist units in Catalonia and was disgusted on his return to England to find the way the popular press had distorted the war. What particularly disturbed him, however, was his discovery that the Communists and their sympathizers had managed to get their view of the war accepted by knowledgeable leftist groups in England. During his stay in Spain Orwell had watched with growing disgust the adroit way in which the Communists destroyed the power of all other leftist forces opposing Franco. He thus made a discovery that other European and American leftists were not to learn until after World War II: despite their ideological posings the Communists subordinated everything to Russian national interests. They were not interested in victory for the Spanish Republic but in merely prolonging the war so that the fascist forces in Europe would not be able to threaten the security of Russia. From his experience in Spain Orwell also learned a very valuable lesson about revolutions: all revolutions inevitably move to the right, destroying those who started them in the process. When he attempted to tell the story of how the Communists betrayed the revolution in Spain he found that his articles were rejected on ideological grounds. The New Statesman, the leading leftist journal of opinion in England, refused to publish Orwell’s Spanish essays. Kingsley Martin, the editor, gave reasons for refusing that revealed the utter poverty and lack of imagination of the English left when dealing with Communism: democracy and fascism were fighting in Spain, he said, simplifying the conflict drastically; if neither triumphed but Communism emerged victorious that would be preferable to a fascist victory. Aside from the confusion about the Spanish Civil War which his statement revealed, Orwell was repelled by the ideological arrogance of Martin’s view. To know the truth but not to publish it because it might offend your allies on the left, Orwell told Martin, was to adopt the “mentality of the whore.”

The Spanish Civil War convinced Orwell that someday the myth of Soviet duplicity would have to be exposed. The Second World War put a temporary halt to any work in that direction on Orwell’s part. But towards the end of the conflict he became even more determined to unmask the Soviet system because
the heroic quality of Russia’s defense against Hitler had further blinded the English people to the real nature of Communism. In an essay, “The Prevention of Literature,” written shortly after the end of the war, Orwell elaborated on his reasons for wanting to expose Communist tyranny. Fifteen years ago, he noted, when one defended intellectual freedom one had to do so against the attacks of conservatives, Catholics, and fascists.

Today one has to defend it against Communists and ‘fellow-travelers.’ One ought not to exaggerate the direct influence of the small English Communist Party, but there can be no question about the poisonous effect of the Russian mythos on English intellectual life. Because of it, known facts are suppressed and distorted to such an extent as to make it doubtful whether a true history of our times can ever be written.

This attitude dominated Orwell’s work in the post-war period. He continued to attack tyranny and totalitarianism as he had before the war, only now the most serious threat came from Russia.

Another factor convincing Orwell to expose the Russian betrayal of the idea of revolution was his intense dislike of the Stalinist intellectuals and their fellow-travelers in England. Orwell had always traveled an eccentric path on political questions and he was disgusted with the way fashionable intellectuals swallowed and spread Communist propaganda. According to one of his close friends, George Woodcock, Orwell had a tendency, at least until he achieved fame in the last years of his life, to imagine himself a victim of literary conspiracies. His experience in trying to get his Spanish Civil War sketches and other anti-Communist writings published deepened this tendency and Orwell found it hard to forgive those who had slighted him in the 1930’s. What better way to get back at them than to expose the system of government and ideology that had so thoroughly duped them. Thus Orwell’s motivation for writing Animal Farm was both personal and political.

In November, 1943, he began work on a short political tract aimed at demonstrating how the Bolshevik revolution had been corrupted by the revolutionaries themselves. After considerable experimentation he hit upon the idea of using the fable form. Within a matter of weeks he finished the first draft of Animal Farm and began trying to find a publisher. Since the Anglo-Russian alliance was still strong, his manuscript was con-
sistently rejected. Victor Gollancz, owner and editor of Gollancz Press, one of the leading leftist publishing houses in England, rejected Animal Farm on the grounds that it was "extreme" and "hysterical." Gollancz had had an unpleasant experience with Orwell a few years before when a work he commissioned to show the responsibility of capitalism for the disastrous conditions in the English coal mines came back with an indictment not only of capitalism but of the limitations of socialism as a solution to England's industrial problems. The finished work, The Road to Wigan Pier, finally had to be published with a special introduction by Gollancz taking exception to Orwell's criticism of socialism.

After despairing of ever seeing his work in print and even considering having it published at his own expense, Orwell found a small English press, Sacker and Warburg, who agreed to put out a limited edition. Animal Farm appeared in 1945 and was an immediate critical and popular success. The good relations between Russia and England were beginning to show their first signs of strain and the political-intellectual climate was more tolerant of a work condemnatory of the Soviet Union.

Whatever success Animal Farm had in Great Britain was overshadowed when it appeared in the United States. The first popular American reaction to Orwell's fable came in the form of a favorable review in the very influential pages of Time in May, 1946. Shortly thereafter the Book of the Month Club announced that Animal Farm would be its choice for the month of August, thus guaranteeing Orwell a large audience in the United States for the first time. Animal Farm was given an almost rapturous reception in America. The popular magazines, Time, Newsweek, The New York Times Magazine, were all enthusiastic in their admiration. One of the most laudatory reviews came from the highly respected Edmund Wilson in the New Yorker. Wilson gave Orwell's reputation a great endorsement by comparing him as a satirist with La Fontaine, Voltaire, and Swift. Naturally, some reviewers missed the point of the fable. Edward Weeks, in the Atlantic, concluded an otherwise favorable comment by noting that Animal Farm showed a "clever hostility if one applies the analogy to Soviet Russia." Whom else you could apply it to is difficult to imagine.

The avowedly political journals, all established and all leftist, reacted with some confusion and anger. They were still committed to the ideal of Soviet-American friendship and thus viewed Animal Farm as a dangerous threat to that cause. The winds of the Cold War had not yet begun to blow through the
American literary scene. Issac Rosenfeld in the Nation produced highly contrived reasons for disliking Orwell’s tale, reasons that were more concerned with political than literary considerations. He denied, for example, that Orwell’s interpretation of revolution had any validity when applied to Russia. At one time such a view had some relation to reality but Rosenfeld argued that offering such an interpretation now made Animal Farm a reactionary work. There was little that Rosenfeld liked about Animal Farm. He believed that it not only failed to explain why revolutions were betrayed, but what was worse in his eyes, told us things about Russia we already knew. This was a strange view from a journal that had sought to justify every switch of the Communist line during the 1930’s. But if Rosenfeld found Animal Farm insignificant, George Soule in the New Republic revealed a naivete and hostility toward it that was shocking. According to Soule Animal Farm was “dull” and the allegory was “a creaking machine for saying in a clumsy way things that have been better said directly.” He neglected to say where these things were said better. Certainly not in the pages of the New Republic, which had been one of the most consistent apologists for Soviet Russia in the United States. Soule managed the difficult task of confusing the identity of both Snowball and Napoleon. He thought Napoleon was supposed to represent Lenin, failing to recognize Stalin’s character in the successful pig who betrayed the Bolshevik Revolution. Soule took strong exception to Orwell’s description of the young dogs being trained as secret police, asking if one was supposed to take that seriously as a commentary on Soviet education. He also could not see any relationship between the slaughter of the old work horse, Boxer, and any event in Russian history. This is an astounding comment on his understanding, or rather lack of understanding, of Russian history in the 1930’s, especially Stalin’s purge of the faithful old Bolsheviks who had made the revolution a success.

Still the unfavorable reviews in the fashionable leftist journals could not offset the impact of the endorsement of the popular magazines. Within a short time Animal Farm became a best seller, ultimately selling over 500,000 copies in the United States. The reasons for this were quite clear. First, the story itself was simple enough to be understood by anyone who wanted to understand it. Moreover, like all great fables, it could be appreciated on two levels. It was popular as a children’s tale of how success corrupts and it could be seen as a sophisticated indictment of the Russians’ betrayal of their own revolution. Moreover, Animal Farm appeared just as the Cold War began
to obsess the American public. People suddenly discovered that the Russians had national interests different from America's, that they were no longer willing to cooperate with the Western allies in the United Nations or in Europe—Stalin had stopped being the pipe-smoking, benign Uncle Joe. Orwell's tale of the venality of the revolutionaries thus found a more responsive audience in America than in Great Britain which did not have the world power responsibilities of the United States and therefore did not come into direct conflict with the Soviet Union. Within a short time Animal Farm had become a minor classic in the United States, cited to show the real nature of Communism. There was hardly a high school or college student anywhere in America in the 1950's that did not have Animal Farm as an assigned reading. Orwell's cleverness with words, his recognition of the significance of slogans, created catch phrases that were soon exploited to reveal the reality of Russian Communism. "All animals are equal, but some are more equal than others" was especially effective in capturing the hypocrisy of the Bolshevik revolution turned into a bureaucratic nightmare.

Orwell's success with Animal Farm not only made him financially secure but, according to George Woodcock, it also mellowed him, making him less prone to see himself the victim of literary conspiracies. He no longer had any problems getting his work published, and in fact found himself being pressed to write articles and reviews which he no longer had time for. In America he contributed to Atlantic and even the New Republic, which had finally become suspicious of the Soviet Union. If anything he wrote more now for the American than he did for the English audience.

Unfortunately Orwell's health was failing. He had a tubercular condition which was slowly killing him. Despite his financial success he refused either to slow down his pace of work or to move to a warmer climate. In fact, in an action almost typical of the man, he took some of the profits from Animal Farm and purchased a home on the island of Jura in the Inner Hebrides, just off the coast of Scotland. At the same time he began work on his last major project, the grim anti-utopian novel 1984.

Irving Howe has noted in his essay on Orwell's 1984, "History As Nightmare" that there are some books, no matter how impressive, a reader has a reluctance to reread. 1984 is such a work. Its somber forecast of the future is almost too vivid and too unpleasant to contemplate. Unlike so many futurists Orwell's 1984 seems real to the reader because it dealt not with an un-
imaginable future but merely enlarged upon certain conditions found in the post war world. The world of 1984 was Orwell's vision of what society would look like after decades of protracted war between the West and the Communist world, a war of rationing, shortages, distorting the truth, and the killing of innocent people. Again like Animal Farm it grew out of Orwell's personal experience. Always sensitive to the written word, Orwell had seen how the events of the Spanish Civil War and Russia's role in World War II had been distorted for ideological purposes. In the world of 1984 ideology was unimportant and instead of propaganda history was simply rewritten. Orwell again showed an insight into the future superior to that of most of his contemporaries. Hitler had burned books—in the future, Orwell predicted, totalitarian regimes would simply rewrite them, a process already underway in Russia.

1984 also revealed the extent to which Orwell was a product of the bourgeois age. He lamented the regimentation and personalization of life in the future, the destruction of the individual under totalitarianism, in a manner that made 1984 broadly fit a conservative interpretation. 1984 was commonly taken as an indictment of Communism and not as a tendency of the modern state in general.

When it was published in June, 1949, 1984 was another Book of the Month Club selection. It was also condensed in the Readers Digest—a sure sign that Orwell had gained wide popular acceptance in America. The reviews were uniformly favorable. Unlike Animal Farm, 1984 was well received even in the leftist journals of opinion. After the Berlin blockade, the Communist coup d'état in Czechoslovakia, and the first signs of Russian espionage, Orwell's projection of the future no longer seemed so unreal to the American left. He was disturbed at the way both Animal Farm and 1984 were used by conservatives as indictments of British socialism and often protested this interpretation of his writings. But Orwell failed to see the way his ideas could be expropriated by those with views diametrically opposed to his. There is no doubt but that he provided some of the most damaging criticism of the left written in the post war world. What made his comments so effective was the fact that they came from a man whose own leftist credentials were beyond dispute. But Orwell never found a way of countering the conservative exploitation of his ideas and criticism. Though it was never his major purpose to censure socialism for its failures in the modern world this is precisely the interpretation most commonly assigned to his work by many American critics.
American intellectuals have had a tendency to be taken in by second and third rate European writers and artists. The success of a C. P. Snow or a Herbert Marcuse as compared with the difficult struggle for acceptance of truly seminal thinkers like Bernanos or Ortega-Y-Gasset is clear enough proof of that phenomenon. Possibly this results from an imagined American inferiority complex toward a “more” cultured Europe. Occasionally, however, a first rate thinker wins an American audience because he captures the mood of the nation at some time of crisis. Such was the case of Orwell after World War II. The Cold War created the proper environment for Orwell to seize the imagination of the American public. Unfortunately Orwell’s impact on Americans came essentially through his final novels. As a result his other work has been relatively neglected. His critical essays, brilliant examinations of topics as varied as English postcards, Rudyard Kipling, and the art of the murder mystery, have never secured a large following in the United States. This is regrettable because a case can be made for their superiority to all his other writings. The essay form was peculiarly suited to the crisp clear prose style that Orwell had mastered. He liked championing unpopular causes and he could make a case with devastating impact in the short essay.

Orwell’s reputation is temporarily in decline in America. Among the “New Left” he is despised as a cold warrior who contributed to the “poisoning” of relations between the United States and Russia. Psychologists have discovered some menacing significance in Orwell’s abandonment of his family name of Blair and his adoption of a new name. Other critics have gone even further and attributed the morbidity of 1984 to Orwell’s terminal illness. None of these observations will mar his reputation in the long run. These views explain both too much and too little. Orwell was not a cold warrior. He was never a proponent of capitalism or of a preventive war against the Soviet Union. He simply disliked totalitarianism in all its forms. As to the psychological interpretation it is self serving. If every writer who used a pseudonym had emotional problems then literature would be little more than a branch of psychology. Orwell’s health was poor while he wrote 1984, but friends attest to his high spirits at the time. He was considering a new project just before his death, hardly the act of a man who had lost interest in life.

Orwell’s place in literature is assured because like all great writers he profoundly understood human nature. His honesty and his detestation of all cant earns him a new reading public
as each generation comes to maturity. If he was originally adopted in this country for the wrong reasons, nevertheless time has shown the universality and continuing vitality of his vision.

All Night My Tongue’s Awash With Words

A. POULIN, JR.

All night my tongue’s awash with words
torrents of syllables vowels tongues
of towns filling the air with bells
all day dry reeds in a deserted square

All night my eyes are kleigs
my ceiling sky for grand openings
premiers mobs of sales and stars
all day ancient and dry wells

All night my bones are telephones
for births and deaths and loneliness suffered endured survived
all day the drone of captured bees

All night my nerves are cables
suspended over riots of water
blood a metropolis of panic
all day buckling in a quake

All night my heart’s a club
every drop of blood a nail
a thud in the wooden dark
all day a sealed lead box.
Mrs. Lawson-Byers

MARGARET ALEXANDER

An Intimate Heirloom

London

A Georgian traveling chamber-pot, "frequently used by a former Lord Mayor of Leeds in his mayoral coach," has been sold at Sotheby's auction house for $2520. It is of silver, is dated 1818, and bears the arms of a High Sheriff of York, and of Mary Anne, daughter of the first Earl of Harewood.

Sotheby's catalogue remarking that the lid fits tightly and that the base is exceptionally broad for stability, added, "The suggestion... that the piece is merely a soup tureen does not entirely hold water." It was sent for sale by one of the Lord Mayor's descendants. In the same sale, 245 pieces of silver from the Duke of Hamilton and Brandon, Scotland's premier peer, brought more than $28,000. Most were engraved with the family crest and motto, "Never Behind." Manchester Guardian

MRS. LAWSON-BYERS was well known in Surrey for her collection of antique pewter. She had just finished her shower and was moving about in a swan of talcum powder when Felicity, her maid, rapped on the bathroom door.

"Excuse me, Madam, but Mr. Withway rang. He said to tell you he'd found something rather good. Wants you to see it straightaway. At his shop."

Mrs. Lawson-Byers was thrilled but she was wise and knew that Ladies let neither their enthusiasms nor their disappointments show. Suppress your emotions, swab your tears, gobble up that giggle, aunts and grandmothers alike had said as they handed down the tapestries and pearls. So Mrs. Lawson-Byers kept the excitement inside herself and thanked Felicity as if the message were of no more importance than a weather report.

It sounded to Felicity as if Mrs. Lawson-Byers might lie down and forget about Mr. Withway's telephone call.

"Straightaway, Mrs. Lawson-Byers!" Felicity urged with
her palms pressed together. A pewter find these days could not be ignored.

But inside the bedroom with the door closed, Mrs. Lawson-Byers was a swivel of activity. Blue hand lotion got overturned, a zipper was caught in some tweed, the nylons on her left leg were a different shade from the ones on her right leg. Nevertheless the phrase something rather good pushed itself with steam through her mind and, all alone where no one could see her, she was very happy.

As she hummed, she remembered calling Mr. Withway a Horrid Old Man (without emotion) only last week. He was a silver smith who always offered things first to the American service people who would buy anything, as Felicity once put it, from the sublime to the caw blimey.

Mrs. Lawson-Byers did give the Americans credit for snapping up some English treasures, but the mystery was those Americans who bought firewood antiques—Victoriana—and never burned them. Recently Captain Miller's wife bought a Victorian sideboard for ten shillings and she had put Spode in it.

Mrs. Lawson-Byers did very well to conceal her shock. When she had been shown this anachronism, she was about to force politeness to the limit and mutter, "How very ..." when Mrs. Miller gripped a stick of chewing gum between her teeth and said, "I knew you'd like it."

Suddenly Mrs. Lawson-Byers sat down on her pink eiderdown. What if Mr. Withway has already telephoned the Americans? Those military wives who do their own hair and housework . . . who outbid me at every auction!

Felicity walked by the now opened door. "But Mrs. Lawson-Byers, I know it's against your nature but you must hurry!"

She did not move.

"Did Mr. Withway mention the Americans?"

"He was quite excited about ringing you first. But said you must come in this morning."

Mrs. Lawson-Byers opened a tallboy drawer (Georgian with original brasses) and looked through her gloves. She was immensely relieved that the Brigadier (ret.) was not at home and getting in her way. Her husband was a amateur tea taster who talked about the color and bouquet within his teacups, who moved the tea in his mouth under a sip of air the way wine tasters do before guessing the grape. When he was about, there was a lot of bother, bringing water to the boil, polishing up the teapots and so on.

"The leather gloves, Felicity?" she asked as if gloves were the issue of the day.
Felicity decided against the ones with little holes across the knuckles because they caught in Madam’s rings.

Mrs. Lawson-Byers hummed a rather violent passage from Swan Lake (Act III). “Now, Felicity, you may tell Cooper that I am ready.” The muted thunder in her throat gave way to happier sounds as she found herself really liking Mr. Withway again in spite of the things he had sold to the Americans. Lord Nelson’s oatmeals, Shelley’s meat platter, and that Charles I warming pan, to remember a few.

The telephone was ringing.

Felicity came into the room. “I’m afraid it’s the Brigadier. Shall I tell him you’re gone?” She looked at the time. “It’s nearly eleven.”

But Mrs. Lawson-Byers smiled into the receiver as if she had all morning long. “Darjeeling,” she said (their little joke).

“. . . You’ve invited the Bank Manager to lunch? Today?”

“. . . another overdraft? One of mine?”

“Extravagant? But those carriage lanterns were silver!”

“. . . For lunch then.” Mentally she reached for an aspirin.

“Circa noon.”

She replaced the receiver and managed to sound vaguely pleased. “Felicity, guess what? The Bank Manager seems to be coming for lunch. The silver tea service. It must be polished.”

Felicity was holding rags in both hands. “But Mrs. Lawson-Byers, I’m doing me brasses today. I like polishing me brasses on a Wednesday. Brass on Wednesday and I know what the day is.”

Mrs. Lawson-Byers sniffed the air. “It does tend to smell like Wednesday around here.” It was wax on Monday, brass on Wednesday, and gin on Friday. But the silver had to be done.

“Felicity, you know what the Brigadier is like when he wants to impress.”

On her way out, she opened her handbag and found two pound notes. Of all days for the Bank Manager to come and sit all over their account!

She stopped at the door and her question to Felicity was casual. “Did Mr. Withway sound as if he’d found something on the, you know . . .”

“The expensive side? Yes, indeed. Really pleased with himself, he was. Called it a treasure.” Then Felicity saw the two notes in Mrs. Lawson-Byer’s hand. “Excuse me for saying so, Madam, but shall I loan you a few quid? I mean it’d be all right. I won’t tell the Brigadier.”

“Thank you but no, I couldn’t. It’s not the right thing.”

“What about the money you save for the ballet?”

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“What a good idea.” From a desk drawer, she took twenty pounds from an envelope marked Rudolf Nureyev. At last she was ready. But company for lunch! Everything seemed against her.

“Felicity, never mind the tarnished silver. The men must be fed, I suppose.”

“Yes, Madam. One of life’s burdens.”

“Well, I’ve no time for Mr. Withway and the shops and we know which comes first. Felicity, you must make something yellow for us.”

“Don’t you worry, Mrs. Lawson-Byers. You’ll have time if you hurry. Put some prawns in an avocado pear. That’s one thing you do very well. Won’t take you a minute.”

But Mrs. Lawson-Byers had taken her mind away from the luncheon table and her thoughts were quite firmly on the treasure, where they belonged.

“To Mr. Withway’s, please,” she said to Cooper as if she were asking him to take her some place no more special than a petrol pump. But just as they were leaving the circular drive, the American, Captain Miller’s wife, the antique and Victoriana enthusiast, Mrs. Lawson-Byers’ greatest competitor for pewter finds, drove in behind them in her station wagon. She ran over to the Rover.

“Hey there, I knew you’d forget to come over and have some tea with me this morning. I’ve come to get you!”

Was it this morning for Mrs. Miller’s tea?

Mrs. Lawson-Byers kept her pleasant expression while her thoughts seemed to rummage about in one of Mrs. Miller’s tea cups, how one had to move Mrs. Miller’s tea bags around until the hot water was stained a decent color. She hated to admit, even to herself, what Mrs. Miller’s tea bags reminded her of but, yes, the thought was there. They reminded Mrs. Lawson-Byers of those internal things and how one was always left with a soggy string to deal with. But this was not the time to think about tea and internal affairs. What if Mrs. Miller learned about the treasure?

“I should love to come for a tiny cup, but the Brigadier is bringing a guest for lunch. He just rang up. I’m off to the shops.”

“You know all about the shops. I’m coming with you!”

“My dear, it’s for boring things like . . .”

“Prawns and avocado pears,” Felicity put it quickly, feeling the threat of American money.

“If you just happen to find yourself in an antique shop,” she said suspiciously, “and you bump into something old, something I might like, you will tell me, won’t you?”

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“Naturally,” Mrs. Lawson-Byers said, waving good-bye. At Mr. Withway’s they drove into the unpaved lot where a junk pile held up a fence. There were no other cars in the lot, only Mr. Withway’s. His new white Rolls.

Mrs. Lawson-Byers’ stomach was in a rosette. Nevertheless, she remembered to say good morning.

His apron was long and touched his shoes. He grinned with old teeth and wide black spaces. “Just you come in, Mrs. Lawson-Byers. An English treasure, I can tell you that!”

He led her through the workroom that smelled of Brasso, tarnish, and dirt. Coldness came from the floor of beaten earth into the soles of Mrs. Lawson-Byers’ shoes. She did not shiver. She looked at the walls which were made from old doors, held together by bolts and locks, paneling the room with rectangles of light and draught. “Where did you find this . . . treasure?” At the word treasure, she put her fingers over the clasp of her handbag. Would twenty-two pounds be enough? “It is pewter?”

“Come along.” They went through the second room where he kept the polished brass and copper. The room was a marmalade of brightness. She stumbled over kettles and fenders, coal skuttles, warming pans, and lanterns.

He unlocked the silver room and turned on the light. This room was being improved.

Blue velvet, she saw, was now covering the shelves. Pressed into this blue pile were footed trays, cut glass decanters, salt bowls, pepper pots, old boxes of fruit forks and fish knives and apostle spoons. Arranged below tall candlesticks and candelabra, she saw biscuit barrels, sauce boats, tea pots, coffee pots, pots shaped like pumpkins, spoons like silver snails. Everywhere there was silver, touched with a lion or plated in Sheffield, silver with Georgian lids or Victorian handles, all of it polished and priced, covering four walls of shelves from the floor to the ceiling and she said, “There’s nothing here.”

He pointed to a cardboard box on the floor. “Here we are.”

She watched his shoulders and elbows move as he opened it.

She leaned over him protectively, thinking of him now as a Dear Man. After all, he had called her first this time, for an important item. She was even warming towards the Americans. They meant well. And what if their interior decorating was mixed up and they entertained with tea bags. What of it, indeed!

Mr. Withway removed old newspapers from the box. Already he had taken out a porringer, a Hester Bateman ladle, and three glass-bottomed tankards. The box was nearly empty. Then something wide was brought up. He held it high, like an offering
plate. It was the thing he had saved especially for Mrs. Lawson-
Byers.

She stepped back.

She had nearly gasped.

But he didn’t notice. “A beauty, this!” he cried, thumping
the ‘x’ that touchmarked the pewter bottom. He turned the object
one way and then another, smiling into it as if it were a mirror.

At this point Mrs. Lawson-Byers had to dip into her family
reserves, those centuries of English composure, to fix an agree-
able expression on her face. “It’s a bedpan, isn’t it?” she asked
in a brave voice.

“I thought of you, Mrs. Lawson-Byers, the minute I saw it.”

“Really, Mr. Withway. On the contrary . . . Surely you
didn’t.” Although her legs were weakening, cabrioling at the
knees, her voice was as even as a contemporary line. She had
successfully kept the feeling of revulsion to herself. Even Mr.
Withway thought she was pleased. He continued the discussion.

“Forty-five years in the trade and this is the first bedpan
I’ve laid my hands on.”

“I wonder if there is another term, an archaic one, for
instance, that we might use. You know, a synonym,” she said
politely.

“A synonym at a time like this! Mrs. Lawson-Byers, I notice
that you, of all people, are disregarding these beautiful markings.
Have you thought what has gone into this particular quality of
pewter?” Again he thumped the inside. Then he moved his finger
along the rim. “Worn smooth in places. Did you notice that?”
He held it low now so that she might have an aerial view. “Tra-
ditional styling. Some things never change. It was a bedpan, by
Jove, it is a bedpan! Do you ever think of things that way?”

“Yes. Yes, indeed. I, too, have my very own realistic
thoughts, ones that I keep mainly to myself. I even guessed
exactly what this was, didn’t I? And I see what you mean. The
carrying on of a tradition, as it were. Oh, I can see it all very
well, thank you very much, Mr. Withway. You may stop weaving
it round, near my face.”

“A national treasure, I’d call it. Should be kept in England.
And it’s all yours for thirty quid. Dirt cheap. Cost you the earth
in downtown London.” He held it out to her as if it were as good
as sold.

She put her gloves on and took them off again. “Mr. With-
way, I’m afraid you’ve exaggerated my interest in pewter. A
bedpan!” There, she had said it again. “Really, I mean no matter
what it could be used for, one would look at it and . . . well, think
of all the things it represents, has represented through the ages.
Of bedpans and things. I mean, what could I, Mrs. Lawson-Byers, possibly do with it?"

"Other than the obvious?"

"Precisely."

She thought of Mrs. Miller. What would she do with it?

"The Americans," she said at last. "They might think of something."

"They never use things as they are intended. Why right now, I'm fitting a little dish for the hole in this violin. Major Lark's wife wants to serve peanuts in it."

"You've given me an idea." She placed her hand on his telephone. "Shall I ring Mrs. Miller for you?"

But there was no need to dial. Mrs. Miller had just entered the shop. "Here I am, hot on your tail! What've you found!"

Like a conspirator, Mrs. Lawson-Byers stood by Mr. Withway. She watched Mrs. Miller's face as she heard his grave words, "One of our national treasures." The bedpan changed hands.

"I can use it for potato chips and my clam chowder dip! Won't that be cute! Can't you just see it!" Suddenly Mrs. Lawson-Byers brought a handkerchief over her mouth. All of her careful inheritance in English composure was falling away.

"What is it, Mrs. Lawson-Byers? Are you all right?"

"Oh, my dear . . . I'm afraid I'm going to laugh." And she did so. (Out loud.)

**Marginalia . . .** (continued)

several months ago about a writer named Christopher Franke who had made a 4' x 8' collage of his rejection slips (including one from Four Quarters, I noted painfully). I doubt if the masochistic Mr. Franke will end up in college anthologies, but the perseverance symbolized by the collage suggests something about what it means to be a writer. Recognition may come only as a rejection slip, perhaps with a note of encouragement, or an occasional publication in a magazine of limited circulation. Yet somehow the serious and unknown writer goes on seeking what James described in "The Lesson of the Master": "The sense of having done the best—the sense which is the real life of the artist and the absence of which
is his death, of having drawn from his intellectual instrument the finest music that nature had hidden in it, of having played it as it should be played."

Failure or long-delayed acceptance is not easy for a writer to live with, but there is plenty of evidence that success has not been easy for most American writers either.

After a writer's work has met with some acceptance, he will, if he is not careful, become a public figure—a celebrity. And what is the matter with that, you say. Hasn't he earned it through the long and dreary years?

But I question whether he has earned this final grim joke of the gods of typewriter and pen. For to be a public figure in this country is to be something other than a writer.

A public figure is never poor. Depending on how many times he has made the late night talk shows, he may command fees ranging from a paltry hundred to a comfortable thousand or two for delivering his person into the hands of the college lecture circuit. He need not say much of substance; he need only talk about himself, which most writers do not find overly difficult.

The public figure need not be lonely, or at least he need not be alone. There is always a seminar, a writers' conference, an award dinner. There are many willing to pay handsomely for the pleasure of his company. Some of them are beautiful and some are rich, and many are both.

The public figure need never face the emptiness of an imagination gone dry. He does not need imagination. The Times or someone will buy his words on the state of the subways, or the evils of shopping centers, or life at the university, or what the great man did last summer.

In America we reward the writer by making him a eunuch at the shrine of the "bitch goddess, success." We make it seductively attractive for him to flee the hell of writing and enjoy all its earthly rewards for doing so. The writer as public figure is spared the solitude when there is nobody there but him and his paper—blank and terrifying and offering no answers or applause. In the age of labor-saving devices and jet planes, writing remains the same as in Sophocles' day: it must be done by hand . . . and by head . . . and by heart. And it must be done alone.

—John Keenan
CONTRIBUTORS

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