

POST V: IMAGINING ITALY



POST

A REVIEW OF POETRY STUDIES

Winter 2014

POST V

imagining italy

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HOLLY MULVEEN

This issue features paintings provided by the Irish artist Holly Mulveen, currently living and working in L'Aquila in the Abruzzo region of Southern Italy. Her work can be viewed at <https://hollymulveen.wordpress.com/>

All the pieces are untitled.





Study for
Fallon
plant in
courtyard 7/10/14

MICHAEL HINDS

editorial: pleasuredome to terrordome

This issue of POST grew out of the 2013 Summer School held at The Irish Centre for Poetry Studies, and is indicative of the vibrancy and range of contributions that were experienced at that gathering. It also signifies, more gratifyingly perhaps, that for all the love we bring to Italy— in particular, the idea of it, the look of it and the taste of it—we also acknowledge its fundamental violence. It is not just romance, it is sex; it is not just looking good, it is plastic surgery and men in expensive crushed strawberry trousers; it is not just artefacture, it is the exploitation and murder that made it possible; it is the glory of God and the Vatican underground car-park; Caesar and *Bunga Bunga*. Out of these tensions, it is no wonder that artists and scholars find such capital. Virgil did not emerge out of the sunny South or the ice-clear North, but out of a Mantuan fog. Italy is as grey as it is *azzurri*.

In many ways, it was Americans who taught us how best to appreciate the Italian romance, a tendency that runs all the way up to the Amanda Knox nightmare through the Roman near-death of Kurt Cobain from the deep-set desire for connection to the violent mythic pasts, both pagan and Catholic that so possessed Nathaniel Hawthorne:

Italy, as the site of his romance, was chiefly valuable to him as affording a sort of poetic or fairy precinct, where actualities would not be so terribly insisted upon as they are, and must needs be, in America. No author, without a trial, can conceive of the difficulty of writing a romance about a country where there is no shadow, no antiquity, no mystery, no picturesque and gloomy wrong, nor anything but a commonplace prosperity, in broad and simple daylight, as is happily the case with my dear native land. It will be very long, I trust, before romance writers may find congenial and easily handled themes, either in the annals of our stalwart republic, or in any characteristic and probable events of our individual lives. Romance and poetry, ivy, lichens, and wallflowers, need ruin to make them grow.

In rewriting these volumes, the author was somewhat surprised to see the extent to which he had introduced descriptions of various Italian objects, antique, pictorial, and statuesque. Yet these things fill the mind everywhere in Italy, and especially in Rome, and cannot easily be kept from flowing out upon the page when one writes freely, and with self-enjoyment

Italy the pleasuredome, a fecund pastoral built on ruin, turns out to fundamentally be an unAmerica more than anything else (recalling how Kafka's America is in reality a counter- or alter-Europe in his novel); but this is precisely what Hawthorne wants from it. And so a culture is born. Byron comes to Venice to whore, perhaps, but also to put his daughter in a nunnery, and indulge himself in a Catholic conservatism that would have been impossible in England. Two hundred years later, Frederick Seidel comes to Italy for the motorbikes that US capitalism cannot offer and indulges in a few morality lessons with regard to the cupidity and venality of the locals (playing the role of Juvenalian moralist in Italy while he himself goofs around orgiastically back home, and everywhere else):

Guys spend more money on beauty products here

Than in any other country in the world.

Everyone is also a boss. ('At a Factory in Italy')

The targeting of Italy for this complex of fantasies is readily explicable; Italy, and more especially Rome, is a site of unquestioned cultural authority that is signified (justified) by its excess of artefacture. It is too much, and therefore repellent even as it seduces. Just ask poor old Daisy Miller. If Italy the country and Rome the city are the *ur*-resource for the cultural and historical imagination of the west, then it follows that they have to bear as much of our animus as our affection. There is probably no better example of loving-to-hate Rome than the recently deceased Ian Paisley, his endlessly inventive rhetoric a sure mark of his respect for such an indefatigably Satanic foe.

It is hard not to escape the sense that everything comes from Italy: food, wine, opera, etc. This sense is also tantamount to regarding Italy as a consumable phenomenon, however, and it is no surprise that so much writing about Italy centres on consumption of one kind or another. As pleasure has become more and more commodified, Italy has become increasingly perceived through commodities, a country that in itself has become a kind of luxury good. In turn, modern Italy has helped to promote this opportunistically, as in the invention of various styles of pasta over the past fifty years that are subsequently given all sorts of pseudo-historical authenticity. Note also the part Italy plays in contemporary American self-fulfilment narratives such as *Under the Tuscan Sun* and *Eat, Drink, Pray, Love*, where romantically lethargized Americans discover how to eat and cook (and "love", yes) in Italy. If it becomes too easy to get cynical rather than romantic about Italy as a fulfilment-machine, a giant department store of sensory and cultural excitement for sale, it is a place

that poets keep returning to in their work, and a place that poetry responds to with peculiar acuity and wit.

The sheer cultural authority of all of that artefacture, as Hawthorne attested, is definitely a part of this; in *Civilization and its Discontents*, Freud further suggests that the very appearance of Rome, with its combination of accreted historical experience (its buildings but also its ruins) is an exact metaphor for the shape of human consciousness, that which constructs but also forgets. Rome's peculiar juxtapositions of once-occupied empty spaces and the extraordinarily-intact monument reproduce the mind's formation of bold totems and their withering collapse. Cityscape/landscape stands for the mind, just as the mindscape is apparently expressed in the city:

Since we overcame the error of supposing that the forgetting we are familiar with signified a destruction of the memory-trace - that is, its annihilation - we have been inclined to take the opposite view, that in mental life nothing which has once been formed can perish - that everything is somehow preserved and that in suitable circumstances (when, for instance, regression goes back far enough) it can once more be brought to light. Let us try to grasp what this assumption involves by taking an analogy from another field. We will choose as an example the history of the Eternal City. Historians tell us that the oldest Rome was the Roma Quadrata, a fenced settlement on the Palatine. Then followed the phase of the Septimontium, a federation of the settlements on the different hills; after that came the city bounded by the Servian wall; and later still, after all the transformations during the periods of the republic and the early Caesars, the city which the Emperor Aurelian surrounded with his walls. We will not follow the changes which the city went through any further, but we will ask ourselves how much a visitor, whom we will suppose to be equipped with the most complete historical and topographical knowledge, may still find left of these early stages in the Rome of to-day. Except for a few gaps, he will see the wall of Aurelian almost unchanged. In some places he will be able to find sections of the Servian wall where they have been excavated and brought to light. If he knows enough - more than present-day archaeology does - he may perhaps be able to trace out in the plan of the city the whole course of that wall and the outline of the Roma Quadrata. Of the buildings which once occupied this ancient area he will find nothing, or only scanty remains, for they exist no longer. The best information about Rome in the republican era would only enable him at the most to point out the sites where the temples and public buildings of that period stood. Their place is now taken by ruins, but not by ruins of themselves but of later restorations made after fires or destruction. It is hardly necessary to remark that all these remains of ancient Rome are found dovetailed into the jumble of a great metropolis which has grown up in the last few centuries since the Renaissance. There is certainly not a little that is ancient still buried in the soil of the city or beneath its modern buildings. This is the manner in which the past is preserved in historical sites like Rome.

If Rome is a model of how consciousness works, a place wherein we can summon memory and its annihilation, in what other ways does it stand for our imagination of ourselves? Poet after poet, and then novelists responding to those poets, show us how. Italy offers itself (and with particular significance to the non-Italian mind) as a simultaneously fantastic and traumatic site, as for many of Henry James's characters (like Daisy Miller) or those in E.M. Forster's *A Room with a View*. Those characters are prepared for an Italy in which sex, death and consumption predominate, as opposed to home where either nothing happens (England) or where nobody cares about any tense other than the present (James's America). On the other hand, Forster's character Fielding in *A Passage to India* instantly travels to Venice upon his return from India, apparently craving its proportion.

What raises these expectations? Usually, it is poetry. Winterbourne, the narrator of *Daisy Miller* is a devoted reader of the Italian-based English Romantics, as are nearly all of the characters in *A Room with a View*, although other poets are cited too, notably Dante and the classics. So you get the Italy that you have already read about. It could also, be argued that you get the Italy you deserve, and in keeping with the idea of Italian poetryscapes and landscapes as representations of our particular subjectivities, the very concept of a private Hell has emerged from Dante's imagining of *Inferno*. In this sense, we can argue that the popularity of Dante for other poets is the way in which he imagines torment as an intimate business, a state of afflicted memory that carries with it the weight of judgement. When Ciaran Carson came to translate the *Inferno*, it was entirely continuous with the trajectory that his work had already described in its agonizing record of a native city in ruins (Belfast, in his case). Similarly, in Philip Terry's relocation of Dis to the death-by-workload-model that is the University of Essex, we can see how the Dantean lens enables a writer from anywhere to comprehend the violence that administers them, as well as the equally violent vengefulness that it licenses in their own imagination.

Of course, all of this imagination and projection does prompt a very fundamental question; where are all the Italians? In this idea of Italy as metaphor for the afflicted or inspired self, we not only are experiencing something remarkably limited, but we are also confirming that we are not interested in otherness at all when we contemplate Italy, or only in how it mirrors ourselves. Classical poets create an Italy for us that in reality pre-dates Italy. In some of their idealized landscapes (although not, say, in Catullus's highly sceptical account of his native Verona), we see the beginning of the Italian hyperreal, a paradisaal site

full of unabashed sensuality and fecundity but who bears little enough relation to geographical reality (as we see with Virgil's Pastorals and Georgics). Poetic Italy has only ever required a population of a few shepherds. In this sense, writing about Italy appears to be assuming licence to create a Neverneverland; so with Louise Glück's book *A Village Life* (2010), reviewed by Langdon Hammer under the title "Louise Glück's Italy of the Mind", we perhaps deal with a village that is not a real place but a mythical construct. Her villagers live their lives outside and are far from any city, working the land; this sounds like Everyvillage (and it is arguable whether the village is in fact "Italian," rather than generically European, or beyond that, just *peasantish*— a woman cooks a *daube*, people are on a *plaza*, but the image on the book's cover is a Japanese woodcut, even as a street is called 'Via della Ombre'.)

Glück's collection is nevertheless given a specific anxiety with its references to the death of the local economy and the need for young people to emigrate; so unusually, Glück does concede that the apparently desert spaces of *Mediterranea* (or Nihon-Mediterranea) reveal stories of enforced mobility. What is deserting the streets and laneways is not the Romantic imagination, but arguably one of its outcomes, globalization:

And for those who understood such things, the stars were sending messages:

You will leave the village where you were born

and in another country you'll become very rich, very powerful,

but always you will mourn something you left behind, even though you

can't say what it was,

and eventually you will return to seek it.

No one really understands

the savagery of this place,

the way it kills people for no reason,

just to keep in practice.

All the same, the interesting part of this is why Glück and other contemporaries are so drawn to Italy, or its likeness. The number of contemporary American poets who have written about it is staggering, and several feature in this issue of POST. Why it and not another "other" place, possibly closer to home? Is it because "Italy" has no life other than its textual one, that it is a place dependent on your writing of it, more so than any other place? To paraphrase Robert Lowell, 'one place, one writing!'

Italy is always a perverse home to a writer, because it offers a guarantee of exile. It is clearly a foreign land. So in 'Sailing Home from Rapallo,' Robert Lowell is definitely not a tourist as he bears home his mother's coffin, but determinedly an alien here, and every vestige of Italianness seems intrusive and vulgar, compared to the starchy dignity of frostbitten New England. The 'tin foil' is 'Italian,' the 'nurse could only speak Italian'; we might expect complaints like these from a transferred footballer, but in Lowell's poems, they are the necessary signifiers of his thorough alienation and guilt. Nowhere could be less Lowellian than the realm of the 'Italian,' nothing could be more humiliating than to have died there, amidst the colours and the Catholics.

D.H. Lawrence's poems written in Italy perhaps offer a counter-example. These poems are not explicitly about the places they were composed in, although Lawrence very deliberately names these places at the end of each poem. Although we could ask flippantly whether or not we would know if the poem were written in Italy, had he not written the place names down.

I LOVE you, rotten,
Delicious rottenness.
I love to suck you out from your skins
So brown and soft and coming suave,
So morbid, as the Italians say.
What a rare, powerful, reminiscent flavour
Comes out of your falling through the stages of decay:
Stream within stream.
Something of the same flavour as Syracusan muscat wine
Or vulgar Marsala.
Though even the word Marsala will smack of preciousness
Soon in the pussy-foot West.

This Italian fruit is sacred and profane, ecstatic yet also of the body, gratifying and disgusting; there is nowhere else Lawrence wants to be; it also communicates to our jadedly gratified 21st century palates how the pre-globalized world where fruit was something you ate in the same place where it was grown, and at the time of year it was harvested (no asparagus from Peru or French beans from Kenya). There is no hiding how strange the slow-food erotics of Lawrence's "responses" to Italy are, but what they do very credibly (in opposition to the tendency of some to mythologize from without), is that the reality of these poems emerges from an encounter with the particulars of place as well as with a

particular creature or flower. Lawrence is particularly attuned to how the sites he occupies in Italy exist in continuity with the pagan past, maybe even the prehuman past. His characteristic mode is one of humiliation in the face of the energies of nature and the colossal errancies and stupidities of Western culture. Despite being thoroughly aware of how freighted Italy is with the classical past, he speaks to an Italy before both Italy and the Romans, and his environment opens up to surprising encounters with both himself and a cast of other beings, not all animal; all of which pushes his own consciousness out of the centre of the action and instead into a more precarious continuity with other things.

Lawrence typifies perhaps a once-trendy idea that may have some use for us, that of psychogeography; his Italy is where taking a wrong turn, misdirecting yourself, being forced out of orthodox mappings into new shapes and places, generates a potentially liberating unmasking. In this, the venerable and Augustan becomes the chaotically modern, as when Goethe's *Venetian* Epigrams turn spectacularly nasty, and the sage of Weimar becomes his sex-addicted daemonic twin; those remarkable poems are somewhat like Lawrence's response to space and place, not so much erotic imaginings as guiltless seductions, maybe even rapes, and that brings us back to where we began, with a sense of Italy as the necessary place to confuse and infuse the Ugly and the Beautiful, where the ideal has to meet the horrifying Real. In that way, the country intrigues because it continues to cast up images that indicate its particular grotesqueness in the midst of its dream of luxury; this can be comically violent, as when Berlusconi was wounded by a tourist model of the Milan *duomo*, but it can also be as paralyzing as the notorious image from 2008 of the dead Roma girls on the beach at Naples being blithely ignored by sunbathers. Cristina and Violetta Djeordsevic were more than only an image, of course; as such, it is evidently wrong to fall into an Audenesque mode and treat this as a moment where the catastrophe of our civilization becomes a moment only for cultural analysis. What it should instruct us in is the lesson in *reality* that Italy continues to offer, just as it once offered one to Virgil, to Dante, to Caravaggio, to Pasolini, and all of the poets referred to in this issue. About suffering, Italy is never wrong, and it is never right; outside of our systems and narratives, it is always remorselessly there, just as sure as the turning of the earth.

STEPHEN MATTERSON

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THE PRESENT TENSE: BENEFICENT ANAESTHESIA IN ANTHONY HECHT'S POETRY

In the many and varied critical negotiations of the 'middle generation' of US poets, World War 2 plays perhaps a surprisingly small part.¹ This might be explained in various ways. It may be that their collective *oeuvre* was grounded in the political effects of that war as felt in the 1950s and 1960s and their impacts on personal life. It may be due simply to the fact that several of the leading members of that generation were non-combatants; 'veterans of the Cold War, not the War' was how Robert Lowell characterised himself and John Berryman, for example.² Lowell's refusal to serve became a famous, even notorious, public gesture, leading to his incarceration. Although he had been in Europe during the build-up to the war and was deeply concerned about public affairs, the Boston draft board classified Berryman as 4F and consequently unfit for the military, mainly because of his poor eyesight, and perhaps because of a recent history of epileptic-like fits. Elizabeth Bishop divided her war years between several places in the US and Mexico; although she worked very briefly (for less than a week) as a trainee in the US Navy Optical Department, this experience and the war generally, play little direct part in her poetry. She does allude with characteristic obliqueness to the war and defiant resistance in poems such as 'The Armadillo.' Stanley Kunitz was drafted though as a conscientious objector he remained in the US in a non-

¹ There has never been a satisfactory or generally agreed-on name for the generation of poets who flourished from the mid-1950s onwards. Terms such as 'confessional' or 'postmodern' are problematic in skewing critical debate towards the idea of a movement, and in this respect 'middle generation' is preferable in implying a chronological positioning. It was also the term used in 1959 by John Berryman when he pondered on how to mark the shift from what he termed the 'senior' generation. See John Berryman, 'From the Middle and Senior Generations' in *The Freedom of the Poet* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1976), pp. 310-315.

² Robert Lowell, 'For John Berryman,' *Day by Day* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1977), p. 27.

combatant role. Theodore Roethke, at the time a University lecturer, was also a non-combatant, and, again, the war is scarcely alluded to in his work.

There were of course poets who were enlisted and several of these experienced combat first-hand; these include Anthony Hecht, Karl Shapiro, James Dickey, Louis Simpson and Randall Jarrell. Each of these poets wrote directly of their experiences of the war but, strikingly, tended to do so in their earlier work and did not generally revisit these experiences. Simpson and Jarrell are good examples here of a kind of model of writing on the war. Simpson was a member of the 101st Airborne Division, which was heavily involved at the war's end in France, The Netherlands and Germany. His first poetry collection, *The Arrivistes* (1949) includes several moving poems derived from these experiences, and 'Carentan O Carentan', 'The Warrior's Return' and 'Resistance' are unjustly overlooked today. He also includes several poems on the war in his second collection, 1955's *Good News of Death and Other Poems*, and in fact he considered arranging his poems in sections, one of which was to be titled 'The Fighting in Europe.' Inevitably perhaps, the representation of war recedes altogether. While he served in the US during the war, instructing the airmen who would go on the bombing missions in Europe, Jarrell follows much the same trajectory, with the war being prominent in *Little Friend, Little Friend* (1945) and *Losses* (1948). Some of these poems are Jarrell's most well-known and most frequently anthologised; a fact effectively acknowledged by the use of a 1943 photograph of Jarrell in air force uniform on the cover of the 1999 Farrar Straus Giroux edition of his *Complete Poems* (a collection whose arrangement frustrates any reader looking for a chronology of his work). It is as though Simpson and Jarrell are able to come to terms with their war experiences through writing of them while they remain relatively fresh, and then to move on elsewhere.³ Simpson's plan for thematically categorizing his poems is telling in this regard, suggesting that the war was a phase one leaves behind for another

The trajectory of Hecht's work seems almost deliberately to contradict the model of recollection provided by Jarrell, Simpson and others. His first published collection was *A Summoning of Stones* (1954) and, given what we now know of Hecht, its oddest element is the almost total absence of reference to his experiences of the war. The poems from this

³ Not that Jarrell necessarily moved on from a mental allegiance to his comrades who had served: he was sufficiently angered by the Olympian aloofness of Marianne Moore's 1945 poem 'In Distrust of Merits' to rebuke her severely and publicly for it. See Randall Jarrell, *Kipling, Auden & Co.* (New York: Farrar, Straus Giroux, 1980), p. 129.

book that he chose to reprint in 1990 for *Collected Earlier Poems* are concerned with a wide variety of themes and topics. We read of Samuel Sewall's wig, encounter numerous classical references, find a delicious parody of Wallace Stevens' 'Le Monocle de Mon Oncle' ('Le Masseur de Ma Souer'), and experience a wonderful technical range. The whole collection opens with a double sonnet and continues with the sophisticated mirrored rhyme stanzas of 'The Gardens of the Villa D'Este' and poems displaying a dazzle of poetic device. Indeed a good many of what will be Hecht's characteristics as a poet are present in this first collection. Tick the boxes for yourself: assured, allusive voice, attention to poetry's technical elements, erudite analogies to painting, music, to classical and mythic narratives, sophisticated awareness of other poets (Stevens, Eliot, Auden) that oscillates between homage and parody. In addition, we have the ease of usage in French and German, and the Italian poem that will be a constant in his books. The Hecht characteristic that we do not have in *A Summoning of Stones* is direct treatment of World War 2 and the rendering of his own experiences. Indeed, any references to these or to contemporary events seem oblique and occluded, perhaps in deference to the so-called 'academic style' of the late 1940s and early 1950s, and to his literary lineage as an heir to the New Critics. 'Christmas is Coming' has multiple narrative allusions to war conditions and to enemies, but its recurrent reference to the English demotic 'Christmas is Coming' also marks it as a descendant of 'The Hollow Men' and of Eliot's use of 'A Penny for the Guy' and of the nursery rhyme 'Here We Go Round the *Mulberry Bush*.' The inserted oblique references lie stubbornly there in the collection, however. In 'Drinking Song' for example, Hecht alludes to German military activity and in 'La Condition Botanique' the line 'The places where Kilroy inscribed his name' intrudes as exactly as 'Kilroy was here' intruded in Europe: an American graffito in the liberation of old world, cultured continental Europe.⁴

Without the knowledge that his later collections provide, it would be impossible to say what this absence of reference or its oblique, understated presence represents. Is it deliberate aversion, distancing, or a self-conscious deferring—the awareness that something horrific must be dealt with, but not yet? With the benefit of both hindsight and the models provided by trauma studies, we can with justification cite conscious deferral. There is a useful literary analogy here with Ernest Hemingway's post-trauma two-part story

⁴ Anthony Hecht, *Collected Earlier Poems* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990), p. 74.

'Big Two-Hearted River' where Nick Adams seeks self-reclamation via a camping trip in Michigan after he has been through the war in Europe. War trauma is represented indirectly as he concentrates on the immediate tasks to hand; making camp, preparing to go fishing, making coffee. Nothing else matters except getting through this present, focusing on the immediate. He knows that this is a temporary respite, another version of pastoral, and eventually he must confront what he is consciously avoiding. The story ends with Nick getting through the day and reflecting: 'There were plenty of days coming when he could fish the swamp.'⁵ In this respect, the Italian poems of *A Summoning of Stones* function as a kind of sanctuary. In spite of its title 'La Condition Botanique' is one of these poems; the others are 'The Gardens of the Villa D'Este' and 'A Roman Holiday.' These poems announce the present, suggesting a place from which one does not need to look back to the immediate past but to a much larger sense of history which, it is implied, provides a meaningful perspective on more recent events. 'I write from Rome' is the phrase opening 'Roman Holiday' and repeated in the sixth stanza. The phrase has a dual function: Rome is the place from which I *can* write; I am here in the present as a survivor.⁶ Similarly 'The Gardens of the Villa D'Este' opens with 'This is Italian'; the here and now, the moment at which perspective is attainable.⁷ The use of the present tense introduced here will become a telling index of Hecht's mental health and attitude to the past, as though Italian locations become an opportunity for revaluation and self-reflection.

Hecht's aversion to writing directly about his war experiences seems on the face of it remarkable and even perverse given their intensity. He was drafted at the age of 20 in 1944, interrupting his undergraduate studies at Bard College after three years there. As part of the recently re-formed 97th Infantry Division he was among those who landed in Normandy in spring 1945. The Division had been intended for service in the Pacific, but allied losses incurred in the European theatre resulted in their being diverted there. The 97th was involved in some of the heaviest fighting during the advance towards and into Germany. It also incurred some of the worst losses: by April 1945 an astonishing 80% of its troops had been killed or wounded. Equally traumatizing was the division's discovery and liberation of death camps as it moved across Germany. The 97th was the first to discover

⁵ Ernest Hemingway, *The Complete Short Stories* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1987), p. 180.

⁶ Hecht, *Collected Earlier Poems*, p. 100, p. 101.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 92.

the Flossenburg camp in Bavaria, close to the Czech border. Because of his education Hecht's basic training had been intermitted and he was sent to Carleton College in Minnesota for intensive language courses in French and German. In Europe he was consequently assigned to the counter-intelligence corps with the task of interviewing the prisoners and, later, the officers who were captured. In an interview completed in 1999, Hecht spoke of this time:

Flossenburg was an annex of Buchenwald. It was both an extermination camp and a slave-labour camp, where prisoners were made to manufacture Messerschmitts at a factory right within the perimeter of the camp. When we arrived, the SS personnel had, of course, fled. Prisoners were dying at the rate of 500 a day from typhus. Since I had the rudiments of French and German, I was appointed to interview such French prisoners as were well enough to speak, in the hope of securing evidence against those who ran the camp.

Later, when some of these were captured, I presented them with the charges levelled against them, translating their denials or defences back into French for the sake of their accusers, in an attempt to get to the bottom of what was done and who was responsible. The place, the suffering, the prisoners' accounts were beyond comprehension. For years after I would wake shrieking. I must add an important point: after the war I read widely in Holocaust literature, and I can no longer separate my anger and revulsion at what I really saw from what I later came to learn.⁸

We cannot help but register immediately the appalling conditions with which the 21 year - old Hecht must somehow deal, and say that these are well beyond the comprehension of most of us; but it is also worth noting the indirection of communication involved in this account. Interviewing the survivors in French, Hecht later meets their oppressors to whom he must, in line with responsible forensic investigation, recount the allegations against them, translated into his self-admittedly rudimentary German. He must then return these to the accusers in French before creating a summary written record in English. There is no easy getting 'to the bottom' in this inevitable layering of languages (and perhaps deliberate misdirection and obfuscation), though the unspeakable suffering and victimisation are everywhere evident. Given this cue, we are invited to consider Hecht's poetry as inflected and infused by his war experiences. It is an indirect and refracted representation of those

⁸ *Anthony Hecht in conversation with Philip Hoy* (London: Between the Lines Press, 1999), p. 24. As founder of Between the Lines and later the Waywiser Press, Hoy became Hecht's UK publisher after the winding-up of the Oxford University Press poetry list. Hecht several times repeated his understanding that Flossenburg was an annex of Buchenwald, but the connection between the two was less formal. For an attempt at clarification see *The Selected Letters of Anthony Hecht*, ed. Jonathan F. S. Post (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), p. 336n.

experiences, refracted as he indicates how those experiences were enriched and given a larger perspective over a long period of time by the subsequent availability of Holocaust literature.

Hecht's war did not end with the war in Europe. As noted above, the 97th Infantry Division had been re-formed to undertake Pacific action. They were returned to the US in summer 1945 to prepare for this, but the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki precipitated the Japanese surrender and the division was spared combat in the East. Hecht was always keenly (and to some degree guiltily) aware that the bombing had effectively saved his life; nevertheless, the 97th was sent to Japan as part of the occupation policy. In fact, as a recent study has shown, Hecht actually spent more time in service in Japan than he had in Europe.⁹ He did of course return to the US eventually, choosing to resume his studies at Kenyon College, mainly on the recommendation of Robie Macauley, with whom he had become friends when they served in the 97th; Macauley had graduated from Kenyon prior to his military service.

While Hecht's war experiences are mostly absent from his first collection, his second book, *The Hard Hours* (1967), makes them forcefully and memorably present. *The Hard Hours* was highly acclaimed, winning Hecht the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1968. The seriousness, tone and brilliant formal skill are intensified from the first book, but evident now is also a way of writing about appalling experience with enough personal presence to add depth and commitment, yet with a measure of detachment that provides an enriching historical sense. Ted Hughes reviewed the volume and praised Hecht for his having 'shed every artifice and began to write with absolute raw simplicity and directness.'¹⁰ But this is rather overstating the shift that Hecht made, although it is true that several sections of 'Rites and Ceremonies' are closer to free verse than anything Hecht ever composed. More generally, though, the poems have a personal edge that never turns into the so-called confessionalism or 'rawness' of his contemporaries, while maintaining an erudite and informed approach that provides depth and historical resonance. In some ways Hecht has learned a good deal here from post-war Auden. Although he had known Auden's work since he was an undergraduate, Hecht became friendly with him since a meeting while on holiday in Ischia in 1951. In several of his post-war poems, notably 'The Shield of Achilles' (1952),

⁹ See Geoffrey Lindsay, 'Anthony Hecht in Occupied Japan.' *Sewanee Review*, 119:4 (2011), 641-655.

¹⁰ Blurb on back cover of *Collected Earlier Poems*.

Auden had developed a mode of writing which includes contemplation of contemporary history and simultaneously invokes a larger perspective.¹¹ The discipline provided by form is crucial to this fusion, making the poem part of a longer tradition while still maintaining a relevance to the contemporary. Auden long remained of central importance to Hecht, as his frequent comments on him, and his critical study, *The Hidden Law* (1993) make clear.

Several holocaust poems from *The Hard Hours* have justly become Hecht's most famous and most anthologised; these include 'Rites and Ceremonies,' 'More Light! More Light!' and 'It out-Herods Herod. Pray you, avoid it.' The actualities of atrocity and the moral situating of this, the self-doubt of a survivor, measured representation of appalling historical truths, are here conveyed with a tone fluctuating between detachment and engagement. There is also the notable refusal to sentimentalise or to seek ways of ennobling suffering, insisting that 'The contemplation of horror is not edifying,/ Neither does it strengthen the soul.'¹² Although these three poems are major achievements, they are in some ways misleading. On one level they represent what Hecht felt was his duty as a war survivor, that is, to commemorate the time and his experiences in poetry. In interviews he spoke of his strong sense of conflicting duties, the need to 'honour and commemorate the tragedies and horror of war,' and the need to 'compose elegant and well-crafted poems.'¹³ At the same time, there is a personal reticence to the poems, indicating reluctance to write directly of himself. It was this reticence, coupled with his elegance and formal craft, which frequently led to Hecht's work being used as an example of all that poetry should *not* be with the emergence of the Beats from the late 1950s. Later, when Hecht wrote directly and movingly of holocaust atrocity in 'The Book of Yokel' he chose the sestina form, thereby ensuring that a deliberately obtrusive form interposes between self and experience.

This reluctance develops into a mode of indirection where Hecht often creates a speaker who can describe the effects of trauma but not the trauma itself. The opening poem of *The Hard Hours* is 'A Hill,' which introduces this mode of self-writing. While in

¹¹ It is often forgotten that while Auden had no combat experience in World War 2, he did experience its effects first-hand in the US army, working for the US Strategic Bombing Survey in Germany immediately after the war.

¹² From 'Rites and Ceremonies,' Hecht, *Collected Earlier Poems*, p. 43.

¹³ *Hecht in conversation with Philip Hoy*, p. 42.

Rome, Hecht's speaker experiences a 'vision' in which his immediate surroundings are suddenly dissolved:

the noises suddenly stopped,
And it got darker; pushcarts and people dissolved
And even the great Farnese Palace itself
Was gone, for all its marble; in its place
Was a hill, mole-colored and bare. It was very cold,
Close to freezing, with a promise of snow.
The trees were like old ironwork gathered for scrap
Outside a factory wall. There was no wind,
And the only sound for a while was the little click
Of ice as it broke in the mud under my feet.¹⁴

The vision dissipates and Rome reappears but in the present, ten years after the experience, the speaker realizes that he knows the imagined hill from his childhood. It is in Poughkeepsie, and 'as a boy / I stood before it for hours in wintertime.'¹⁵

'A Hill' is a major poem of trauma, in which the triggering event or condition is unnamed even when its effects are felt years later, and felt with an intensity that threatens to destroy the present. Its repeated echoing of the opening lines of Dante's *Inferno* of course intensifies the sense of how much is at stake here. An unhappy childhood, a punishment, a scarcely bearable event; whatever the trauma was remains mysterious even though its consequences are palpable and lasting. The silence/trauma dynamic of 'A Hill' engages Hecht elsewhere. His recently published *Selected Letters* include some of the 93 letters, postcards and telegrams that Hecht wrote during his time in training and combat. Their editor, Jonathan F. S. Post, draws attention to Hecht's 'conspicuous silence' on much of his experience. He rightly reminds us that wartime letters are composed in conditions which demand reticence: the operation of official censorship; the self-censorship, the desire to assure the correspondent or to allay anxiety. But even so, Hecht's letters are reticent almost to the point of becoming laconic. 'The exigencies of combat have made writing impossible for the last few days,' begins one, while another written during intense fighting

¹⁴ *Collected Earlier Poems*, p. 2. The particular arrangement of *Collected Earlier Poems* made 'A Hill' the opening poem in that volume also.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

opens 'I have been getting a short, much needed rest yesterday and today.'¹⁶ Indeed, fifty years after the war Hecht asserts 'There is much about this I have never spoken about, and never will.'¹⁷ Silence is both self-protective and potentially self-destructive, and one of Hecht's methods of reducing its corrosive power is to develop a poetic strategy of indirection, a strategy particularly conspicuous given the development of so-called 'confessional' poetry in the 1960s. There are other strategies, however, and these include a kind of self-armouring; with intertextuality, and, finally, with an endorsement of poetic-looking as a moral and ethical gesture.

The need to develop self-protective mental armour is articulated very directly in one of the later Italian narrative poems, 'See Naples and Die,' collected in 1990's *The Transparent Man*.¹⁸ Although the poem's themes are far more complex than the narrative alone might suggest, it is a narrative that records a failing marriage. Indeed, technically 'See Naples and Die' is a dramatic monologue rather than a narrative poem, and here as in 'The Venetian Vespers' we must not ignore the possibility of a self-deceiving or self-unaware narrator in the monologue tradition supplied by Robert Browning and T. S. Eliot. The narrator is recalling events from 'many years' past, anchored in an Italian holiday taken by him and his wife, Martha. Tellingly, though perhaps oddly for a poem featuring memoir, Hecht begins by invoking the muse of forgetfulness:

I can at last consider those events
Almost without emotion, a circumstance
That for many years I'd scarcely have believed.
We forget much, of course, and, along with facts,
Our strong emotions, of pleasure and of pain,
Fade into stark insensibility.
For which, perhaps, it need be said, thank God.¹⁹

This strain develops from a similar one from 'The Venetian Vespers', where it is explored more fully. Time's erosion of emotional memory facilitates actual memory and therefore the poem itself. However this is allied to a more active strategy endorsed in the speaker's

¹⁶ *Selected Letters of Anthony Hecht*, pp. 20-21, p. 42

¹⁷ *Hecht in conversation with Philip Hoy*, p. 23.

¹⁸ As winner of the The Mary Elinore Smith Poetry Prize, the poem was published in *The American Scholar* in summer 1990.

¹⁹ Anthony Hecht, *The Transparent Man* (New York: Knopf, 1990), p. 21.

sensibility. On several occasions Martha is upset by unexpected events in the Neapolitan streets; and Hecht carefully frames these moments to contrast the ordered world of art with the actuality of suffering. In one of them the couple emerge from the Museo Nazionale and encounter a funeral. Martha is 'especially and mysteriously upset/ In ways I fail to understand' because as the narrator later discovers, the coffin was that of a child.²⁰ In another instance they become 'reluctant witnesses/ To a straggling parade of freaks and mutants/ From a local hospital for the handicapped[.]'²¹ Rather complacently, the narrator muses on the group as 'raw material for the painting/ Of Bosch's *Temptation of Saint Anthony*' before realising that Martha has disappeared.²² Finding her deeply shaken back in their hotel room, he tries to offer a rationale for dealing with suffering and deformity:

I tried to tell her in what must have been
A way that somehow frightened or offended
That life required us to steel ourselves
To the all-too-sad calamities of others,
The brute, inexplicable inequities,
To form for ourselves a carapace of sorts,
A self-preservative petrific toughness.
At this she raised her arm, shielding her eyes
As if she thought I was about to strike her,
And said *No* several times, not as a statement,
But rather as a groan.²³

'See Naples and Die' has clear and conscious affinities with two major precursor poems, Auden's 'Musée de Beaux Arts' and Robert Frost's 'Home Burial'; but Hecht surpasses these in his exploration of the binary involved. An escape into the aesthetic might frame and make suffering approachable, but it can also lead to an insulated self-complacency. On the other hand, exposure to suffering without any self-preserving insulation is meaningless and potentially self-destructive. This is partly how, as Hecht tried to explain to Joseph Brodsky, the narrative is a meditation on the quote from Simone Weil that forms its epigraph: 'It is

²⁰ *The Transparent Man*, p. 27.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 28.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

better to say "I am suffering" than to say "This landscape is ugly.""²⁴ Having reviewed their marriage and its end, the narrator, still self-blinded, comes to believe that

We were the cursed
To whom it seemed no joy was possible,
The spiritually warped and handicapped.²⁵

To a large degree, aspects of the narrator of 'See Naples and Die' recur in other Hecht poems, and it is hard not to represent this as Hecht's own mode of self-examination, an acceptance of the possibly extreme consequences of his own silences. It is also hard not to reflect on Hecht's own literariness as an aspect of the need for the aesthetic that the narrator has. The invocation of Bosch's *Temptation of Saint Anthony* is a means of looking away from the grim sight before him, but it is also a way of giving some artistic meaning to what otherwise is meaningless suffering. Hecht's choice of intertextual echoes could be said to be strategic in this respect, and not merely a Bloomian recognition of his belatedness. While on the one hand, they exist simply as part of Hecht's sophisticated mental furniture, they also create layers between the experience and the writing, resulting in a refracting of the experience. The echoes enrich his poetry, as the unmistakable allusions to Auden and Frost clearly do in this poem, but it is also questionable how much the phrase 'stark insensibility', quoted above from the poem's opening, adds to it. It is from Boswell's *Life of Johnson*, used when Johnson recalls a youthful ill-mannered response to his tutor at Oxford, and while it helps to establish the narrator as well-read, and insensibility will be a motif in the poem, it nevertheless comes across as a distraction.²⁶

Hecht's allusiveness has often been remarked on, and the range of writers and artists referred to in his lengthy interview with Philip Hoy continues this referencing. Indeed, in his 2010 study *True Friendship*, Christopher Ricks included an extensive list of Hecht's echoes of Eliot; and there is the danger that some of Hecht's most impressive poems can be dogged with reference to Eliot, borrowing even where there seems to be no obvious need for an allusion. A good example is from 'The Venetian Vespers' when he

²⁴ In spite of their friendship, Brodsky had been dismissive of 'See Naples and Die' and Hecht was deeply wounded by this. In response he asserted the poem's centrality to *The Transparent Man*. See *Selected Letters*, pp. 234-5. Hecht dedicated the poem 'Exile' to Brodsky and included versions of his poems in *The Venetian Vespers*.

²⁵ *Transparent Man*, p. 33.

²⁶ Samuel Boswell, *Life of Johnson* (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 45.

writes 'Thus virtues, it is said, are forced upon us/ By our own impudent crimes.'²⁷ This is almost a straight rendering from 'Gerontion' where Eliot writes 'Virtues/ Are forced upon us by our impudent crimes.'²⁸ There is no clear reason for this borrowing, however, and it serves no real purpose. Hecht has spoken of Eliot as a 'formidable' influence on him, but there are many other poetic presences in his work, to the degree that it is more accurate to think of intertextuality rather than influence.²⁹ Indeed, Hecht's self-conscious use of other writers extends readily to parody, and 'The Dover Bitch' from *The Hard Hours* has been much anthologised. While intertextuality can be the mark of erudition (and of someone who after all taught in universities for almost 50 years), it can also, as noted above, lead to the layering of representation and a refracted rendering of experience. Donald Davie called this Hecht's 'framing,' complaining that the poems are 'held off at a distance from the life that they feed on and undoubtedly in some sense mirror.'³⁰ Davie's point is well-made, and has been echoed by those critics who feel that Hecht's elegance, erudition and adherence to poetic tradition mark him as a detached, intellectual poet. This is to miss the self-consciously protective nature of allusiveness, however, and to miss the fact that Hecht does explore this very detachment as a theme in his poetry. (It is also to overlook the moments of genuine humour in Hecht; many of his poems, like those of his friend and collaborator John Hollander, can readily be characterised as light verse.) It is not too fanciful to align Hecht with Marianne Moore's armoured animals, or with Elizabeth Bishop's Armadillo, protected but glistening.

The theme of detachment is most fully explored in one of Hecht's most celebrated poems, 1979's dramatic monologue, 'The Venetian Vespers.' Here literary and cultural allusions seem inevitable, given the history of Venice and its long association with writers and artists; the poem's epigraphs from *Othello* and Ruskin's *Stones of Venice* introduce this allusiveness at once. In reflecting on his life, the narrator is in effect providing explanations for his extreme human detachment ('a policed exile from the human race') as an expatriate American living in Venice on an inheritance made ambiguous, and guilty, by a cloudy family history. This history is one cause of detachment, another is his war experiences; refusing to take up a fighting role, he enlisted as a medic and having witnessed appalling atrocities was

²⁷ *Collected Earlier Poems*, p. 227.

²⁸ T. S. Eliot, *Poems 1909-25* (London: Faber and Gwyer, 1926), p. 41.

²⁹ *Hecht in conversation with Philip Hoy*, p. 92.

³⁰ Davie review of *The Venetian Vespers*, qtd in *Hecht in conversation with Philip Hoy*, p. 140.

sectioned out of the service and returned to civilian life.³¹ There are also several hints in the poem that he was in an insane asylum or a sanatorium for a spell. Like the narrator of 'See Naples and Die' he asserts the need for a self-protective covering against the world's ugly realities:

The mind
Can scarcely cope with the world's sufferings,
Must blinker itself to much or else go mad.³²

Indeed, fear of madness or mental chaos runs through the poem and numerous historical and personal examples are referenced; but so too are attempts to combat this threat of mental chaos. One of the narrator's memories of war involves an extreme example of this blinkering. A corporal involved in heavy fighting carries with him an Emily Post guide to etiquette. The soldier, brought up in an orphanage and confronting unspeakable experiences on a daily basis, finds solace in this 'fiction of kindness', civilisation, family and wealth. It is in effect to him what the *Inquiry into Some Points of Seamanship* is for Marlow in *Heart of Darkness*, that is, a protection against collapse into chaos. It will not protect him from becoming a casualty, however, or from forming yet another ghost-like inescapable memory for the narrator:

He haunts me here, that seeker after law
In a lawless world, in rainsoaked combat boots,
Oil-stained fatigues and heavy bandoleers.
He was killed by enemy machine-gun fire.
His helmet had fallen off. They had sheared away
The top of his cranium like a soft-boiled egg,
And there he crouched, huddled over his weapon,
His brains wet in the chalice of his skull.³³

In large measure the narrator's fear of madness and his own detachment derive from uncertainty over who was his father. The poem's slightly bathetic, monosyllabically leaden final line 'Who was never even at one time a wise child' alludes to the saying 'It's a wise child who knows its own father.' Similarly his celibate self-isolation can be read as a

³¹ *Collected Earlier Poems*, p. 233.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 233.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 234-5.

confused act of atonement for the legacy from the previous generation. But while this unsolvable family history may be the start of his dilemma, the poem is further characterised by the conflicting dynamic between the narrator's desire to forget and his knowing that this is impossible. The importance of forgetting as a response to trauma has never been disputed, and the phrase 'motivated forgetting' has been in use since the end of the 19th century. But the narrator knows his forgetting can only ever be temporary:

These days I find
A small aperitif at Florian's
Is helpful, although I do not forget.³⁴

He actually cherishes this momentary loss of identity, a suspension of time and of self and an alertness to the present alone; it is worth remembering that the poem is written in the present tense. It opens with an ambivalent *aubade*, the narrator's praise for the temporary unawareness of self on waking:

What's merciful is not knowing where you are,
What time it is, not even your name and age,
But merely a clean coolness at the temple—
That, says the spirit softly, is enough[.]³⁵

Later on, he thinks of heaven as a form of stasis; tellingly, as another escape into aesthetics:

What is our happiest, most cherished dream
Of paradise? Not harps and fugues and feathers
But rather arrested action, an escape
From time, from history, from evolution
Into the blessed stasis of a painting[.]³⁶

In a comment on Philip Larkin's phrase 'solving emptiness' Hecht called this near paradisaical state 'beneficent anaesthesia'.³⁷ It is also unsustainable, as unrealistic as the escape into aesthetics. In this regard, at first it may seem that the narrator's withdrawal from life marks him out as a failure, unable to accommodate trauma and family history into a meaningful life. This is indeed very much his self-characterisation; someone who has effectively opted

³⁴ Ibid., p. 229.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 221.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 244.

³⁷ Hecht in conversation with Philip Hoy, p. 58.

out of life's expectations and lacks even the 'evolutionary zeal' that is a feature of all life. Glass imagery is of course appropriate for a poem set in Venice, given its long history of fine glassware. But Hecht's imagery invokes various forms of glass; the wine-bottles being broken by the garbage-men, the art of glass-making, stained-glass windows, lightbulbs, and even the bottle of Worcestershire Sauce recalled by the narrator from childhood. But it is the imagery of the glass window that recurs most often, becoming a formative motif in the life of the narrator. It is central to his self-representation as someone who has distanced himself from life's actualities:

Perhaps that early vigilance at windows
Explains why I have now come to regard
Life as a spectator sport.³⁸

.....

In these late days
I find myself frequently at the window,
Its glass a cooling comfort to my temple.³⁹

Looking at the world through a window is perhaps the closest we can come to turning it into an aesthetic experience without actually transforming it into art. Through the window the world comes to the viewer framed, focused, ordered and in perspective, lacking the messy ambivalence and blurred disorder of actuality. The window's glass of course also insulates the spectator from the moment, distancing and softening actuality.⁴⁰

The poem's glass window imagery is indicative of Hecht's own refracting poetic in writing of his experiences. Significantly, though, his narrator's self-characterisation as an isolated spectator is made more complex since Hecht considers 'looking' to have a moral function. In the poem's final movement the narrator says 'I look and look, /As though I

³⁸ *Collected Earlier Poems*, p. 238-9.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 246.

⁴⁰ The repetition of 'Glass' in the poem sets up an intriguing connection to J. D. Salinger. Hecht was born within a few years of Salinger and both were Jewish American combatants in World War 2. Salinger's precocious Glass family appear in many stories, and were characterised by their lucrative appearances on the (fictional) radio quiz show 'It's a Wise Child'; enriching the allusions of final line of 'Venetian Vespers.'

could be saved simply by looking[.]’⁴¹ In an interview with Hecht, Langdon Hammer quoted these lines and invited Hecht to comment, which he did as follows:

As for [the] quotation from ‘Vespers’ about the possibility of being ‘saved’ by ‘looking,’ I can cite a sentence of Simone Weil (from *Waiting for God*): ‘One of the principal truths of Christianity, a truth that goes almost unrecognized today, is that looking is what saves us.’ Surely part of that ‘salvation’ is engendered by a capacity, at least momentarily, to forget ourselves, and fully to attend to something else. Weil writes again and again of trying to attain ‘the kingdom of truth’ through ‘an effort of concentrated attention.’⁴²

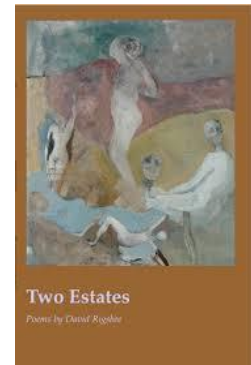
As Hecht goes on to say, looking’s relation to prayer was taken up by Auden in several prose pieces. It also appears in ‘Horae Canonicae,’ his set of poems for the liturgical hours of Good Friday. In the sequence’s third poem, ‘Sext’ he treats this theme directly, praising those whose vocation demands attentiveness, ‘forgetting themselves in a function.’⁴³ Auden’s emphasis on looking as a human responsibility recurs often in his work, notably in ‘The Shield of Achilles’ where Hephaestos demands that Thetis look at the actualities of war and suffering rather than indulge her romanticised heroic versions of these.

Looking is potentially redemptive for the narrator of ‘The Venetian Vespers’ and for other characters in Hecht’s work. Looking demands a momentary relinquishing of the self by attending closely to actuality beyond the self, and looking can only take place in the present moment. For all of Hecht’s apparent indirection in writing personally of his war experiences, he responds again and again to the moral, ethical and social responsibility of looking and of recording.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 247.

⁴² Langdon Hammer, “Efforts of Attention: An Interview with Anthony Hecht,” *Sewanee Review*, 104:1 (1996), 120-33, 129.

⁴³ W. H. Auden, *Selected Poems* ed. Edward Mendelson (London: Faber, 1982), p. 219.



“THE STONE IS ALSO THE VAULT”:

DAVID RIGSBEE DISCUSSES TWO ESTATES WITH MICHAEL HINDS

*North Carolinian poet David Rigsbee has always fretted productively at the extent and the limits of perception, both in his stringently reflective poems and his translations of Joseph Brodsky. His *Two Estates* (2009) is a remarkably sustained engagement with the idea and the experience of Italy, and demands an equally sustained reception. Over two or three days of emailing in November 2014, he revisited his work on the book for POST with typical grace and patience.*

MH: Thanks for giving us the opportunity to talk about your poetic process, David. Can I ask a couple of preliminary questions about *Two Estates*? Was it the product of one visit to Italy, or repeated trips? And which estates did you have in mind, the medieval ones of Church and monarchy? Or do these terms acquire personal re-definition with you?

DR: Of course I had all those things in mind in the naming of the collection, as Church, especially, underwrites the process so clearly undertaken in Italy for two millennia, namely the move, pilgrimage, transformation, metamorphosis, word it as you like, from matter to what is beyond matter and so free of its disadvantages. But first and foremost for me it was the Muse’s yield from two summers (*estate* being—also—summer, of course), both in the late ‘90s. The first was outside Todi (“At Todi,” as you mention, begins the collection); the second half of the book takes place largely in Rome, where I was at the American Academy at that time. So you might say it’s country v. city, a classic Horatian distinction and setup.

MH: Plenty of poets have written in or about Italy, but few enough have dedicated an entire book to it. What informed your decision to make an Italy-book without distractions?

DR: My (then) wife and I had decided to spend the summer in Italy. My father, a kind and artistic man, had died that spring, so I needed to go. My wife meanwhile, a painter, wanted to be near her mentor, who had a school in Monte Castello di Vibio in Umbria, near Todi. So we stayed in the country nearby and worked every day, she painting *plein air* on an easel, me writing nearby on the edge of a hill, overlooking sunflower fields, mountains, and spires. Although we planned to explore on the weekends in our little rented Citroën (we had driven

down from Paris), we held the work time to be more or less inviolate. And let me say here that it is impressive just how much work you can get done if you put in a normal working day's hours. There is a difference too in a decision to live and work *in* the culture, not just with reference to it. It's like T. S. Eliot's assertion that believing trumps knowing, which is a variant of the difference between embodiment and comprehension—a truth dear to Yeats too. This is a roundabout way of saying that being in Italy, making it a part of our existential reality—at least for a short while—put us in touch with artistic capacities and norms that we wouldn't have, had we not taken to the immersion.

MH: Here is a lazy one, if I just say the name of a poet, can you say whether or not they were on your mind, and to what degree? The list is indicative of the poets that I know I thought of as I read *Two Estates*.

Horace? Yes, of course. The source of so much lyricism in Western poetry—the *exegi monumentum* theme, for example, the source of lyricism itself, in many ways.

Lawrence? Yes, but less in his prose than in his poems, which, were they converted into painterly equivalents, would strike the reader as terra cotta. The self-critical and didactic poem about killing a snake at the cistern is a poem I carry with me. I had a similar experience in the killing of an asp.

James Wright? Yes, very much. James Wright came to see "Italy" as *heaven* in diametrical opposition to his rusty home state, Ohio, which was, with its steel mills lit with blast furnaces, hell. Wright was one of the formative poets for my generation.

Hecht? Not so much, although I am aware of his Italian settings—early poems, some war poems, and then *Venetian Vespers*. I also think of him in connection to Brodsky, whose own devotion to all things Italian, including spouses, was unsurpassed.

Robert Lowell? Lowell has that poem about shipping his mother's body from Rapallo to Boston. He happens to mention that she was wrapped in foil, like a bon-bon. Not anything more than an ordinary Italophile, as far as I can tell. Yet that one image... brings up so many associations of how we approach the dead, of tradition and honor—and the lightness, buffoonery, and the absurd that stays just beyond the edge.

MH: A related question...it strikes me that your book is quite singular in that you are less dependent upon Dante as a model than the vast majority of other poets who are lured by Italy. He is there alright, but he weighs lightly. Is that a fair reading?

DR: It's funny you should mention that. Once Brodsky sent me a postcard with the standard profile portrait of Dante on the reverse. He wrote, "There is a resemblance." You have to keep Dante at arm's length because anything Dantean will swallow up your own poem. The form and the closed system in which he works are his personal property. Now having said that, last year I began a project to translate what *Paradiso*. I am halfway there. I also just finished, in spite of myself, a new poem, "The Red Dot," which I now see is completely the child of the *Paradiso*. Funny, I didn't think that as I was writing it, but now it seems obvious. [I

enclose

the

poem

below.]

MH: I suppose that I should ask a counter-question that will allow you to explore the very problem of all these shades that attend writing about Italy. Did you actually worry about such notions of influence at all? Did you practice allusion, or did you just let intertextuality have its way?

DR: Sure, I think about influence, yes, both in the benign sense and in the agonistic sense, and I'm pretty good at embedding the sources and cognates, which, after a time, don't feel artificial at all: they become part of the kit bag; they in a sense become who we are. They became what they beheld, says Blake. As far as allusions are concerned, mine are first and foremost derived from the Anglo-American tradition, which is to say, from the English language, its graces, its pedigree, and its heft. Allusions not grounded in linguistics (Shakespeare, Donne, Marvell, Hopkins, Yeats) tend to reference ideas familiar to all poets. I find them in Wordsworth and Keats, Eliot, Blake, and so forth. I have a background in philosophy, so my ideas often derive from my reading, though I don't believe in superimposing philosophy onto poetry or to being known as a "philosophical poet," as I was referred to recently in someone's blog. Neither side would claim you.

MH: Does this relate to the question of subjectivity, in that in order to see a world as overwritten and repainted as Italy, you have to adopt an even more intense single-mindedness than usual, otherwise your vision gets fuzzed –up with all that interpretative static.

DR: Certainly. I think ultimately you go to Italy not to look, or even to feel, but to *change*. I certainly did.

MH: So is Henry James the real influence at work here then?

DR: Henry James wanted to change the terms of translatability of dimensions, by introducing sensibility, which narrows the chasm between stone and air. He is an influence insofar as the approach to Italy is first and foremost one of the cultivation of sense as a method of approach. He is also a ruin-bibber, in Larkin's phrase. The commitment to ruins suggests that the transformative stone, now defeated on its own terms, can lend itself to this narrowing. His characters walk around ruins as raw materials, so to speak. *Daisy Miller*, surely, and *Portrait of a Lady*. Although no one would accuse him of being either an elegist or a Romantic, he is, in a broad sense, both: he is belated and yet he wants to participate in some form of a marriage of heaven and earth. I think of James in the same way I think of Stevens, writers of complicated psyches, who perceive that the magical world of imaginative transformation needs the assistance of literary minds, as the material forces become less the irrational other, once central to imagination, and as heaven itself fades like everything else into naturalism.

MH: We all expect to find poems about painters and sculptors in a book about Italy, but more than that you often seem to enter entirely into either the gaze of the artist or the work itself.

Sometimes you write as a sculptor, or sometimes you produce a high-def landscape text that could be a Poussin (without telling us it is a Poussin).; how do you see yourself as an ekphrastic poet?

DR: I have been around artists most of my adult life, and I learned to state the visual through the eyes of artists. Surely adopting the eyes of an artist improves a poet's eyesight, and that, in turn, enhances his approach to images. For one thing, it reduces the temptation to be covertly didactic—a common weakness.

MH: How do we add measure to this scopophilia? Is the spectacle of Italy almost too seductive? Do we forget to hear it?

DR: Well, there is a certain *convenience* to Italy, so in that sense it's lamentable that it could be the source of the trite. On the other hand, that triteness, that sunniness, helps to keep the real—as you say—spectacle from overwhelming the experience—if I may generalize this way. So convenience is seductive, and in that lies the danger. It may well be that the Italies of the imagination serve as capably, and sometimes more capably, than the actual landscape. It's not representational fidelity one is after anyway. Stevens, whom a friend of mine once called the most "Frenchified" of American poets, never set foot in la Belle France, but the appellation surely strikes one as right. This is in line with the various old adages about fantasy's ability to replace reality, at least in aesthetic terms, with something improved, or to create dual or multiple realities, some in competition, some in harmony, all pointing away from necessity and toward freedom. I think of Blok's Petersburg and Cavafy's Alexandria—cities, not countries, to be sure, but based on seeing, of scopophilia, a term that I believe designates deviance. Well, poetry is deviant. What's a metaphor, after all? The thing is, though, that Italy is also a limiting case to these same old adages because of the sheer plenitude of the good stuff; it is so beautiful, so impressive, so sublimely memorable and so on. One could almost consider leaving the imagination at home. Regardless, it is surely the case that traveling there enables new points of view. *Two Estates*, for example is constantly about perspective, about where one stands, where clearances are, where obstacles to view.

MH: The book begins with "At Todi," a poem that strikes me as representative of an elegiac mode that is in all of your work, not just the Italy poems; however, did writing in and out of Italy allow you to maximize the potential of that elegiac tendency? There is pastoral elegy here, satirical elegy, what else?

DR: You are quite correct to locate an elegiac strain in my work. I wrote my doctoral dissertation on the problems of writing elegy in the postmodernist era. For one thing, the traditional consolations are either stripped away, one by one, or drastically diminished: religious, philosophical, psychological, political, literary. The Italy of the imagination, because of the presence and reverence for art, particularly pictorial art, sculpture, and architecture, resists these disinvestments. This is in part thanks, too, to the continued relevance of the Catholic Church in defining the country's general interests.

MH: Related to this, is pastoral a more immanent mode in these Italian poems than it is in your representations of elsewhere? Is it a paradoxically “natural” choice of fictive mode?

DR: Well, it’s natural in its fictiveness, and if you care to call me out for trying to conflate aspects of a distinction, instead of finessing the distinction (as poets routinely do), I accept the charge. But to your question: yes, the pastoral in the first half of *Two Estates* is more immanent than you will find elsewhere in my poems, although you are right to point out that it also permeates my other work. Now, the pastoral is a mode in which shepherds sit out under the Milky Way and discuss deep things, so the form is grounded in wonder and initiates the interpenetration of time and the timeless. As such, and because the participants, in varying degrees of wonder, offer speculations framed by their mortality before the heavens, which are eternal in this setting, it both resembles the kinds of metamorphosis I am trying to describe in *Two Estates* and seeks to chart its own maps concerning what properly belongs to the human intelligence in what is really a discontinuous circumstance.

MH: “Bar Giancolo” aside, there is not much overt reference in *The Two Estates* to recent catastrophes and calamities in Italian politics. Were you conscious of keeping the chaotic necessities of Italian political life at a remove? After Berlusconi, isn’t there a problem with the very idea of Italy as spectacle, in that we find ourselves asking; “Yes, this is beautiful, but who is paying for this, and how?”

DR: In the poems of the countryside, it’s true that there is little acknowledgment of the surrounding political realities, especially of the conspicuous ones. I do make one reference to the Red Brigades, as you know. It was the first time I had noticed vigilant-looking, conspicuous *carabinieri* with submachine guns in public places.

MH: Do you think of yourself as a tourist or a traveller (to use Paul Fussell’s distinction) in these poems?

DR: Well, one wants to be a traveler, but at the end of the day, one is probably a tourist. Or a Mental Traveller, to borrow Blake’s term. And don’t forget that Fussell made a third category: the *anti*-tourist. One could be that.

MH: Did you go everywhere in Italy? It feels a bit like it. There are not many actual place-names, but an awful lot of atmospheric changes across the book.

DR: We didn’t go to Calabria, and I didn’t go to Venice, although my wife did. I would like to go there now, since it is where my dear friend and mentor Brodsky is buried. Also never had an interest in Naples, and even reading about it, as I did in John’s Gray’s recent, dark book—the cannibalistic despair during the War, the sense of gibbering nihilism and of nihilism as equated with realism.

MH: My god, that is kind of iconoclastic. No Naples, no Venice! Do you know Luzzi’s article “Italy without Italians,” which complains about the way post-Romantic poets from abroad practically

annihilate the living in order to get directly to the landscapes? Is that an idea which troubles you?

DR: Yes, it is an idea that's troubling. But it's not hard to see why. With so much layering, the people being on top, the "life," will always appear to be smaller and smaller, and they can only protect themselves, so to speak, either by becoming more numerous or by seeming more lively as they are, despite the cold face of stone, despite living atop such layers.

MH: How about afterwards? How have you returned to these poems and experiences in later work? To what degree do they still generate poetry for you?

DR: No, the book has unmoored and drifted away on its own, although I stand by all the poems as sincere attempts to explore what I take Italy to be about: the translation from stone to air, from physical to metaphysical, from existence to prayer. And the art that affects these transformations *is* art. So, all of my poems in one way or another try to be cognizant of the bridge between physical and metaphysical, insofar as linguistic means can articulate the difference. It seems increasingly to me that this theme is not only mine, but a type of theme that sets up lyric poetry altogether by defining its characteristic motion, in this case, the translatability of one dimension into another.

Yes, I talk about going every year (and now my daughter follows me in this). I am a patient person, so there's no hurry to get on with my dotage, but I do have a recurrent fancy about merging with the figure of Santayana in Stevens' great poem, "To an Old Philosopher in Rome," perhaps the poem I've thought most of in my life. The poet Desmond O'Grady once put it to me to consider living as an émigré in Rome. I had linguistic issues then (I still do), but I do like the thought, and as it gets later, the thought itself suggests going in a comic retrograde direction: from metaphysical to physical.

The Red Dot

After we embraced at the crosswalk
in the coarse fidelity of separation
our chests together one brief last time

in the rain, in the bluster, the puddles,
the honking taxis, the herds of umbrellas,
then my family rose from their silos

and crossed the sky to find me.
My mother and father like a flying
boxcar, my father with his trumpet,

then my brother with the hole
in his temple untouched, soaring
up the east coast, practically

stratospheric, like a hawk in autumn,
whose vision increases with distance,
looking to find me, past the forests

of Pennsylvania, past the Pine Barrens,
finally turning east before Paterson,
down through swirling pipes of rain,

the dark copper clouds, the towers
rising from the river, the shining rooftops,
my mother and father swerving out,

then turning in from the sea, looking

to land, looking for their other son,
the one who had summoned them

and my brother whose eternal muteness
would someday become speech,
and that pass for eloquence, as

Nietzsche himself reassured us. I came
home and sat by the computer screen
checking, as I had always done,

for the ruby dot announcing a message,
light that burns a hole in everything,
a change of heart as if the heart were

no longer hurtling into the rain, no longer
losing, anxiously whispering, change me!
Instead I heard them overhead.

I looked up and we smiled at each other.
I was being airlifted by beloved
spirits called to the old vastness

from the sleep of their cylinders,
who bore my name, who still believed,
sleepy as they were, that they knew me.

Up we went and I saw Canal shrink
into a line, the line into a spinning
propeller, so I looked straight up, my family

pulling me up in the updraft, through

the plunging temperatures, until it was
full black, and yet there were stars.

Here they peeled off and faded,
leaving me; they were just clouds
themselves now, morphing and turning.

Because I was in pain, I pretended
it was them. Because there was no
red dot, only black city rain,

I found myself floating, knowing
how Pluto would rise from his throne
pointing earthward, not heavenward,

though I was exalted in my wedding suit
waiting to have my ears rubbed,
which was the special sign for love

for no one could mistake thinking
that's what it's like. Not even
the sweet dead in their cerements.

Not even a stranger.





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WORDSWORTH'S BLACK JESUS:

IKONIC TRANSFIGURATION IN 'TO TOUSSAINT L'OUVERTURE'

Wordsworth's 'To Toussaint L'Ouverture' enacts the symbolic transfiguration of the image of a man into the image of a God. The man who provided Wordsworth with the basis of the image is the highly-prized and semiotically-rich political hostage Toussaint L'Ouverture, leader of the Haitian slave revolt of 1794-1804 against a trio of Empires: French, British and Spanish. The God Wordsworth turns L'Ouverture's image into is the one he - and that section of the romantic generation he spoke for - needed in 1803. This is a God who, in the first place, absolves this politically-recanting generation of the need to declare for either Napoleon or Pitt; as such, L'Ouverture is a third-way emblem. Secondly, Wordsworth's Black Jesus allows commitment to progressive ideals to be deflected away from dangerous political activity in the contingently real world, and towards passive contemplation of a next-world utopia underpinned by the eschatological guarantees of religious belief.

In the aftermath of the Peace of Amiens of March 1802, signed between Monarchist Britain and Bonapartist France, thousands of British revolutionary tourists, among them many who had once been (or, in rarer cases, were still,) supporters of the French revolution crossed the channel too see for themselves what the novel society of Republican France was like. William Wordsworth scorned it all as a vapid fad:

Or what is it that ye go forth to see?
Lords, lawyers, statesmen, squires of low degree,
Men known, and men unknown, sick, lame, and blind,
Post forward all, like creatures of one kind,
With first-fruit offerings crowd to bend the knee
In France, before the new-born Majesty.

'Tis ever thus. Ye men of prostrate mind,
A seemly reverence may be paid to power;
But that's a loyal virtue, never sown
In haste, nor springing with a transient shower
(‘Calais, August 1802’:2-11)

Unlike those he rather haughtily criticises here, Wordsworth’s own brief trip to Calais in August of 1802 was not undertaken happily or voluntarily. It had been close to a decade since a youthful love affair with Catherine Vallon had left the awkward legacy of daughter Annette, now 9 years old and about to meet her father for the first time due to restrictions on travel imposed by the war. Wordsworth went to meet his daughter under pressure from his sister Dorothy Wordsworth, who accompanied him, and his betrothed Mary Hutchinson. These expected him to settle matters to do with Annette in advance of his wedding. Wordsworth’s had political as well as personal hangovers to deal with from his time in France. His passionate youth in France, where he witnessed the early glory of the French Revolution had inspired in him a feeling, as it did in many, of attending at a rebirth of humanity, which he couched poetically in terms of apocalyptic ecstasy:

For mighty were the auxiliars which then stood
Upon our side, we who were strong in love!
Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive,
But to be young was very heaven!--Oh! times,
In which the meagre, stale, forbidding ways
Of custom, law, and statute, took at once
The attraction of a country in romance!
When Reason seemed the most to assert her rights,
When most intent on making of herself
A prime Enchantress--to assist the work,
Which then was going forward in her name!
Not favoured spots alone, but the whole earth,
The beauty wore of promise, that which sets
(As at some moment might not be unfelt
Among the bowers of paradise itself)
The budding rose above the rose full blown.
What temper at the prospect did not wake
To happiness unthought of?
(‘French Revolution’, 1805: 2-19)

Wordsworth had recoiled in horror from the French Revolution following the outbreak of the Terror, and with the rise of an openly aggressive French foreign policy. He had, over time, dropped much of his political activism; in this he was typical of the '80000 incorrigible Jacobins'¹ half-hallucinated by the reactionary genius Edmund Burke. However, like many others of his generation, while Wordsworth had slid into disenchantment and passivity, he was yet to become an opponent of the French Revolution and of change from below in general². Though he already knew that Utopia had failed utterly to materialize in France, the seeming total reversal of the early gains of the revolution that he experienced when he arrived in Calais still shocked him deeply. Wordsworth felt exposed as naive. He felt conned. It was if the dream had been only masking an imminently greater nightmare all along:

A homeless sound of joy was in the sky:

From hour to hour the antiquated Earth
Beat like the heart of Man: songs, garlands, mirth,
Banners, and happy faces, far and nigh!
And now, sole register that these things were,
Two solitary greetings have I heard,
"Good-morrow, Citizen!" a hollow word,
As if a dead man spake it! Yet despair
Touches me not, though pensive as a bird
Whose vernal coverts winter hath laid bare.

(‘Composed Near Calais, On The Road Leading To Ardres, August 7, 1802’: 4-14)

The period before, during and after the visit to France forced Wordsworth into a heightened critical confrontation with the past, present and future direction of the revolution, and from there to try and evolve a new attitude towards it upon which he would base a re-founded ethics and a renovated aesthetics. The form he chose to express this critical crisis and its attempted resolutions was the sonnet. Barely two years after the expanded edition of the distinctly rupturous and heretical *Lyrical Ballads*, this marks a return to literary piety. In his framing ‘Prefaratory Sonnet’ Wordsworth outlines the reasoning behind his sonnet turn:

¹ Quoted in John Colman Rashleigh, ‘The case of the people of England, addressed to the "Lives and fortune men," : both in and out of the House of Commons ; as a ground for national thanksgiving! By one of the 80,000 incorrigible Jacobins. London’ Printed for R.H. Westley, 1798.

² see E.P Thompson Wordsworth’s Crisis

Nuns fret not at their Convent's narrow room;
And Hermits are contented in their Cells;
And Students in their pensive Citadels;
Maids at the Wheel, the Weaver at his Loom,
Sit blithe and happy; Bees that soar for bloom,
Higher than the highest Peak of Furness fells
Will murmur by the hour in Foxglove bells:
In truth, this prison, into which we doom
Ourselves, no prison is: and hence for me,
In sundry moods, 'twas pastime to be bound
Within the Sonnet's scanty plot of ground:
Pleas'd if some Souls (for such there needs must be)
Who have felt the weight of too much liberty,
Should find brief solace there, as I have found.

The hermetic and religious allegorizing of the writer here is crucial to our understanding of the full significance of Wordsworth's sonnet turn - away from a mass audience and orientation, and towards the literary elite and their specialized and bookish concerns. The primary allegorical figures of the nun and the hermit signal that Wordsworth now sees his task as a poet as an isolated and metaphysical one rather than one that is collaborationist and agitational. It also, by a higher level association with monastic literary mysticism, indicates that the poems will carry hermetic encodings only visible to those belonging in the same category of semiotic competence, the same 'order', as Wordsworth himself. These are, in Wordsworth's time, the narrow band of the highly literate and acculturated; British intellectuals who were undergoing, like Wordsworth, a dramatic revaluation of their attitude to political revolution at home and abroad, in the highly pressuring context of war abroad and repression at home. Speaking through the sonnet allows Wordsworth to situate himself, bishop-like, within the esteemed continuity of literary canon - to speak to 'eternity' - and to knowingly address his own contemporaries familiar with the canon's coding and its connotations in present time. The Wordsworthian sonnet is then a complex and condensed act of communication which consciously addresses its intended literary audience through a doubled and hybridized symbolism bearing historico-literary connotations meaningfully fused with topical associations and only fully apprehensible to canonical initiates.

As well as allowing Wordsworth to deal with his little secret, the Peace of Amiens lifted the British Blockade of the French Navy and meant, for the first time in years, that the French could send substantial forces to Haiti where a slave revolt against had been in progress for 8 years. The French went under Leclerc with the pretense of treating on an equal footing with the Haitians and regularising the situation between the two countries. But their real mission was to undermine the revolution, making way for a reconquering and reintroduction of slavery. They took L'Ouverture hostage and brought him back alone and desperate to France to secret imprisonment.

Wordsworth knew that L'Ouverture had been subject to extraordinary rendition but not where he was being held. In Wordsworth's day, no more than in ours, there was not much hope held out for kidnapped political hostages being held in secret locations. Wordsworth knew that the outlook for L'Ouverture, if he were not already dead, was very grave. Through the figure of L'Ouverture his consistent sympathy for the hopelessly downtrodden, in evidence throughout his previous poetry, was activated at a point in ethical and political confrontation with the slave-supporting regimes of both Britain and France. Wordsworth, master of symbols, would have intimated that a martyred L'Ouverture would potentially come to symbolise humanist resistance to all inhumanist tyrannies; and L'Ouverture has indeed become such a symbol, at least for a large section of the political underground, (particularly after his portrayal in CLR James *The Black Jacobins*), representing a central ikon of Trotskyism and Marxist Third Worldism. It was Wordsworth who first word-painted this powerfully influential ikon onto being, and it is one of his many great artistic achievements:

Toussaint, the most unhappy Man of Men!
Whether the whistling Rustic tend his plough
Within thy hearing, or thy head be now
Pillowed in some deep dungeon's earless den; -
O miserable Chieftain! where and when
Wilt thou find patience? Yet die not; do thou
Wear rather in thy bonds a cheerful brow:
Though fallen Thyself, never to rise again,
Live, and take comfort. Thou hast left behind
Powers that will work for thee; air, earth, and skies;
There's not a breathing of the common wind
That will forget thee; thou hast great allies;

Thy friends are exultations, agonies,
And love, and Man's unconquerable mind.

By the time Wordsworth came to the sonnet, the motif of transfiguration, that is of aesthetically transforming a human figure into a divine figure, had been embedded as a central and widely encountered aspect of art, poetry, and, of course, religious worship for more than an aeon. Following Petrarch, Dante, Shakespeare, Milton, and others, the sonnet recognizably bore a deeply-embedded aura of erotic, political, and religious intensity. For Wordsworth, searching desperately for a new conviction to replace the revolutionary creed that he and his congregation were rapidly losing, or had already lost, the choice of L'Ouverture as ikon must have been suggested even by the prisoners name which contains both Saint and Opening.

Besides this, the morphology of the sonnet - it is shaped like a window, as well as like a portrait painting - doubles the symbolizing of the numinous and liminal before we have even started the poem. There, we find the kidnap victim pictured as 'most unhappy man of men'. The singularity of L'Ouverture's despair, and his status as a 'man of men', makes him both an intense individual sufferer and a representative of collective trauma, a suffering Jesus if ever there was one. The 'whistling rustic' of line 2 is a masterpiece of condensed and layered symbolism. Firstly, it is a type of The Good Shepherd - a representation of Christ at work in Christian Art since the underground, persecuted days of the catacombs. Secondly it is a romantic synecdoche of the contemporary poor and one of numerous similarly isolated, happy, downtrodden rural figures to appear in Wordsworth's poetry. The fact that he is 'whistling' grants him an organic happiness - he is a worker in Utopia, but also makes him echo the trumpets of Revelations, priming our apocalyptic expectations for the poem. The Irish eye-ear will pick up an echo of *ceol sidhe* - the strange music which serves as otherworldly omen in gaelic lore and literature. The rustic plough is also a three-pronged symbolic instrument. It symbolises peace, regeneration, and—once again as romantic synecdoche—the hard, good work of the labouring poor. The pairing of the imprisoned and doomed black general in line 1 with the mass figure in Line 2 reminds us of L'Ouverture's role in leading the rustic slaves of Haiti towards the gates of freedom. It also embeds the prophecy of Matthew 20:16 that the last shall be first, and the first last signaling again that a grand reversal is on the way. The poem wonders if Christ/L'Ouverture can hear the whistling

and thus be comforted in his doom with the news of his resurrection, or if thy head be now Pillowed in some deep dungeon's earless den;. The employment of a rapid monosyllabism, intertwining with the alliterative use of 'P', 'E' and 'D', sonically images the hammering of nails into a coffin. The line redoubles the gloom of the first line by presenting us with a definitively deceased saviour who is out of earshot of the *ceol sidhe*, and is himself beyond saving. The deep dungeon is both prison and tomb, the 'den' introduces a note of corporeality and decay by association with animals who keep dens. But Den also has associations, by way of Bunyan, with Christian retreat, sanctuary and visionary experience:

As I walk'd through the wilderness of this world, I lighted on a certain
place where was a Den, and I laid me down in that place to sleep; and as I
slept, I dreamed a Dream.³

Again we see the double coding at work, the coding of impending sudden reversal, the prison being where L'Ouverture is persecuted, but also the place where he transcends persecution in Christian repose, reflection, acceptance and immersion in the Good News of Revelation. The line also references the darkest phase in the Martyrdom of Christ, the time between Friday Death and Sunday Resurrection: when there is no sign left of the redemption, and divinity has apparently left the earth irreversibly. This strange 36 hour, yet 3 day, period was naturally a source of great interest and debate among early church fathers⁴. The living Christ could neither be in heaven— there is only room for one ascension— nor on Earth. Where was he then? Well, in hell, where, like Orpheus with superpowers, he was saving the souls of all the righteous that had died since the beginning of time and had not had the benefit of the divine presence to confirm their convictions. Even when Christ— or political progress— are nowhere to be seen, they are still at work in unseen ways, burrowing away mole-like, as Marx would have it, beneath the visible, on behalf of our redemption. L'Ouverture, and the radical ideals he represents, may well be dead and buried, but that is only how things appear on the surface, to the untrained eye. Besides, in heaven he will bring the good news of the risen people to those countless who died dreaming of such without ever seeing it.

³ Opening lines of *The Pilgrims Progress*

⁴ It wasn't until the raucous council of Nicodemus in 425 that the matter of Christ's lost weekend whereabouts was finally decided upon.

The approaching rising is inscribed again in Line 5 where 'miserable chieftain' rhymes with and modifies the 'most unhappy man of men' of line 1. Though still down, L'Ouverture has been raised to the status of the head of a body of men, an organization, state... and a military leader;⁵ 'chieftain' may justly appear somewhat patronizing to us, but is in fact again a perfect symbolic efficiency of Wordsworth's part, reflecting the dual Michael-Collins-like role of L'Ouverture as both military and political leader of the Haitian Revolt, as well as echoing the designation of Christ in Isaiah 55:4 as a leader and commander to the people. There also is a world of difference between being 'most unhappy' of all men, to being merely miserable. At the caesura in line 5 the poem takes a curious turn and, apparently, directly addresses its eponym: '...where and when/ Wilt thou find patience?'

Of course there is no prospect of this query ever reaching the ear of Toussaint L'Ouverture. Wordsworth undoubtedly realized this, and, by inserting such a glaring lacuna he raises the question of to whom in fact is the poem addressed. It is, I believe, a masked address to his readership on the theme of their ongoing post-revolutionary ethical trauma. In the first place, it is addressed to the poetry readership of the *London Morning Post*, where it was published on the 2nd of February 1803, one of a dozen or so sonnets published by Wordsworth in the same outlet in 1802/3⁶. This was a small circulation paper - no more than a couple of thousand - founded as a Whig Outlet in 1795 but now of a moderate Tory persuasion. It was one of the organs through which the small but prolific and vocal English cultural elite conversed with each other. Many of these highly educated readers were, like the *Morning Post* itself, shifting rightwards politically. Many, like Wordsworth, while they had absconded from progressive political activity, were not quite ready to abandon the utopian dreams that had animated the hopes and passions of their youth, for which they would always be nostalgic, for which they would always be seeking a replacement. It is for this small, scattered, disenchanted and rightward-drifting elite that Wordsworth constructs his Black Jesus. It is to them that the poem, and indeed the whole sequence of 1802-3 sonnets is addressed. Again the signaling is layered, his apparent advice to the martyr not to physically resist his captivity signals Wordsworth's now strong disavowal of revolutionary violence, a reassuring message for a Tory publication with its Tory and proto-Tory

⁵ Both current definitions of chieftain in Wordsworth's time.

⁶ See Bernard Hickey *Wordsworth's Sonnet: To Toussaint L'Ouverture and Mary Kelly Perys's The Sublime Turn Away from Empire: Wordsworth's Encounter with Colonial Slavery, 1802*

readership. It echoes an important passage in the Bible where spiritual fortitude and readiness for the redemption are defined in terms of political patience:

Be patient, then, brothers and sisters, until the Lord's coming. See how the farmer (the whistling rustic of line 2) waits for the land to yield its valuable crop, patiently waiting for the autumn and spring rains. You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near. Don't grumble against one another, brothers and sisters, or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door!⁷

It is a moment when the poem definitively moves away from sympathy for the actual struggle of Toussaint and the poor he represents and towards an abstract contemplation of the consoling— and eliding—image of their holy suffering, now eschatologically framed and politically neutered. Contemplative affinity with the image of Toussaint the martyr allows Wordsworth and his melancholic congregation the welcome luxury of being able to continue an abstract support for ideals of equality and justice (they are, after all, Christian doctrines well before they are Jacobin notions) without being obliged to take any risky concrete action towards realizing these ideals.

Wordsworth now issues a doubled imperative, which is aimed apparently and weirdly at the image he has drawn, but in reality is a command on how the image should be constructed in the imagination of those that come to contemplate it⁸:

Yet die not; do thou
Wear rather in thy bonds a cheerful brow:
Though fallen thyself, never to rise again,
Live, and take comfort.

What the contemplator is now commanded to imagine, and to identify with, is no longer a doomed and despairing prisoner, but one who has turned the other cheek, accepted their faith and is under orders to Live, and take comfort. Of course the only life this makes possible for *L'Ouverture* is the life of an image, shaped by an image maker, within the tomblike 'scanty plot of ground' of the sonnet. The contradiction between 'though fallen thyself, never to rise again' and the framing 'Die not....Live', irresolvable in the real, historical world, is resolved in the metaphysical realms of art and religion, where the referent can be long dead but its sign live on undead as long as it can be understood.

⁷ James 5:7

⁸ All poems are obviously a set of instructions for imaginary constructions

For the rest of the sonnet Wordsworth turns to construction and presentation of his own modified post-enlightenment, romanticized, somewhat secularised image of God, with its attendant promise of resurrection, redemption and eternity for all true believers.

Thou hast left behind
Powers that will work for thee; air, earth, and skies;
There's not a breathing of the common wind
That will forget thee; thou hast great allies;
Thy friends are exultations, agonies,
And love, and man's unconquerable mind.

Consolingly, only the discardable fleshy body of man, whether of Jesus, L'Ouverture, Wordsworth or any of his readers, is shed into history, decay and forgetting. What is far more important is the dead man's contribution to the 'Powers' he has left behind. These 'Powers' are all aspects of one, Wordsworthian, and therefore High Romantic, deity. It is in the first place an omnipresent God of the active, shaping, destroying/creating elements, connected with a vague political collective through the trope of 'the common wind'. Shelley went on to radicalize just such Christian pantheism in 'Ode to The West Wind,' and storms and floods were common political allegories in 18th Century English landscape painting⁹. Every time that Dylanesque 'common wind' blows, and justice and equality are struggled for, or even thought of, those who fought for them in the past are honoured, remembered, continued, reinscribed into the historical body which is a physical river flowing towards a metaphysical ocean of eternity. The righteous dead are also reanimated in the great expressive passions - one is tempted to say the stations - of living humans; exultations, agonies, and love. Tellingly, Wordsworth places the climactic emphasis on a divine aspect of the human - the unconquerable mind - being unconquerable is an aspect of the highest divinity, much sought after but never achieved, by human tyrannies.

At its most radical reading, this passage is an appropriation of the religious symbolic heritage for pantheistic, atheistic, and even socialistic ends. The watermark, as it were, of the poem is religious, but the currency seems designed, at least in part, for secular exchange. As long as there is injustice and inequality, there will be struggle against them.

⁹ Alan Woods makes the connection between the political iconography of 18thC Landscape painting and elemental symbolism in Romantic Poetry in his *British poets and the French Revolution. Part Two: Wordsworth and Coleridge - The death of an Ideal*

You can take comfort in this even if your own personal part in that seemingly endless struggle has failed or been blocked by circumstance; but the poem is also ultimately a reactionary scripture. You can touch the divine, contribute to upholding it, be personally transformed by it, simply by contemplating its symbolism in the works of arts and scripture. No action is needed. One can save one's body and one's soul at the same time. This, of course, is the perfect religion and the perfect divinity for Wordsworth and his generation, who needed to resolve the contradiction between radicalized youth and mature reaction, who wanted to uphold at a philosophical level the commitment to liberty, equality, fraternity, but who did not wish to participate any more to the political movement for their appearance on earth, who no longer wanted to put their body at risk in their work¹⁰, as the unswervingly radical Pasolini, one hundred and fifty years and many revolutionary defeats and resurrections later, insisted the artist should.

¹⁰ *Pasolini e l'omologazione del nuovo fascismo*. Documentary
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vQttzmv55iA>

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DELTA DANTE: FROM THE BLUES INFERNO

Vernacular Rummaging

Following is but one of several drafts of an English translation of Canto I from the *Commedia* of Dante, and, like so many of Anne Bradstreet's failing text-children, they each have their own particular, if admittedly sickly, attractions for their author. In the present version, we have more an example of gestation than birth, and as a result the poor darling is missing some fingers and toes. Be that as it may, it does yet hit upon a few central ideas in the matter of Dante in translation, namely that of the possibility that the local vernaculars of America can be summoned to serve the music of the Italian original, and, moreover, that these same dialectical off-shoots may be advantageously employed in the recovery of many structural aspects of Dante's poetics. Just as Dante availed himself liberally of the phraseological vagaries of Genoa and Friuli, so too does this author rummage freely in the country-talk bazaar of Texas and Georgia. Regarding the structural elements of the original which find themselves friendly dance-partners of such seemingly far afield linguistic phenomena as the Texan drawl, we have the elusive *terza rima*, which proves to be so sympathetic to the Southwestern persuasion that one could well imagine some San Antonio soothsayer straddling a chair in joke-telling position, 'So Cangrande della Scala walks into a bar...' So, too, do we find that the positively yeti-like hendecasyllabic line can find comfortable accommodation in the somewhat bumpy diction of Southern Mississippi, which reveals itself quite the adept in recovering not only the syllable count of the Dantean line, but it's drumming accentual meter. While there is still much to be done in both theory and practice, the author hopes the following attempt at a vernacular translation of Dante may yet shed a little light on the potential of rendering this aged work in a modern tongue while simultaneously embracing its structural and syntactic components with fidelity.

from INFERNO

I

Smack-dab in the middle of our path in life,
well I woke me up in the dark of a forest
where the right way to go had gone all awry.

Man, I can't figure word one what to call it,
that thick old thicket so wild and mean
that I shudder with fear just to think on it!

So bitter it had seemed like death to me,
but I might could tell what good I found
if I reckon the rest of what all I've seen.

I can't right say just how it is I wound
up there, with all that sleep in my eyes
when I swapped the right path for doubt.

But when I hit the foot yon mountain clime,
which rose on up right out of that pass
that darkened my heart like the night,

I looked up to the top of it and a bath
of light lit that summit something golden,
such as may will right all men's paths.

At that, I felt my fear quit of a sudden;

I had watched it watch me all night long,
casting a line in the lake of my heart, and

like a man gasping for air in his lungs
on the hustle from the storm to the shore,
looking back out at what all he done,

so my soul had mind to bide at the fork
and reckon on that wretched stretch
that never left a man alive before.

I eased back a tad to catch my breath
and made way on up the road a piece,
digging in at the heel with every step.

On over, where the going got steep,
go figure it! a leopard all lithe and quick
stepped round the bend with spotted feet

and he spotted me, not moving a whit,
just sat right plum with his paunch on the clime
as I turned to return at the sight of him.

It was getting well nigh on morning time
and the sun rose up with the stars,
those golden lights which a love divine

saw fit to impart with beauty and spark
and it did me good to begin to hope
that I might could yet be done with the dark

in spite of the leopard's dappled coat;

but hope didn't cut it well not by a sight,
when I saw yon lion now eying my throat.

He looked just like he was fixing to fight,
with his head held high so starved and hungry,
that even the air seemed shaken with fright.

Now a raw-boned wolf came aggressing on me,
and she trot right up looking all malicious,
of such a mean kind as gives a man to grief.

It hit me hard and I had so afeared it,
that I left off hoping right there on the spot
and I knew then I was lost to the summit.

Like a man buying into what all he bought,
winding up afterwhile in hock and debt,
thinking only of a good luck day gone wrong,

well that's how it was when I had felt that threat,
what of the mad bad cat so stalking on me,
that it pushed me back where the sun is silent.

As I fell back now to the low ground retreat,
my eyes caught the sight of something down the line,
what for all its silence I couldn't right see.

When I made him out along the desert clime,
"Have mercy on me," did I holler and fuss,
"be you a hide-behind or a man alive!"

He said to me: "Not man, but a man I was.

See my folks had come up out of Lombard way,
and settled down around neck Mantuan woods.

Born late under Julius way back in the day,
I hung hat in Rome when Augustus called it,
when all the no good low-down gods had held sway.

I've been around, you know? I was a poet,
and I sang up the just son of Anchises,
come down from Troy after proud Illium quit.

But you, why you want to come back to crisis?
Why don't you make a way up that jut-up there,
the first and the last of what all delight is?"

"Wait now, are you that Virgil, that fount from where
there had bubbled up all of that mighty speech?"
I let my head down low in a shameful air.

"Oh, are you a light for the poets to reach,
see I've studied and loved you the live long day
and I hope that I learned what you had to teach.

You wrote and I read and you said as I say,
you alone have authored me whole and fitted
me with that higher style that's won me praise.

I had the hill, but that beast made me quit it;
please shelter me, sage, and go drive her away,
she shudders my blood and saps me of spirit."

"There is another way that you ought to take,"

is what he said by sight of my crying eyes,
“if you want to have done with this savage place.

Now about that cat that's troubling your mind,
still the toughest comers yet can't get past it,
and she will kill you dead or wait till you die.

I tell it right true, that bitch is malicious,
she tires her teeth but never is sated,
and after she eats you'd swear that she didn't.

Oh, how many has she wedded and bedded,
and she won't leave off until the dog gives chase,
when she'll suffer the death that she is debted.

This dog, he won't feed from any earthly plate,
but on wisdom, love, power and dignity;
he'll be born between a rock and a hard place.

He'll make good on the low-lands of Italy,
what for the wounds of our miss Camilia,
Euryalus, Turnus and Nisus were deadly.

He'll run that beast right out till she's belly-up,
sent back to hell like the devilment she is,
where she first sprang up as a covetous pup.

So it's a good idea to stick with me kid,
and stay by my side so that I'll be the guide
to ferry you on through the valley of sin,

where you'll hear all manner of desperate cries,

and see the old souls writhe in terrible pain
as they moan the fate of their second demise,

and you'll see the all ones who wouldn't complain
to burn, hoping one day to maybe do right,
that their suffering would be for heaven's gain.

If you want to move up and think that you might,
I know a soul better fit to lead than me;
I'll leave you to her when I leave of your sight,

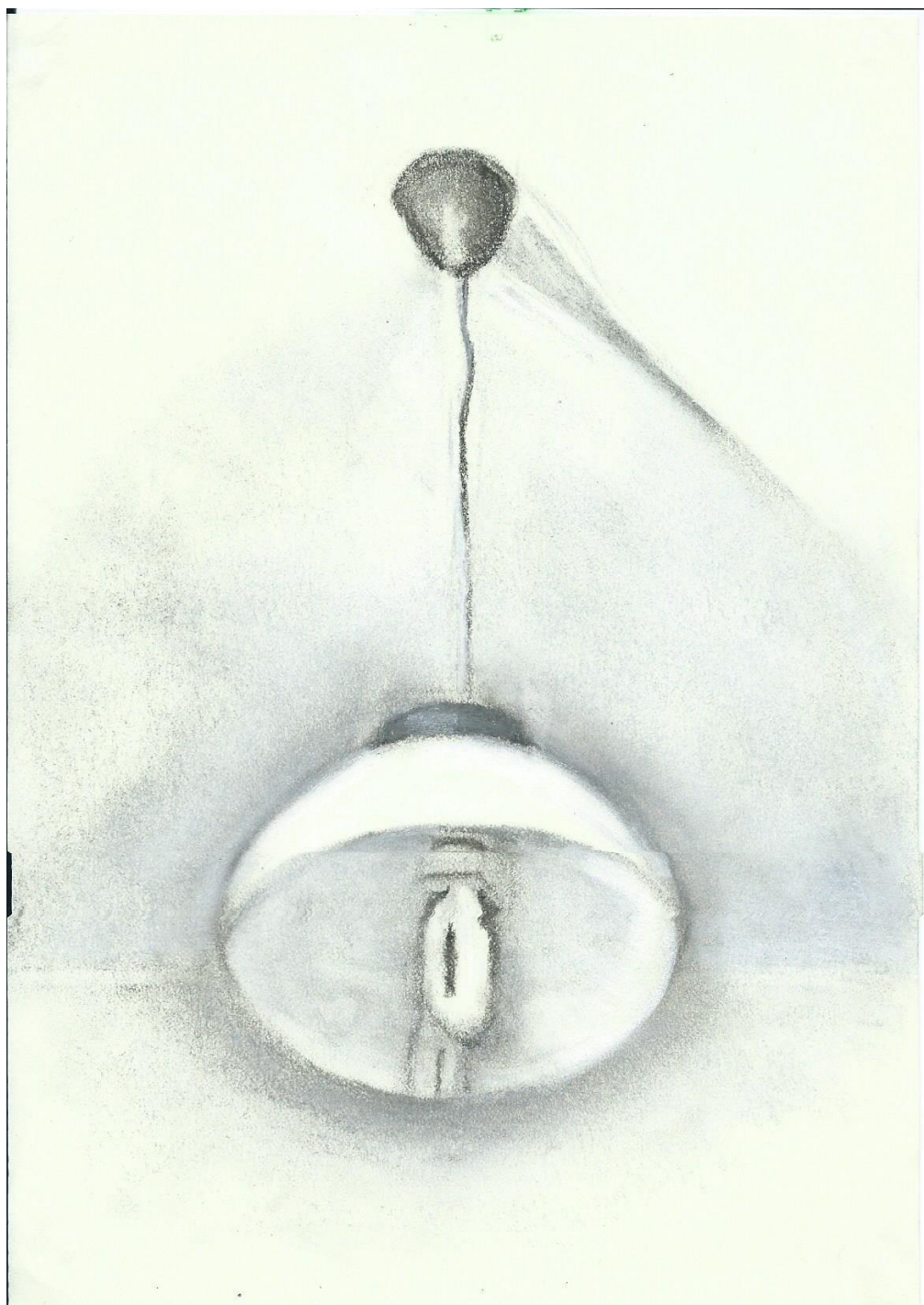
because the one who sits on the highest seat
won't hurry for a rebel like me in his fold;
I'm destined to wait outside of the city.

Everywhere he says and everywhere it's so,
look there at his city and what all he rules,
it is a happy man who would get to go!"

I said to him: "Good poet, I beg of you
by the sight of the God that you didn't know
to spare me this harm and the harm to ensue,

to lead me in deed just the same as you spoke,
so I'll see Peter's gate with my own two eyes,
and the ones you describe as so sorrowful."

He went on ahead, and I fell in behind.



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'THE WEIGHT OF MATTER IS DISSOLVED':

TOWARDS LIGHTNESS IN PETER MANSON'S CANZON – (FOR SINGING) – AFTER CAVALCANTI

In (a Cavalcanti) sonnet the body is dismembered by the sufferings of love, but goes on walking about like an automaton *"fatto di rame o di pietra o di legno"* (made of copper or stone or wood)... In Cavalcanti the weight of matter is dissolved because the materials of the human simulacrum can be many, all interchangeable. (Calvino, 1988, p.13)

At the time of his death in 1985, Italo Calvino was working on a series of texts to be delivered as the Charles Eliot Norton Lectures in Harvard in autumn of that year. He had completed five lectures: on "Lightness"; "Quickness"; "Exactitude"; "Visibility"; "Multiplicity". A sixth title, "Consistency", had been chosen and according to his widow, Esther, he intended to write this essay upon his arrival in the United States (Calvino, 1988). In the 'Note on the Text' that precedes the English edition, by Esther Calvino, she shares this insight into Calvino's methods: 'He stood before the vast range of possibilities open to him and he worried, believing as he did in the importance of constraints, until the day he settled on a scheme to organise the lectures; after that he devoted most of his time to their preparation.' (Calvino, 1988)

In the opening essay of the five, Calvino analyses the concept of 'Lightness.' This was a quality he particularly cherished, one that he saw as having to be wrested by force from the gravity of the world. In his essay, Calvino uses Guido Cavalcanti as an emblem of the type of lightness he most valued. Prior to his cameo in Calvino, Cavalcanti is a poet who enjoyed a remarkable 20th century afterlife, making several appearances in two of the great Modernist epic poem sequences, Ezra Pound's *Cantos* and Louis Zukofsky's 'A'. In the current millennium, a new translation of his

canzone ‘Donna me prega’, *Canzon – (for singing) – after Cavalcanti* appeared in the Scottish poet Peter Manson’s 2007 collection *Between Cup and Lip*, and it is this collection that will become the ultimate focus of this essay. Beginning by attempting to summarize the essential qualities of Calvino’s sense of lightness, and the extent to which Cavalcanti is emblematic of these qualities, I will then outline the means by which Cavalcanti’s *Donna me Prega* was adopted and adapted in the work of Pound and Zukofsky, drawing in particular on Richard Sieburth’s 2004 paper ‘EP/LZ: Corresponding Cavalcantis’. The final section will then focus on Peter Manson’s *Canzon – (for singing) – after Cavalcanti*; I will begin by assessing the ‘importance of constraints’ in building the armature of his translation, and seeking the origins of key aspects of his process in poems he wrote during the period he was working on the *Canzon*; finally, I will attempt to ascertain the extent to which Manson’s process, and the resulting version, preserves the hard-won lightness of Calvino’s Cavalcanti.

I. CALVINO ON THE ART OF LOSING WEIGHT

In his essay on lightness, while Calvino begins by positing weight and lightness as concepts of equivalent value, each with its own virtues, he is clear on his affinity for lightness, not merely as a matter of individual sensibility, but as a means of escape from ‘the weight, the inertia, the opacity of the world—qualities that stick to writing from the start, unless one finds some way of evading them.’ (Calvino, 1988, 4) Here, Calvino is expressing his concern for the current status of lightness in the world and in literature, and, in the 25 pages that follow, he will go on to ‘explain why I have come to consider lightness a value rather than a defect; (and) to indicate the works of the past in which I recognize my ideal of lightness.’ (3)

Calvino draws on mythology for the first example of his ‘ideal of lightness’, the victory of Perseus over the gorgon Medusa. While the outlines of this well-known story, complete with petrifying gaze and winged sandals, provide an obvious analogy for Calvino’s thesis, there is a richness to his retelling of the myth that draws a more complex range of strategies into the war on weight than simple confrontation. As Calvino reminds us, the key to Perseus’s victory lies, not in might or lightness, but in indirectness – he uses his shield to see a reflection of the gorgon rather than looking at her directly. This oblique approach is central to a writing that acknowledges the realities of the world while evading the deadening effects of the weight of living:

Perseus’s strength always lies in a refusal to look directly, but not in a refusal of the reality in which he is fated to live; he carries the reality with him and accepts it as his particular burden.’(5)

What Calvino is proposing here is a poetics of indirectness, one that acknowledges the constraints imposed by the world, but seeks, and indeed revels in, an elliptical approach that allows his writing

to wriggle out from under their weight. This 'thoughtful lightness (that) can make frivolity seem dull and heavy' (p10) is exemplified in the person and poetics of Guido Cavalcanti.

Calvino's Cavalcanti is initially presented as an anecdotal figure, author of a human swerve reminiscent of the Lucretian physics Calvino earlier described as 'the first great work of poetry in which knowledge of the world tends to dissolve the solidity of the world, leading to a perception of all that is infinitely minute, light, and mobile.' (p8) Calvino, sharing Lucretius' 'chief concern ... to prevent the weight of matter from crushing us', (p9) shows us his 'unpredictable deviation from the straight line' (p9) scaled up from the atomic level to the persona of 'Guido Cavalcanti' as depicted in Boccaccio's *Decameron*.

Boccaccio's anecdote depicts Cavalcanti, wandering through Florence lost in thought, when he is surrounded by a group of young men on horseback who are intent on picking a fight. Cavalcanti, trapped between his aggressors, a church, and the arches of some massive marble tombs, put his hands on one of the tombs and, with a nimble leap, vaulted to freedom. Calvino comments:

Were I to choose an auspicious image for the new millennium, I would choose that one: the sudden agile leap of the poet-philosopher who raises himself above the weight of the world, showing that with all his gravity he has the secret of lightness... (11)

This anecdote, however, demonstrates qualities other than lightness that are just as essential to an understanding of Calvino's poetics and their potential application to the work of Peter Manson.

Firstly, the 'agile leap' is not made in a void – it requires multiple constraints, in the form of the church, the tombs, the pursuers on horseback. The importance of constraint to Calvino's own practice has already been acknowledged, and what we witness here is a demonstration of the mechanics of constraint in the creation of poetic lightness. Each element of constraint is essential to the process: without the pursuers, there is nothing to escape from; without the obstacles there is no difficulty escaping. The dual constraint creates the conditions in which the poet must exercise his qualities of agility and intellect to their fullest, to achieve the light perfection of his vault. Secondly, the fulcrum of the vault is the roof of a tomb, with the force exerted by the poet on this surface providing him with the upward momentum needed to vault clear of the obstacle. Thus the tomb represents both an impediment, and the route by which the impediment can be overcome. In poetic terms, the tombs represent constraints of a particular nature – they are the bulwark of poetic history, towering over the contemporary poet and blocking his way. However, if approached with lightness, the poet, by drawing on his own forces, can provide himself with the means of vaulting clear of the impasse. This productive interplay between poetic history and conditions of multiple constraint will prove fruitful in the later work of Peter Manson.

From this anecdotal image of 'Cavalcanti', Calvino goes on to sketch the process of abstraction employed by this 'poet of lightness':

a theme...is dissolved into impalpable entities that move between sensitive soul and intellective soul, between heart and mind, between eyes and voice. In short, in every case we are concerned with something marked by three characteristics: (1) it is to the highest degree light; (2) it is in motion; (3) it is a vector of information. In some poems this messenger-cum-message is the poetic text itself. (12-13)

This process employs dissolution, lightness and motion, a continuous circulation between, and synthesis of, concrete and abstract, perception and intellection, that not only encapsulates the 'weightless gravity' of Cavalcanti's technique, but is also suggestive of what Dworkin (2007, 168) has described as Peter Manson's 'baroque tributaries of eddying, non-laminar torque.' This complex flow, shaped as it is by the bulk of the constraints around which it must circulate, will form the focus of the final section; but first we must return to those marble tombs, improvised vaulting-horses of poetic (counter)tradition.

II. MASCULINE SPIRITS AND AMERICAN QUILTS: POUND AND ZUKOFSKY'S CAVALCANTIS

As a full analysis of the extent of Pound and Zukofsky's interactions with the works of Cavalcanti would stretch the scope of this paper far beyond breaking point, I will limit myself to a brief overview of their versions of *Donna me Prega*, and of the tradition Manson places himself in by styling his translation 'after Ezra Pound and Louis Zukofsky'.

It could be suggested that Cavalcanti provided Pound with his own monumental marble tombs, and it might be worth briefly examining whether Pound turned his energies to vaulting, or to pacing in their shadow like a boxer in the ring.

This sense of a young poet squaring up to his predecessor is consistent with the quality of 'masculine spirit' Pound associated with Cavalcanti though, as Simon West (2009) has pointed out in his introduction to his own Cavalcanti translations, the extreme imprecision of Pound's definition of this term gives rise to the suspicion that it was a case of 'a projection of Pound's own spirit onto Guido' (Intro - *liv*).

West also makes the intriguing case that the archaism of Pound's Cavalcanti translations is evidence of his 'struggling to exorcise the spirits of the nineteenth century in order to make way for those of the thirteenth.....the first steps of an eventual journey to Modernism.' (*li*), an example of 'reculer pour mieux sauter' (taking a step back for a better jump) via translation that suggests that that any evidence of Pound's vault, via Cavalcanti, into a more masculine, modern poetics is destined to lie outside of the translations themselves, and therefore of the scope of this paper.

However, the translations do suggest that Pound, hemmed in by Guido's monumental tomb, fell to selecting marble for a monument of his own, rather than gathering his energies for a leap into the new. The most curious aspect of his approach lies in his decision to couch the translations in an anachronistic faux-Elizabethan dialect which, as he acknowledges, leaves him open to the question of 'whether one has the right to take a serious poem and turn it into an exercise in quaintness' (Pound, 1968, p200). Indeed, in several cases 'quaintness' renders key lines of his *Donna me Prega* almost impenetrable, with the lines

Di sua potenza segue spesso morte,
se forte - la virtù fosse impedita,
la quale aita - la contraria via (ll 35-37)

[from his (love's) power death often follows, if he's strong – virtue having been impeded, whose help (is) the opposite way]¹

appearing in *Canto XXXVI* as:

Often his power cometh on death in the end,
Be it withstayed
and so swinging counterweight
(2011, 177)

This translation entirely drops the key idea of virtue as a possible alternative path, an antidote to love's fatal power. His decision was partially motivated by a desire to 'shake loose the sediment of my own vocabulary' (193), supporting West's notion of renewal via archaism, and in his introduction to his 1912 translation of the *Sonnets and Ballate*, he goes some way towards explaining his thinking:

It is conceivable that poetry of a far-off time or place requires a translation not only of word and of spirit, but of "accompaniment," that is, that the modern audience must in some measure be made aware of the mental content of the older audience, and of what these others drew from certain fashions of thought and speech. Six centuries of derivative convention and loose usage have obscured the exact significances of such phrases as : " The death of the heart," and " The departure of the soul."
(Pound, 1912, 2)

This suggests that the decision is motivated, not by natural affinities between Guido's *trecento* Italian and Elizabethan English (faux or otherwise), but by a reaction to what Pound sees as a blunting of the bite of modern poetic English through the build-up of a sediment of convention. Whether the linguistic equivalent of Elizabethan wooden false teeth is a successful solution to the

¹ Author's translation.

build-up of poetic tartar is questionable, and there is no doubt that these translations are, as West suggests, but the first step on the road to more radical solutions. Nevertheless, there are a couple of further aspects worth noting.

Firstly, at all stages of Pound's engagement with the works of Cavalcanti he stresses the imperfection and provisional nature of his versions, urging his reader to return to the music of the original, what Anderson (2014, p. xxx) describes as a long-running experiment in 'bringing over Cavalcanti.' Indeed, his 1931 essay 'Cavalcanti' acknowledges and explains his imperfect efforts:

As for the atrocities of my translation, all that can be said in excuse is that they are, I hope, for the most part intentional, and committed with the aim of driving the reader's perception further into the original than it would, without them, have penetrated. (Pound, 1968, 172)

Secondly, his long engagement with Cavalcanti provided Pound with a forum for working through his ideas on poetry, allowing him to define and refine poetic ideals that he found crystallized within Guido's work:

As for the verse itself: I believe in an ultimate and absolute rhythm as I believe in an absolute symbol or metaphor. The perception of the intellect is given in the word, that of the emotions in the cadence. It is only, then, in perfect rhythm joined to the perfect word that the twofold vision can be recorded. (Pound, 1912, 11)

Prynne (2007), outlines Pound's struggles to approach this 'two-fold vision' in his translations of *Donna me Prega*, where the demands for fidelity to perfect rhythm and perfect word set up a tension (similar perhaps to that between love and virtue in the section from ll.35-37 quoted above which Pound renders as 'swinging') that can never be fully resolved:

Both versions maintain a self-consciously stilted diction, pointing up Cavalcanti's unfamiliar technical distance from mere amorous sentiment and also the distance intervening between Cavalcanti and the modern world; the effect is tight but disjointed in lyrical flow, drawing the reader instead towards logical definition and argument set out in articulate steps of 'natural demonstration'...But the earlier version attempts to represent at least some of the elaborate structure of internal/end-rhyme, the carapace of its sound shape as actively forming the links of thought with speech and song...The version preferred for Canto XXXVI has largely abandoned this level of overt *melopoeia*, at least so far as chime of like sounds is concerned (Prynne, 2007, 7)

Prynne supports Pound's own assessment of the infelicities of his translation as evidence of the work needed to excavate a language from the sediment of English poetics in which the lines could sing again:

...the moments of stiff awkwardness in the version included in Canto XXXVI are intended as exemplary and therapeutic; the route back to 'cantabile virtue' from the vantage of modern English poetic

possibility could not lie through any part of the iambic pentameter tradition, because that route was silted up and blocked (8)

Pound's translations lack the lightness to shake off the silt of centuries of English poetic tradition and follow their source into song (the 'cantabile virtue' he defines as 'keeping the sound sharp and light in the throat by the rhymes inside the long line' 1968, p170), yet his clarity of thought in formulating the terms of the dilemma stand as an enduring challenge to those who would follow after.

First among the followers (although unlikely to have relished that description), is Louis Zukofsky, whose extended presentation of "A"-9 (*First Half*), published in 1940, incorporates both of Pound's *Donna me Prega* translations in their entirety as well as Guido's original, whose rhyme-scheme he adapts as armature for a poetic work where 'labour' eclipses 'love' as the world's guiding force. Unfortunately, due to ongoing copyright difficulties relating to the Zukofsky estate, it will be impossible to quote from the poem in question in sufficient detail to fully tease out its implications for the work of a self-confessed 'Zukofsky nut' (Manson, 2014 b), therefore I will merely comment on aspects of Zukofsky's craftsmanship that are suggestive of affinities with Manson's later *Canzon-for singing-after Cavalcanti*.

Richard Sieburth (2004) proposes the American friendship quilt, which Zukofsky was researching during the time of writing A-9, as the closest model for the radical collage techniques employed in crafting this huge poem. This analogy seems inspired – like an American quilt, Zukofsky's work is stitched together from older cloth, made by many hands at many times, trimmed to fit his own particular pattern; and, like a quilt, Zukofsky's poem draws its comforting heft from the feather-lightness at its core.

Sieburth goes on to enumerate the layers of text and theory drawn by Zukofsky into the fabric of his poem and, given the current impossibility of presenting samples of the fabric itself as examples of its crafting, I will rely on Sieburth's description to give some sense of the work:

He first gives the base-text of the Cavalcanti in Pound's editorial reconstruction, then a cento of quotations from Marx, followed by excerpts from H. Stanley Allen's *Electrons and Waves: An Introduction to Atomic Physics* dealing with Max Planck and Einstein's theory of ...This is then followed by Pound's 1928 *Dial* "traduction" of the Canzone (also included in his *Rime*), and his revised 1934 translation (published as Canto 36), succeeded by two vernacular American translations, his friend Jerry Reisman's "A Dame ast me," and his own Irish-Brooklynese "A foin lass bodders me...This is followed by a brief statement on the canzone's form, in which Zukosky (with the help of his friend Reisman) translates Pound's analysis of the poem's rhyme scheme into the "poetic analog of a conic section" with an accompanying chart recording the numerical frequency of the consonantal "n" and "r" sounds in the various lines of the first half of "A"-9, and, in culmination, Zukofsky's poem itself,

followed by its translation into a prose restatement of its major themes strophe by strophe (Sieburth, 2004, 13)

The monumental edifice of constraint Zukofsky constructs around himself to shape the creation of his poem is paralleled by the constraints he chooses to place on the reader's interpretation of it, with all work of exegesis laid out for the reader who approaches the text through the 1940 version of part 1. However, for the reader of the version of "A"- 9, as it appeared in the University of California complete "A", published in 1978, there is none of this exegetic paraphernalia. Rather, the poem is presented as one unit, a double canzone, the first half of which (from the 1940 "A"-9) uses Cavalcanti's rhyming structure as armature for ideas drawn from Marx's writings on abstracted labour and the second half of which adapts the same rhyme structure to ideas on love, drawn less directly from Spinoza (Scroggins, 1998). There is not even a seam to mark the suturing of two *canzoni* composed a decade apart. This is reminiscent of the process outlined in the opening quote from Calvino, where the weight of matter is dissolved through the interchangeability of materials. In this, it prefigures Manson's later version – and in the fact that, other than its acknowledgements, the poem does not burden the reader with keys or notes, but lets the song resonate in its own space.

From Sieburth's catalogue I will draw on three further elements that strike me as key for an understanding of Manson's later work and the extent to which it is 'after Louis Zukofsky': a reclamation of the sound and song-structure of Cavalcanti's *canzone*, via 'transliteration and *traducson*' (Sieburth, p6); a spirit of contrariness in the modulation between positions of disciple of and rival to Pound; and a successful synthesis, in the almost throw-away shape of 'A foin lass boddors', of Cavalcanti's sound structure and sense with a contemporary dialect of English. Indeed, the lilting cadences of Zukofsky's Oirish-American patois achieve a lightness of tone and line that transcend the surrounding weight of explicatory text and theory in a Cavalcantian vault that Manson will restage over a half-century later.

III. 'THE ROUTE BACK TO 'CANTABILE VIRTUE': MANSON'S 'CONTRARIA VIA'

In order to assess the extent to which Manson's *Canzone –for singing – after Cavalcanti* achieves the lightness of Calvino's Cavalcanti, I will focus on constraint and contradiction as themes and techniques. Manson's 1997 booklet *me generation* features a poem *Progressive Vocalic Lipogram (i.m. Italo Calvino)*, which explores and enacts the beauty of constraint as a spur to poetic creation in direct homage to the *Oulipian*, playful side of Calvino. The lure of extreme constraint for the writers of *Oulipo* has been described in these terms:

If the Oulipo insists on rigidly constraining formal organization, it is in the belief that this will engender texts of exceptional merit, another avatar of the aesthetic of *difficulté vaincue*. It rapidly becomes clear that this, too, can be conceived as a hierarchy: increasing the difficulty of the problems posed

necessarily increases—here is the leap of faith—the merit of its eventual solution’ (Motte, 1998, 11)

The constraint for which Manson’s poem is named is certainly rigorous, being based on a staged pattern of exclusion and reintroduction of vowels. This is the pattern followed in the first stanza, which opens with ‘Enunciators’, containing all five vowels, gradually giving way over the course of the line to the univocalic ‘art.’ The second line’s ‘up’ is steadily built up to ‘housewarming.’

Enunciators’ memorial gleanings date art
But groups outwit eruptions’ housewarming
Plans. Aye, Maggie, toil-laden Ur-leipograms
outpraise yourself-ish mouthings

(Manson, 1997, 3)

This stringently applied constraint yields, in the lines ‘toil-laden Ur-leipograms/out-praise yourself-ish mouthings’, as distinct a defence of the supremacy of constraint to self-expression as Calvino’s ‘a game that is invested with unexpected meaning’ (1986, 22), antidote to ‘the vertigo of what is countless, unclassifiable, in a state of flux’(17).

Manson’s second stanza departs from the eponymous constraint, working instead with univocalics, leading to three of the stanza’s four lines featuring only the letter ‘e’, visually and sonically recalling Christian Bok’s *Eunoia*. This stanza’s coded commentary on its process’s constraint is ‘Drouth burns. The leerer/ meets meeker seekers here, levels her revels.’ Here, Manson appears to be acknowledging a poverty of expression imposed by the tightening of the poem’s lipogramatic structure, depriving the work of the flexibility of expression allowed by the opening stanza’s more mobile, undulant form. Of course, in the lament ‘Drouth burns’, Manson has permitted himself a brief swerve outside the univocalic constraint in order not to completely sacrifice meaning to structure. This vocalic shimmying can also be noted in the opening stanza, where the addition of an extra ‘e’ to ‘lipogram’ yields the convincingly Scottish-tinged ‘ur-leipograms’, fulfilling the requirement for a word containing all five vowels.

Manson’s poem *Perma Sonnet*, which follows *Canzon - for singing – after Cavalcanti* in *Between Cup and Lip*, and was composed during a break in its translation (Manson, 2014 b.) addresses the potential inflexibilities of a more traditional suite of poetic constraints: the rhyme and metre of the sonnet form. Manson has referred to this poem, in email correspondence with this author, as one of his ‘Procrustean sonnets’ and he plays with the ways in which the sonnet’s conventions impose constraints on its lines and their ideas, as Procrustes’ victims found themselves cut down to size or stretched in order to fit his bed. The poem consists of 14 lines of ten syllables each, whose metrical structure is outlined in the opening line: ‘Off on off on on on on on off on’ –

two iambs followed by two spondees and an iamb. The rhyme scheme, a-b-a-b-c-d-e-e-c-d-f-g-g-f, doesn't, after its opening quatrain, conform to any of the standard sonnet models. The key of 'ten', for the syllabic code, is inserted parenthetically in the fourth line, and expanded in the fifth:

Person, whose name, writ(ten) on time, in words
 Not water, splits in ten in time, giving
 Pih-ee, tih-uh, rr-mm, ah-nn, ss-nn

(Manson, 2007, 9)

The line into which the key is slipped recalls Keats's epitaph, 'Here lies one whose name was writ on water', with the 'ten' supplying, not just the code, but a linguistic updating of the line, before enacting the process it describes – the inscribing of the poet's name on time, in words, where the expansion of each sound of the poet's name to fit the poem's syllabic structure uses time, in the form of each sound's extended duration, to give the poet's name an enduring presence in words that contrasts with Keats's description of a more fleeting inscription, albeit one later memorialized in stone.

Line ten employs a form of word-splitting across lines reminiscent (or prescient) of *Canzone*, 'Voice, place and mann/ -er vie for mind's eye's fovea.' This splitting highlights the constraints imposed by the artificiality of the poem's syllabic structure, while providing a rhyme for the poet's surname's last syllable ('ss-nn') that is a homophone of its first ('mann'), further inscribing his name on time, in words. *Perma Sonnet's* embodiment of the constraints of the sonnet form in its structure and sense is elaborated in *Canzone – for singing – after Cavalcanti*. In this cover version of *Donna me Prega*, Manson has set himself the multiple challenges of maintaining the rhyme-scheme of Cavalcanti's poem using, where possible, homophonic translations of the rhyme words, while preserving the sense of the original. Manson's version preserves the division of lines into two- and three-step segments that Sieburth has identified as one of the great innovations of Pound's translation:

Pound translates the minute scribal marks on the Laurenziano manuscript into typographical lineation, setting off the internal rhymes as two- or three-step lines and thus achieving what Zukofsky would define as the crux of writing: "audibility in two-dimensional print." (Sieburth, 2004, 7)

Manson's translation makes a feature of these stepping lines, laying bare the visual effect of the poem's rhyme structure that complements its auditory qualities:

My donna prays, 'Say' -
 such is my volition, dearly!
 'of one accident,
 which so vents

itself, ferociously
 to alter old Guido'.
 It's amatory. Ah, more, eh?
 Some chill nay-
 sayers even perceive it clearly
 and I'm at present
 cognisant
 their old
 hope's gone where old
 hopes go. Old story! (Manson, 2007, 2)

The opening lines feature the most rigid cleaving to the source poem's sound patterns (Cavalcanti, 2006) with 'voglio dire' becoming 'volition, dearly', 'accidente' 'accident', 'sovente' 'so vents' and 'amore' 'Ah, more, eh?.' Cavalcanti's 'fero' can clearly be heard nestling inside 'ferociously', and 'alter old Guido' runs together to sound out his 'altero', as well as providing (with the lines 'one accident/ which so vents/ itself ferociously/ to alter old Guido') a guide to the process being enacted in the poem.

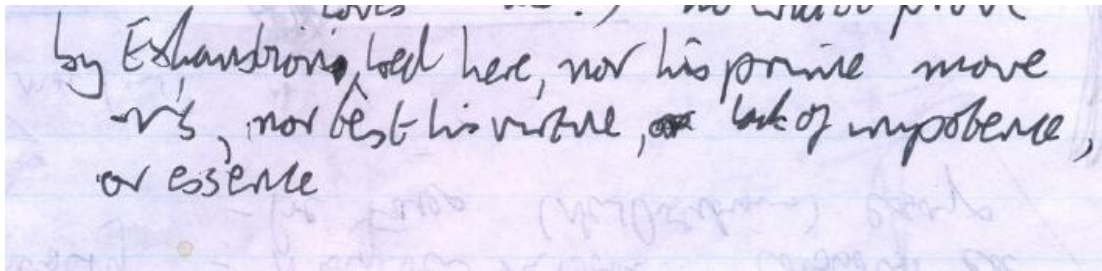
These lines bind themselves in the further constraint of maintaining the complex rhyme scheme that Prynne described as 'the elaborate structure of internal/end-rhyme, the carapace of its sound shape as actively forming the links of thought with speech and song' (2007, 7). This fidelity to the sound of the source poem denotes Manson's desire, hinted at in the title's 'for singing', to return the music to Cavalcanti's song, reviving the air of internal rhyme that Pound had praised as 'keeping the sound sharp and light in the throat' (1968, 170), but felt the need to eschew in his *Canto XXXVI*.

The triple constraint, recreating the sound, rhyme and sense of the source poem in the translation, was initially woven with a fourth strand, that of maintaining sight-rhymes to the original by splitting the homophonic translations across lines:

25/11/91
 Donna me ^{prays, say} ~~prophesies~~:
 Of ^{one} ~~stone~~ accident such is my volition, ^{dearly} ~~dearly~~!
 Whence vent
 -s itself -eh, fero
 ciously t'alter o
 -ld Guido. It's amatory. Ah, more,
 some ^{some} ~~some~~ chill nay-say even
 And I'm at present -ers L perceive it ~~and~~ clearly
 cognisant
 L d hopes' ^{gone} where o
 L d hopes go. Old story!

(Manson, 1992)

In this version 'so vents', 'ferociously', 'alter old Guido' 'their old' and 'where old' are split across the line to maintain visual as well as sonic kinship with Cavalcanti's 'sovente', 'fero', 'altero', 'chero' and 'spero'. This virtuosic feat of musical quadruple-constrained fidelity takes a slight swerve from the source poem in rendering 'perch'io no spero/ ch'om di basso core' ('because I don't hope/ that man of low heart') as 'hope's gone where o/ld hopes go. Old story!' before petering out mid-line, on 'his virtue, lack of impotence/ or essence':



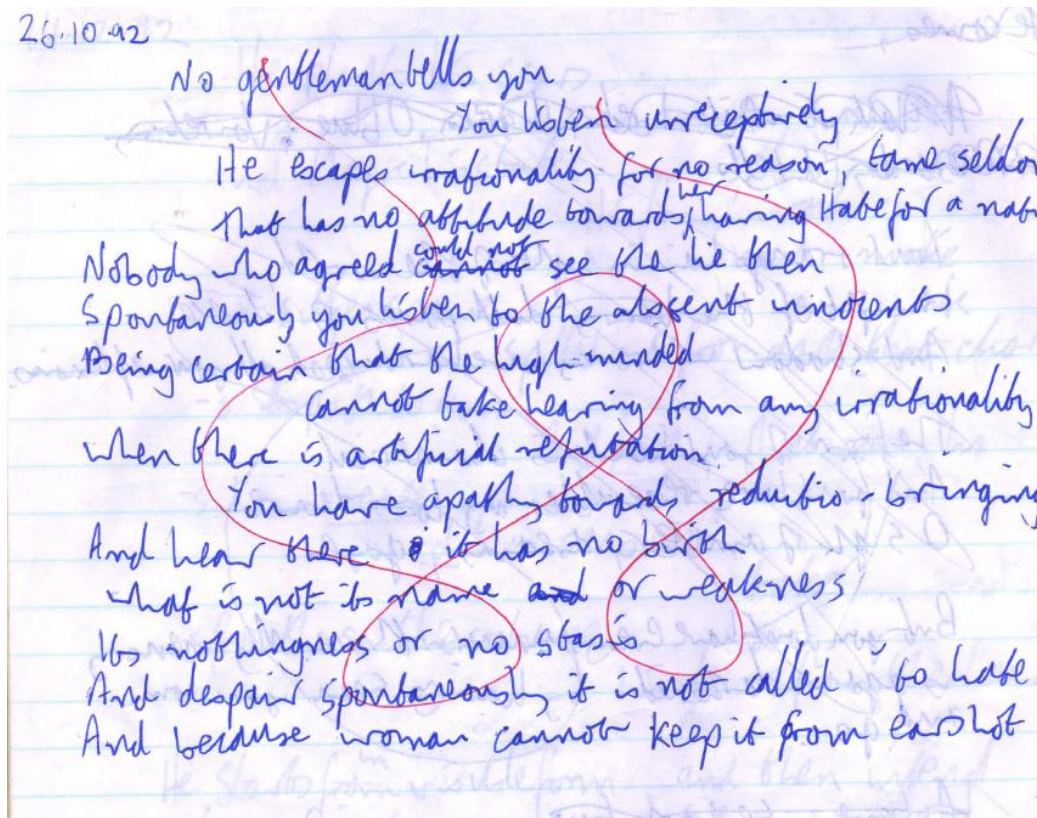
This manuscript version of most of the *canzone*'s opening stanza, dated November-December 1991, is rewritten on the following page, but Manson will not return to complete his translation for over a year. Like Houdini handcuffing himself before being locked in a milk-can and submerged in water, Manson has bound himself so tightly in his web of constraints that it's hard to see how he can wriggle free and complete the remaining 64 lines.

IV. TAKING THE 'CONTRARIA VIA'

During the break between writing the first stanza of *Canzon – for singing – after Cavalcanti* and completing the poem in late 1992, Manson began work on a series of what he called 'contradiction poems' (Manson, 2014 c), the only surviving published example of which is *If by dull rhymes our English must be chained* (Manson, 2007), a word-by-word contradiction of Keats' late sonnet on the shortcomings of the sonnet form. Scott (1994) suggests that, in this work 'Keats attempts to write his way out of the sonnet, as if it was indeed the prison Wordsworth so blithely denies it to be.' Manson's writing through of Keats' words bulldozes the prison walls, leaving jagged, unrhymed line-ends where once stood Keats' delicate rhymes against the tyranny of rhyme.

The lines 'the Sonnet sweet/Fetter'd, in spite of pained loveliness' (Keats, 1978, 368) become, via contradiction, 'the sour text/ Unleashed because of pleasing tawdriness' a line where, once again, Manson provides insight into the process being enacted in his poem. 'Let us inspect the lyre, and weigh the stress/Of every chord, and see what may be gain'd/By ear industrious, and attention meet' becomes 'Don't bother to ignore the hammer, or estimate the laxity/ Of any note, or hear what will be lost/ To lazy eye or unfocused attention.' It's interesting to note the choice of 'hammer' as opposite term for 'lyre', musical instrument from which the 'lyric' originated, and the poet's acknowledgement of the inevitability of loss to a lack of attention on the reader's part.

In the concluding lines, Keats' 'So, if we may not let the Muse be free,/ She will be bound with garlands of her own' is transformed into 'Nevertheless, because you will force the examiner to be detained/ he won't be released without the chains of his comrades.' These lines transform the muse's garlands into chains, such as those borrowed from comrades Cavalcanti, Pound and Zukofsky, by and from which Manson will release himself over the course of his *Canzone*. In the manuscript of *Canzone*, Manson has written and then scribbled over a contradiction poem of Pound's *Canto XXXVI* version of *Donna me prega*:



Beginning by transforming 'A lady asks me' into 'No gentleman tells you', it goes on to rework the stanza word by word, contradicting as it goes. The troublesome second lobe, where the first effort at translation sputtered out on 'essence', is switched from:

I have no will to try proof-bringing
Or say where it hath birth
What is its virtue and power
Its being and every moving
Or delight whereby 'tis called "to love"
Or if man can show it to sight. (Pound, 2011)

to:

You have apathy towards reduction-bringing
And hear there it has no birth

What is not its name or weakness
Its nothingness and no stasis
And despair spontaneously it is not called 'to hate'
And because woman cannot keep it from earshot.

The 'essence', subsumed into 'being' in Pound's version, is evaporated into 'nothingness' by Manson's process of contradiction, to be followed by 'no stasis', surely a call to get moving again. Although this 'contradiction poem' was never published, and none of its lines found their way into the completed version of the *Canzone*, it marks a turning point in Manson's struggle against his self-imposed web of constraint.

The 'contradiction' is dated 26/10/92, ten months after the first stanza ground to a halt. Less than two months later, on 14/12/92, Manson takes up a blue pen and takes off again in mid-sentence, following that dangling 'essence' with 'or what indeed/ he's sent to do or bent o/n I can't say/ and you've no stylus for this groove.' These lines proceed within the established framework of constraint – they maintain the internal and end rhyme schemes, with the splitting of 'on' serving to preserve a visual link to '*piacimento*'. However, Manson has leapt clear of the strict sense of the source poem, releasing something that is uniquely his from the shackles of Cavalcanti, Pound and Zukofsky. There are no styluses or grooves to be found in any of the 'before' poems that *Canzone* is 'after', but it is this stylus, fashioned by Manson's process of contradiction, that releases the music trapped within the grooves of this palimpsest poem, returning it to 'cantabile virtue.'

The following stanza transforms Cavalcanti's '*diaffan da lume*' ('diafan of light') into 'silken spume/ spilled out from dark which charts/ a path from Mars', but it is in the final lines of each lobe and stanza that the most virtuosic vaults take place:

–

'a comb
for thought... the kind of thing you won't catch in a poem.'

'Chance' doesn't govern the life you lead.
If your needs outrun your authority,
don't blame the dice. Love spoiled your party.'

'a psychedelic plant
(unstable figure), features grinned or gurned,
burnt-on by pokers, planed back off in sheets.'

'Love was not made to bend to a slight goal:
it can display surprising self-control.'
'It's not in the bag yet - and on reflection
it might be better to remain...
no, here we go again. The Twilight Zone!'

These lines take up the motif of Cavalcanti's *canzone* and sing something new, a modern-day melodic counterpoint to a medieval treatise on the meaning of love. In these lobe and stanza endings Manson finds lines light as silken spume spun out of Cavalcanti, the perfect poetic recreation of Cavalcanti's vault to freedom over the tomb-tops. In his masterful handling of multiple constraints, using the momentum provided by the process of contradiction, Manson creates the conditions in which he must exercise his qualities of agility and intellect to their fullest, to achieve the light perfection of his vault. In so doing, he fulfils the criteria set out by Calvino to describe Cavalcanti's poetics of lightness: '(1) it is to the highest degree light; (2) it is in motion; (3) it is a vector of information.' It is in the mobile vectors of his lobe and stanza endings that Manson finds lines light as silken spume spun out of Cavalcanti, the perfect poetic recreation of Cavalcanti's vault to freedom over the tomb-tops.

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POROUS ITALIES: VIRGIL AND WALTER BENJAMIN

One of the key characteristics to get to grips with is that this [Italy] is a nation at ease with the distance between ideal and real. They are beyond what we call hypocrisy. Quite simply they do not register the contradiction between rhetoric and behaviour. It is an enviable mind-set (25).

-Tim Parks, *Italian Ways* (2013)

Goethe once claimed Italy was “the shadow of a nation” (Gilmore, 150). Indeed, much of its history is exemplary of contradiction and disunity, existing oftentimes as a semblance of something to come, or already passed, as opposed to an entity wholly present to itself. Proof of this can be drawn from the fact that, for many, ‘until the end of the eighteenth century, Italy remained a literary idea, and abstract concept, an imaginary homeland or simply a sentimental urge’ (Gilmore, 9). In *The Pursuit of Italy* (2011), David Gilmore suggests that this phenomenon finds its roots in the different linguistic, geographical, cultural, idealistic and political realities notable throughout the various stages of the country's life. However, or for Gilmore at least, regardless of these contradictory and ongoing tensions that align themselves with Italy, it has nonetheless managed to maintain an identity. Although such an identity has developed and changed repeatedly, what has remained constant for Gilmore are its various movements and moments of self-creation. His study, while never directly quoting it, hinges upon the famous claim made by the Italian Statesman Massimo d’Azeglio in 1870 following Italian unification: ‘We have made Italy. Now we must make Italians’ (Parks, 11-12). The making of both Italy and Italians is the embodiment of what Gilmore regards as the pursuit of Italy, it is the act creation that constantly recreates. However, the outcome of such a reality leads Gilmore to note that:

‘Nations are not inevitable [...] and sometimes their creation is so artificial that [...] they simply fall apart’(3). Here, the author suggests from the outset that there is an artificiality at the heart of Italy’s identity and that its facticity is inherently fictitious. At its source, it is a contradiction; it is a constantly created fiction that appears as fact. The artifice in Azeglio’s claims about Italy as something made and as something that must continue in the making suggests it is often at odds with itself. The making of Italy and Italians drains its content through the pursuit of what is being made. The act of making in relation to the ideal of the what is to come, overshadows the reality of what exists. Perhaps it is for this reason that Italy has sustained as an infinite source of inspiration for artists, writers and thinkers alike. For them, Italy does not only inspire the creative process, it exemplifies it. What we find in such creative engagements are works that, like Italy itself, are permeated by a lack of presence, revealing points of tension and disunity.

Both the poet Virgil (70-19 BC), in his *Eclogues* (42-39 BC), and Walter Benjamin (1892-1940), in his essay on Naples (1925), exemplify creative instances where Italy is presented as the manifestation of contradiction and artifice. Although separated by history and context, both figures depict Italy as a space that furnishes an ironic play between opposites. What makes such a dynamic possible for Virgil and Benjamin are their observations regarding a porosity that attaches itself to their representations and images of Italy. This porosity is the characteristic that allows for the free-flow and intersection of conflicting ideals and realities that for both writers, is manifested within and among their unique experiences of Italy. For instance: Virgil depicts the Italian country-side as an idyllic Arcadian landscape, however, the comfort and safety of this pastoral setting is forever threatened by the looming reality of the Roman *polis*. However, and at the same time, he writes of certain Arcadians who sing the glories of Rome and welcome the alternative utopian promises it offers. Thus, the poet’s idyllic landscape is presented to us as compromised one; it is offered as a source of its own possibility while simultaneously, it is also the site of its own undoing. Its identity is determined and threatened by its relationship to Rome. Similarly, for Benjamin, Naples appears as a porous battle-ground that plays out the tense relationship between the Neapolitan conception of itself and its altogether different reality. In many ways, it is analogous to Benjamin’s depictions of the Paris Arcades; Naples represents as a space of conflicting entry and exit points. It harbours within its image

of itself utopian dreams that, although never actualized, became a notable imprint on the collective psyche. As such, Naples, much like Virgil's Arcadian country-side, represents a conflict between what it sees itself as and what it actually is.

This point of contradiction, and the logical impasse that follows in its wake, is the very poetic devise that Wallace Stevens adopts when theorizing his ideas on what he refers to as 'Supreme Fiction.' For Stevens, this is 'a fiction, which you know to be a fiction, there being nothing else. The exquisite truth is to know that it is a fiction and that you believe in it willingly'(903). It is as 'Supreme Fiction' that we can read both Virgil's and Benjamin's imaginative approaches to Italy and furthermore, it is through the idea of 'Supreme Fiction' that we will enframe and locate the presence of porosity in each of their accounts. Furthermore, porosity is not only revealed as a defining characteristic of both authors' depiction of Italy, it is also the very devise that makes such accounts possible. It is the inevitable outcome of a wilfully constructed people and place. Azeglio's claims highlight this fact, and in doing so, draw our attention to the supremacy of fiction that lies at the heart of certain conceptions of both Italy and Italians.

In Virgil's *Eclogues*, a sequence of poems set and inspired by a period of Italian history burdened by civil unrest, we see numerous examples of the antithetical, yet curiously symbiotic dialectic between real and ideal. Here, we see how both melts into one another revealing a primal contradiction at the heart of poetic imagination and its relation to images of Italy. Following the assassination of Caesar in 44 BC, a power-struggle developed between the 'second triumvirate' comprising Mark Anthony, Lepidus and Octavian and the opposing 'liberators,' whose most famous members include Brutus and Cassius. The ensuing tussle for control resulted in a civil war that ended in 42 BC with Mark Anthony and Octavian claiming victory. In order to make reparations to the soldiers that fought in his armies, the task fell to Octavian to acquire lands in order to reward their services to Rome. Soldiers were rewarded by their masters 'with land confiscated from those who had owned it in peacetime, and this dislocated the rural society of Italy' (Hughes, 90). The *Eclogues*, composed throughout the years of the civil war, depicts the response of those who suffered as a result of having their lands taken from them in order to pay the services of soldiers to the state. It is estimated that 'a quarter of the good land in Italy is thought to have changed hands in this way' (Ibid). The context of 'Eclogue I' is determined

by this event. The poem marks the conversation between two shepherds, Meliboeus and Tityrus, the former having been relieved of his lands by the Rome:

Tityrus, here you loll, your slim reed-pipe serenading
The woodland spirit beneath a spread of sheltering beech,
While I must leave my home place, the fields so dear to me.
I'm driven away from my home place. (3)

Initially we are unaware of the reasons for this, but later in the poem we see that:

[T]he rest of us must go from here and be dispersed-
To Scythia, bone dry Africa, the Chalky spate of the Oxus,
Even to Britain – that place cut off at the very world's end.
Ah when shall I see my native land again? After long years,
Or never? – see the turf-dressed roof of my simple cottage,
And wondering gaze at the ears of corn that were all my kingdom?
To think of some godless soldier owning my well-farmed fallow,
A foreigner reaping these crops! To such a pass has civil
Dissension brought us. (5-6)

In 'Eclogue IX,' a similar fate befalls Moeris who, like Meliboeus before him, expresses his discontent to his neighbour Lycidas about the dispossession of his farm:

Oh, Lycidas, that I should have lived to see an outsider
Take over my little farm-a thing that I had never feared-
And tell me, 'You're dispossessed, you old tenants, you've got to go.'
We're down and out. (38)

Here Meliboeus and Moeris suffer at the hands of contradiction. The very mouths they worked to feed – 'for people like these we have sown our fields' (6), cries Meliboeus – are the same hands that take their livelihood away from them. What becomes apparent here is that the Italy that the 'second triumvirate' went to war to secure was not one that every Italian was assured of prospering from. In both 'Eclogue I' and 'II,' Virgil differentiates between the harsh reality imposed upon of many Italians farmers when compared to the ideals of smaller number of Italian statesmen and their political obligations.

Contradiction abounds in the *Eclogues*. The context and setting of these poems seeks not only mark a distinct tension between reality and fiction, but further to this, to suggest a fiction at the heart of reality and vice versa. 'Eclogues IV, VII and X' make specific

reference to the mythical Arcadian setting that the poet situates his dramatic personae within. Yet at the same time, and lurking in the background of all these scenes is the harsh historical event of the Roman seizure of farmers' lands (Lyne, xi, 129). However, while we witness the traumatic uprooting of characters like Meliboeus from his lands in 'Eclogue I,' the context of the poem is simultaneously shaped and determined by joyous celebration. Running parallel to Meliboeus' narrative is Tityrus' story. The latter appears at the beginning of the *Eclogues* as a recently freed slave who pleasantly loaf and relaxes in the idyllic Arcadian countryside. Tityrus offers up a counter-point to the misfortune of Meliboeus, indeed, he embodies the liberating power of Rome. In response to Meliboeus's unjust dispossession of his land, Tityrus apathetically responds with the assertion: 'a god has given me this ease' (3). This God is later-revealed as the 'young prince' (4) from Rome, Octavian, the same person whose orders resulted in Meliboeus being removed from his land. In the first 'Eclogue' we see a simultaneous presentation of a Rome that gives and a Rome that takes away. Meliboeus depicts an image of Arcadia that is open to penetration and influence by external authority; its porosity results in the loss of his lands. However, and concurrent to this, it is also Rome that affords Tityrus the chance to live unperturbed in Arcadian paradise.

Tityrus' celebration of the liberating powers of Rome is echoed in 'Eclogue IV,' however, here, the reader witnesses another contradiction played out within Virgil's depiction of Italy. Commentators suggest that the unnamed speaker in this poem sings in celebration of the Pact of Brundisium (40 BC), a political event leading to the union between the houses of Octavian and Mark Anthony (Lyne, 130). The context of this poem is the celebration of this union, the anticipation of the child that shall be born from it and the end of the civil unrest in Italy. In recognition of this important historical event, the poem's speaker jubilantly predicts a future for Italy that seems to confuse reality with ideality; his words suggest that the child of the marital union promises the coming of a utopia where humankind and nature no longer oppose each other, but instead live in harmony:

Traders will retire from the sea, from the pine built vessels
They used for commerce: every land will be self supporting.
The soil will need no harrowing, the vine no pruning knife;
And the tough ploughman may at last unyoke his oxen.

We shall stop treating wool with artificial dyes,
For the ram himself in his pasture will change his fleece's
Colour (19)

Not only will man and beast live in peaceful existence with one another, nature will live in peaceful harmony with itself, so much so that 'the ox will have no fear of the lion' (18). The speaker's celebration of 'the crowning era foretold in prophecy:/Born of Time, a great new cycle of centuries/Begins' (Ibid), seems to drift from a depiction of an ordered reality into an altogether alternative ideal. The movement from reality to ideality becomes distorted and results in the presentation of a utopian image that undermines and looks beyond Rome's power to rule and have dominion over lands and peoples. Thus, at one and the same time, 'Eclogue IV,' celebrates the victory of Roman rule but also looks towards a time where its rule won't be necessary; it is thus empowered and disempowered in the same poem.

Contradiction reveals itself in the formal structure of the *Eclogue* also. What Virgil achieves via his insertion of scenes where sheppards recite poetry to one another is in fact embodied contradiction. In the instances where these 'poem-offs,' or proto-rap battles unfold, we see the characters' attempts to literally *contra-dict* each other. We see an example of this in 'Eclogue III' where Damoteas suggests to Menalcas that they 'have a match, each singing in turn, and try/out/Each other's skill' (11). Other similar instances of this can be seen in 'Eclogue V' between Mopsus and Menalcas (22-24), in 'Eclogue VII' between Corydon and Thyrsis (30-32), and in 'Eclogue VIII' between Damon and Alphesiboeus (33-37). We get a sense from reading these poems that Virgil is attempting to capture an over-all mood of instability lying at the heart of the Arcadian setting populated by people. Its ideality becomes polluted by the special interests of those inhabiting it, each in their own way seeking to claim authority and dominion over the idealised space making it a lived reality. This is best demonstrated in 'Eclogue III' where it is revealed that Menalcas, in an attempt to settle a score with Micon, slashes the latter's vineyard and maims his growing vines (10). Similarly, Menalcas attempts to 'rustle a goat of Damon's' (11) he claims he won when he beat the latter 'At piping and singing' (Ibid).

In the *Eclogues* Virgil continuously wrestles with the inability of the real and the ideal to exist in harmony with one another. In the presentation of such a theme, he reveals that the distance between the two is changeable. The real and the ideal bleed into and out of

one another, refusing to stay still long enough that either can be accurately situated or definitely exemplified. Furthermore, Virgil's Arcadia is dependent upon its relationship to its inhabitants, but also, upon the constant threat posed to it by Rome. However, and as we have noted above, it is also Rome that stands as the counter-point and backdrop to which Arcadia can be presented as an idealized pastoral setting independent from the *polis*. In many ways, the porosity of Virgil's Arcadia is its downfall. It's openness to the presence of Rome is the very backdrop upon which its utopian setting can be emphasized, however, it is this very backdrop that moves to the foreground in Virgil's *Eclogues* and ultimately problematizes the experience and definition of Arcadia itself. At the same time however, and as we have seen in 'Eclogue IV:' Roman authority and supremacy is threatened from within by Arcadian potentialities that birth of 'the first-born' of Octavia and Mark Anthony promises. The speaker who awaits the 'Golden Age' of Rome simultaneously projects its demise as a power. Thus, in Virgil, we see a continuous interplay between the potential of Arcadia to be destroyed by Rome, and the potential of Rome to be made powerless by the promises of Arcadia. Both become the simultaneous possibility and impossibility of one another. The same can be said for the inhabitants of this problematized idyllic landscape. It becomes the site from which they experience the promises of utopia but also the impossibility of it. Similarly, the special interests of those who seek to exploit the bountiful resources that this Arcadia offers succeed in leeching from it the utopian potentiality that it contains; it is thus undone from the inside. The image of Italy that Virgil presents to us in these poems is one representing a space furnishing both possibility and its opposite; he does this by bringing together and simultaneously separating reality and 'Supreme Fiction'. Indeed, in these poems Virgil embodies this very dynamic. The poet recognized the 'extraordinary variety' in the country and 'he believed its strength and destiny lay in 'unity in diversity'' (Gilmore, 44); the *Eclogues* offers such a unification. Be this as it may, at the heart of this unification of opposites there rests an undecided ambiguity. We are not treated to a resolution that falls on the side of either reality or ideality. Virgil, 'the first Italian,' (Ibid) appears unresolved in the *Eclogues*; these poems seem to exemplify the work of one who seems 'at ease with the distance between ideal and real' (Parks, 25). It is this trait (as suggested in the opening quotation of this paper), that Tim Parks aligns with his experience and encounter with 'Italian Ways' altogether. It is perhaps for this reason that in the same text, Parks claims: 'Italy is not a country for beginners' (20). After all, as we have

seen in the *Eclogues*, even Virgil, the so-called ‘first Italian,’ does not represent or exemplify a starting point, but instead, a perpetual beginning caught in between two points of indecision.

Perpetual beginning is one of the numerous themes that Walter Benjamin investigates in ‘Naples,’ an essay offering a snap-shot of an Italian city alive with paradox. He observes how for the Neapolitan ‘The stamp of the definitive is avoided’ because here ‘nothing is concluded’ (166). It is a place that stands alone in its image of itself, and for Benjamin, it appears unnerving in its uniqueness when compared to Rome (164). Written in conjunction with his sometimes lover Asja Lacis, ‘Naples’ offers an ideological critique laying bare the relationship between the city’s physical composition and those populating it. What follows these observations is the revelation of a profound disharmony between the actuality of Neapolitan existence and image of itself it believes it projects. A key term in this text is ‘porosity,’ for Benjamin it is ‘the inexhaustible law of the city, reappearing everywhere’ (168). Indeed, it is this very characteristic of the city that makes possible his critique of it, allowing him thread between a series of conflicting Neapolitan realities depicting the points of connection between each. The essay is typical of Benjamin later critical style where he creates what he class ‘literary montage.’ His writing seeks to base itself on the idea of the ‘constellation’ where seemingly unrelated material is brought together in order to provide a detailed critical analysis of a theme. The principle behind this method of composition is that it unites seemingly antagonistic elements to reveal what Benjamin refers to as a ‘profane manifestations of ‘nearness’’ (*The Arcades Project*, 205). Further to this, each single component in the ‘constellation’ is representative of both itself and every other aspect of the ‘montage’ it is part of, regardless of how it may exist in a contrary or paradoxical relationship to its counterpart.

The essay in its entirety is an example of this method and is complemented by its content in kind. We need only look at a selection of observation that Benjamin makes in this piece to get a clear idea of the Naples he is presented with. Like Virgil, Benjamin draws attention to Rome as a defining factor of his investigation. However, the latter speaks of it in terms of it in a different context of authority. Marking the very present influence of the religion in Naples, Benjamin marks how ‘So absolutely, in this city, does Catholicism strive to reassert itself in every situation’ that ‘Should it disappear from the face of the earth, its last

foothold would not be Rome, but Naples' (163). The practice of faith here is a literal example of the word becoming flesh, only in this context, the flesh loses any claims to transcendence becoming immersed instead in the barbarity of immanence. 'Nowhere,' writes Benjamin, 'can this people live out its rich barbarism, which has its source in the heart of the city itself, more securely than in the lap of the Church' (Ibid). In a similar way to motifs presented in the *Eclogues*, the secular (Rome) and the divine (Arcadia) comingle, blurring the lines between two. It is here that the Catholic Church is 'supple enough to accommodate the trade of the swindler and the whore, in order to control it' (Ibid). Transgression and doctrinal expectation intermingle to such a point that they are oftentimes indistinguishable. Benjamin sees this reality mirrored even in the physical layout of the city:

For the typical Neapolitan church does not ostentatiously occupy a vast square, visible from afar, with transepts, gallery, and dome. It is hidden, built in; high domes are often to be seen only from a few places, and even then it is not easy to find one's way to them, impossible to distinguish the mass of the church from that of the neighbouring secular buildings. (166)

There seems a sort of superficiality oozing from not only the porous ideology of Naples, but from its architecture (165). Benjamin relates how 'Buildings are used as a popular stage,' and that 'the street decorations are closely related to those of the theatre' (167). For the tourist such as Benjamin 'Nothing is enjoyable except the famous drinking water' (164); but even this is soured by the visible fact that poverty is contagious (Ibid). However, regardless of this, celebration and rest seems to permeate the mid-set of the Neapolitan because in Naples, 'A grain of Sunday is hidden in each week day' (168). The city is alive with contradiction: 'each private act is permeated by streams of communal life,' 'the living room appears on the street,' 'the poorer the quarter, the more numerous the eating houses' (171).

According to Hannah Arendt, Benjamin, while communicating in prose, thinks 'poetically' (*Illuminations*, 20). Indeed, his reports from Naples enact the very dream of a poetic prose as imagined by Charles Baudelaire as a 'musical without rhythm or rhyme, supple enough and jarring enough to be adapted to the soul's lyrical movements, to the undulations of reverie, to the twist and turns that consciousness takes' (*Paris Spleen*, 3). Benjamin simultaneously reads and writes the city as he walks it. He becomes the medium through which the irreducible complexity of this urban landscape is channelled. However, it

is a landscape such as this that intrigues Benjamin, for it exists as a physical manifestation of the contrariness that inspires much of his philosophical and critical thinking. Indeed, the space between the real and the ideal, the manifestation of contradiction itself, is one of the most characteristic traits of Benjamin's work. This idea is exemplified early in his critical thinking (c.1917), in a letter to his close friend Gershom Scholem. Here Benjamin claims: 'A philosophy that does not include the possibility of soothsaying from *coffee grounds* and cannot explicate it cannot be a true philosophy'(Scholem, 73). His attempt to open his thought towards a point of impossibility and contradiction, as we have seen, is reinforced in the 'Naples' essay. In 'Goethe's Elective Affinities' (1925), an essay written around the same time as 'Naples,' Benjamin offers that 'Only the expressionless completes' (Benjamin, 340). This claim, made in relation to interpreting symbolism in Goethe's novel, can also be applied to Benjamin's reading of Naples. For him, the city exists as a complete unit, as a world of its own; however, it is one at odds with itself. It is complete only insofar as its true expression is expressionless. The contradictions that manifest themselves in Benjamin's depiction of Naples are what are most genuine about the city; what is most authentic about it is its inauthenticity. In much the same way as Virgil's Arcadia, the porosity characteristic of both its ideological and physical make-up presents Benjamin's Naples as a space of 'Supreme Fiction.'

The porosity revealed within both authors' accounts of Italy is simultaneously a characteristic and possibility of 'Supreme Fiction'; it is the same force that is embodied in Massimo d'Azeglio's claims in relation to the making of Italy and Italians. 'Supreme Fiction' is the site of a shared *poiesis*. On the one hand it offers itself as a characteristic of Italy's identity, revealing it as a place and idea that is always in the making. On the other, it is the possibility of the creative engagements of those who respond to Italy. This act of creation is indeed an ongoing pursuit of Italy, and as we have seen, it is one that threads the line between ideality and reality, fact and fiction. However, to think of Italy in terms is to limit the very singularity of its presence as a cultural, political, geographical and historical entity. Goethe's claims in relation to Italy as 'the shadow of a nation' attest to this. As a 'shadow,' Italy is unlike other nations, it cannot be grouped alongside them characteristically. Its unique position and identity within the narrative of the world suggests that it is a place like no other, set apart and singular in a manner that undercuts sameness. As an inherently

porous 'Supreme Fiction,' Italy is presented as a site of excess, limiting its limitability. As the 'shadow of a nation,' it is simultaneously more and less than itself. As the movement of 'Supreme Fiction' constantly in the making, the pursuit of Italy realistically and idealistically overshadows and leaves a shadow upon any and every attempt to situate it in static terms. For both Virgil and Benjamin, it is the very mobility and volatility of this Italy that makes possible their creative engagements with it.

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'THE GALLOWS TREE': EZRA POUND IN ITALY AND THE PROBLEM OF POLITICS

'So, Pound, you have found the gallows tree
you with your thumb at your nose
the word in your mouth dirty, and otherwise.'
Charles Olson – 'A Lustrum for You, E.P.'

'He makes brilliant discoveries and howling blunders.'
James Joyce on Pound, Letter to Harriet Shaw Weaver, 1 Feb. 1927

In his *Guide to Kulchur* (1938), Ezra Pound claims, 'There was and is a higher civilization in a dozen, or a hundred or two hundred Italian writers, who will never achieve any celebrity, than in the much published and touted names.'¹ We know that for Pound writing was an aesthetic and intellectual practice, one ideally married to music; but his writing was also a powerful political and pedagogical weapon. Combative authority and revisionist tradition made his poetry and critical prose useful to a younger generation of poets, while his pedagogical stance guided the way in which poetry of the avant-garde would be transmitted through the century. From the beginning of his writing life, Pound looked to Italy as a cradle of poetic traditions – a place where he could, as early as 1908, 'secure his mind from such "phantoms of the brain" and [...] restore his confidence in life's abundance.'²

¹ Pound, Ezra. *Guide To Kulchur*. London: Peter Owen, 1952. 91

² Moody, A. David. *Ezra Pound Poet*. Oxford University Press, 2007. 62

As the twentieth century marched into decades of escalating violence, Pound the poet also became a propagandist, and his visions of Italy adhered to a fascistic model of the world that cannot be divorced from his poetry or poetics. Like Pound's writing, this model looked both backward and forward at once, maintaining nostalgia for past national glory beside the futuristic ambitions of a purified people. Venice was Pound's port of call as he exited American life and rejected (or was rejected by) the conventional scholarly conditions of U.S. academia. At the end of his life, after World War II and his incarceration, he returned to Venice. In between, Italy stood as the poetic, political and personal centre of the poet's existence. It is also the vivid setting for the story of Pound's poetic and pedagogical influence. This is a story about the utility of his critical prose and musical poetics and, also, the rejection of Pound by younger poets – like Charles Olson – who had once found works by 'the Master' so useful. With Italy as setting, we begin with Pound's earliest poetic ambitions, move through his contentious political development, and end with his disciples' disavowal (based on those political dissonances) of perhaps their greatest influence.

I
'Gawsh,' said Pound, 'I won't be near so caustic about European decadence the next time I see it.'³ He was living in Crawfordsville, Indiana, spending an ill-fated period teaching in Wabash College. This set the tone for Pound's later, vitriolic treatment of U.S. education. From his unhappy position at Wabash, Noel Stock suggests, Pound wrote a poem in which 'the verse itself opens out into other worlds: 'I will sing of the white birds / In the blue waters of heaven.' The title of the poem makes more concrete the location of his mind's wandering. 'Cino: *Italian Campagna* 1309, *the open road*' was collected in Pound's early volume of poems, *A Lume Spento*, printed by A. Antonini in Venice. His fascination with the 'old world,' the place where he sensed he could forge something new in poetry, centres on Italy – the birthplace of Dante, the outward projection of artistic tradition and venerability. At least, it provided a mental respite from Indiana, 'the last or at least sixth circle of desolation.'⁴

Pound arrived in Venice in April 1908 with wide eyes and a hungry poetic ambition. Europe – and the Italy of his revered Dante – sparked his precocious imagination. In his 'San Trovaso Notebook' of this period, he writes:

³ Stock, Noel. *The Life of Ezra Pound*. London: Penguin Books, 1970. 46

⁴ Stock, *Life of E.P.* 51

Old powers rise and do return to me
Grace to thy bounty, O Venetian sun.
Weary I came to thee, my romery
A cloth of day-strands raveled and ill-spun,
My soul a swimmer weary of the sea,
The shore a desert place with flowers none.⁵

This is conventional verse written by a young man struck, as Joyce wrote, by the 'poetic moment.' Pound's moment is suffused with generative light, calling the wanderer off roads of desolation. The poet's study of traditions had not yet formed the striking originality of the best of *The Cantos*. However, this slim notebook records his discovery of the poet's stance toward the world:

A thundered thorough bass the rocks upon,
Makes strong forgotten chanteys, and anon
My heart's loud-shouted burden proves to thee
Old powers risen have returned to me.

This stance was not much changed, though the times certainly had, in *The Pisan Cantos*, when his 'heart's loud-shouted burden' reaches the controlled pitch of a master, under conditions of harsh imprisonment. Pound had an ability to see where verse was moving, and this applied even to his own work. He often anticipated his own progress by decades. In the 'strife of waves' and 'their lusty harmony' of the Venice notebook, Pound imagined the tumultuous future of his poetry and his life, as the singer of 'forgotten chanteys' of old power. This poetic stance is fraught with loneliness:

As winds thru a round smooth knot-hole
Make tune to the time of the storm,
The cry of the bard in the half-light
Is chaos bruised into form.⁶

Tuned to the storm, the poet attempts to order the tumult inside, which is intensified by his surroundings. These early verses themselves are 'bruised into form.' They are handled with attempted delicacy, but show a knotted negotiation of antiquated rhyme and metre. This slight poem ends with the conventional turn of the poet to the lover's half-recalled image. It speaks to his isolation:

Yet there cometh one in the half-light
That shieldeth a man with her hair,
And what man crouch from in his soul
The child of his heart shall bear.

⁵ Pound, Ezra. *Poems and Translations*. Library of America, 2003. 61

⁶ 'Ballad of the Wine Skins' *Poems and Translations*. 65

At this point, the ‘child of his heart’ is more likely poetry personified – in its lofty ideal – than the true image of a beloved (though Pound had at least two possible addressees in that regard). The poetic utterance, the mastery of its form, will vindicate the poet, whose ‘name [is] as a jest out-told.’ As A. David Moody writes, ‘a new theme in these Venetian poems is the acceptance that his mission will entail loneliness and exile.’⁷ Beauty in the poetic image steels the poet against the swirling of chaos and the desolation of life. Inside the poem, he is alone against the world.

Outside the poems, Pound’s gregarious nature is revealed. His other activities in summer 1908 initiated the promotional side of his character in support of his artistic associates. This would become a common function, hand-in-hand with his mission to ‘Make it New.’ It meant that fellow artists – particularly musicians – formed an integral coterie, useful for the poet’s stance against the world and also for the more practical, promotional demands on the ‘maker’ who would have his works known. As he attempted to publicize *A Lume Spento*, Pound arranged two concerts in Venice for the American pianist and composer Katherine Ruth Heyman. Heyman had known the poet since 1904, and she functioned as his *donna ideale*, in contrast to his more complicated relationship with Hilda Doolittle. Moody establishes Heyman’s role as the Beatrice figure in Pound’s earliest attempts at a Dante-inspired long poem. She is vested with his desire toward a more perfect art, as Moody writes:

Pound was dedicating himself to honour ‘K.R.H.’, as Dante had Beatrice, in his own ‘great forty-year epic / That you know of’. Inspired by the beauty of her music he would make ‘A new thing / As hath not heretofore been writ’. One notes that whereas Dante had his Beatrice lead him to a vision of the divine order, Pound’s preoccupation in this early poem is with the creation of his own ‘new thing’.⁸

It is extremely important that a musical impulse – a ‘secret’ Heyman and Pound seemed to share, according to H.D. – drives the will toward ‘new things.’ In ‘Nel Biancheggiar,’ from *A Quinzaine for this Yule*, Pound reflects on the summer concerts he helped arrange for Heyman:

“Her” dreaming fingers lay between the tunes,

⁷ Moody 62

⁸ Moody 40

As when the living music swoons
But dies not quite, because for love of us
— knowing our state
How that 'tis troublous —
It wills not die to leave us desolate.⁹

The poem presents “her” — already complicating the ideal poetic vision of Heyman, the muse, with the personal pronoun in ironic quotes — amid the ‘living music’ that ‘dies not quite.’

Her agency is not responsible for the music made, but rather her ‘dreaming fingers lay between the tunes.’ Literally, this should be ‘between the keys,’ but the immortal, dream state of music is contrasted with material bodies that will fade away, love that is ‘troublous’ and will itself die. The ‘desolation’ now is a world without music, and a world without its muse.

From 1908 to 1920 — and certainly after — Pound dedicated his poetic and critical practice to reviving a correspondence between verse and music. Notable is Pound’s relating music of the distant past — later through his association with the likes of instrument maker and composer Arnold Dolmetsch — to the poetics of the future. In 1921, Heyman published *The Relation of Ultramodern to Archaic Music*, in which she writes, in Poundian terms,

To merge stone [as in architecture] into idea may to the layman seem something of a task; but transmutation of music into its original substance is more readily conceivable. The closest rapport that can be established between our earthly art forms and the supersensuous verities is through the concept of relation and correspondence. Relation: this *to* that. Correspondence: this *with* that.¹⁰

Pound’s poetics can be read as a search for the ‘original substance,’ accessed — importantly — through pains-taking method. Relation and correspondence are central to Pound’s poetics and criticism. As he writes in his *ABC of Reading* (1934), ‘the proper METHOD for studying poetry and good letters is the method of the contemporary biologists, that is careful first-hand examination of the matter, and continual COMPARISON of one ‘slide’ or specimen with another.’¹¹ Correspondence also pertains to Pound’s use of letters to further his poetic, pedagogical and political agenda. Heyman glosses ‘correspondence’ as ‘a sort of proportion showing the unity of all things in their original essence.’ As early as his first Venice trip,

⁹ Pound. *Poems and Translations*. 80

¹⁰ Heyman Online Archive

¹¹ Pound, Ezra. *ABC of Reading*. New York: New Directions, 2011. 17

Pound recognized music as the unifying condition, key to the poet's 'power over the essences of dawn, over the filaments of light and the warp of melody.'¹² When we move later to Pound's overtly political poetry and activities, music still plays a central role, though it is complicated by an absolute insistence on his economic theories. The purity that music had stood for becomes more an instrument of organisation than exaltation. Politics drive the muse back down to earth.

Pound's initial encounter with Italy lasted only a summer. He was destined to travel to London in search of W.B. Yeats. There he would form a much stronger poetic stance toward the world and its political realities, but he would come back to Italy, where his 'old powers rise' and 'return.' His life in London would in many ways be a social, communal period with vast correspondences. Though in 1908, Pound was already aware of his solitary mission, even if he did not yet have the prophetic language he would later command to express it:

My songs remade that I send greet the world
Thou knowest as at first they came to me,
Freighted with fragrance of thyself and furled
In stumbling words that yet us seemed to be
True music, sith thy heart and mine empurled
Their outer sense with inner subtlety.¹³

'Over the Ognissanti' positions the poet-speaker at work in his Venice apartment; he sits at an elevated remove, above the crowd, listening to their voices floating up and taking their music for his own song:

High-dwelling 'bove the people here,
Being alone with beauty most the while,
Lonely?

How can I be,
Having mine own great thoughts for paladins

[...]

I see much life below me,
In the garden, on the waters,
And hither float the shades of songs they sing

[...]

Which shades of song re-echoed
Within that sometime barren hall, my heart,

¹² Moody 65.

¹³ Pound, 'To Ysolt. For Pardon.' *Poems and Translations*. 62

Are found as I transcribe them following.¹⁴

Later, in his memoir *Gaudier-Brezka* (1916) – his own comparison of stone, words and ideas – Pound writes of the poetic moment when ‘one is trying to record the precise instant when a thing outward and objective transforms itself, or darts into a thing inward and subjective.’¹⁵ Venice of 1908 was a place for the emerging poet to observe a new objective present outside the newfangled ‘traditions’ of the United States, while also perfecting a poetic stance toward the mutable past: ‘outer sense with inward subtlety.’ In ‘Partenza di Venezia,’ Pound says goodbye to the city:

Ne’er felt I parting from a woman loved
As feel I now my going forth from thee,
Yea, all thy waters cry out “Stay with me!”
And laugh reflected flames up luringly.
[...]

So we bewildered, yet have trust in thee,
And thus thou, Venice,
show’st thy mastery.¹⁶

In Canto 17, Pound imagines a heavenly place that merges eventually into what is evidently Venice. A gondolier offers a natural, architectural vision of the city that comes to light out of ‘stone trees,’ ‘water,’ ‘silver’ and ‘steel.’

So that the vines burst from my fingers
And the bees weighted with pollen
Move heavily in the vine-shoots [...]

With the first pale-clear of the heaven
And cities set in their hills
And the goddess of the fair knees
Moving there, with the oak-wood behind her [...]

Flat water before me
and the trees growing in water,
Marble trunks out of stillness,
On past the palazzi,
in the stillness,
The light now, not of the sun.

[...]

A boat came,
One man holding her sail,
Guiding her with oar caught over gunwale, saying:

¹⁴ ‘Quinzaine for this Yule.’ *Poems and Translations*.

¹⁵ Pound, *Gaudier-Brezka*. New York: New Directions, 1974. 86

¹⁶ ‘Partenza di Venezia.’ *Poems and Translations*. 74 – 75.

“ There, in the forest of marble,
“ the stone trees – out of water –
“ the arbours of stone–

[...]

“ the gilt beams flare of an evening”

II

After a career-establishing period in London and Paris, Pound returned to Italy. He wrote from Rapallo in 1924 to Henry Allen Moe, secretary of the Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, ‘I am extremely glad to be out of the maelstrom of literary London and artistic Paris, with leisure to do my own job.’¹⁷ Musical associations and concert promotion continued to mark his activities, while his dark (and later disastrous) political streak became more evident. Both were still tied up in the location and imagination of Italy. Stock sketches the Pounds’ life during this period:

The Pounds did most of their entertaining in the restaurant of the Albergo Rapallo. Early in March 1929 they gave a dinner there for Yeats to meet another Nobel Prize winner, Gerhart Hauptmann, who lived for some months each year in Rapallo. Also living there at this time was Basil Bunting whom Yeats described as ‘one of Ezra’s more savage disciples.’¹⁸

Pound had been fed up with Paris and a stifling (as he saw it) French society and literary scene. His energy and the simple facts of life in Rapallo drew artists and poets to the place, in no small measure increasing Pound’s poetic and pedagogical influence.

Characteristic of his life in Italy, music brought Pound further into the world of politics. By the late ’20s, Pound and his partner (both musically and romantically), Olga Rudge, met Benito Mussolini. In response to a concert of George Antheil’s music, Pound was delighted that Mussolini approved of the cutting-edge percussive techniques. No doubt, this allowed Pound room to imagine the leader as sympathetic to the poet’s drive toward a ‘new civilization.’¹⁹ Pound had always felt that only the clarity and intellectual vigor of the artist could shape states effectively in the proper philosophical mold. As he wrote in his *ABC of Reading*, when a country’s literature fails, so does the nation. In 1931, Pound started dating his letters using the Fascist calendar. In 1933, he met privately with Mussolini and gave him

¹⁷ Stock. *Life of Ezra Pound*. 328

¹⁸ Stock. *Life of Ezra Pound*. 358 - 9

¹⁹ Stock. *Life of Ezra Pound*. 335 onward

a copy of the first thirty cantos. So impressed with what he felt were the Italian leader's 'swift' perceptions, the poet writes in canto 41 of Mussolini's 'catching the point before the aesthetes had got there'. When Yeats visited Rapallo again in 1933 to get Pound's thoughts on his recent poems, 'Pound refused to talk about anything except Douglas and the fact that all modern statesmen except Mussolini and Hitler were more or less scoundrels'²⁰ Clearly, Pound saw Mussolini not merely as a political strongman, but as an artist, a composer of the social order.

Along with politics, in the 1930s a series of concerts co-produced with Rudge in Rapallo made significant contributions to Pound's poetic understanding as he continued to draft *The Cantos*. Again from *ABC*, under the heading, 'Laboratory Conditions', we find the following:

A series of coincidences permitted me (1933) to demonstrate the *How to Read* thesis in a medium nearer to poetry than painting is. A group of serious musicians (Gerhard Munch, Olga Rudge, Luigi Sansoni), a town hall at our disposition (Rapallo), we presented among other things the following programmes:

Oct. 10

From the Chilesotti MSS. Munch transcription: Francesco da Milano: 'Canzone degli Uccelli',
[...]

Giovanni Terzi: Suite di Ballo.

Corelli: Sonata [...] ²¹

And so on, through Bach and Ravel. The 'point of this experiment', Pound writes, 'is that everyone present at the two concerts now knows a great deal more about the relations, the relative weight, etc.,' of the composers presented.²² 'How to read' is knowable through relative associations of music curated by Pound and Rudge, set in Rapallo, where Pound held forth as poet and pedagogue, continuing and expanding his influence over English-language verse from his 'exile' in Italy. His political views were likely more evident to his close circle than to his readers in England and the United States. This was soon to change.

Other concerts in Italy during this time gave Pound poetic direction. In 1935, Bartok's quartets were performed in Rapallo. At the Venice Biennale in 1936, Pound was treated to

²⁰ Stock. *Life of Ezra Pound*. 396

²¹ *ABC* 23

²² *ABC* 24

the New Hungarian Quartet performing Bartok's fifth quartet, which the poet felt 'resembled his *Cantos* in the sense that it represented the struggle of a man working against traditions and culture.'²³ This is a compelling but complicated statement, as Pound's writing became increasingly involved with establishing a 'new' tradition and culture along Mussolini's line.

The musical structure of the *Pisan Cantos* can be drawn from the intensive series of Italian concerts. Since his London days, Pound had written music criticism and even began to study music composition. In Italy, the access and control he had over programming his own musical events – like his ordering of anthologies and 'textbooks' – made his musical approach more competent and assertive.

While the *Cantos* are musical and historical poems addressed to tradition, and involved in its revision or destruction, they are also distinctively pedagogical works. This stance of the poet was one Pound cultivated early on, in texts like *The Spirit of Romance* (1910). Pound's publisher James Laughlin writes in *Pound as Wuz*:

Pound was born a teacher, even if not destined to be a professor. He could not keep himself from teaching. In one way or another he was always teaching. The *Cantos* themselves are a kind of teaching. *Ut doceat, ut moveat, ut delectet*. They move us, they delight us, but above all they teach us.'²⁴

Most plainly pedagogical of Pound's published works are his prose books, from *The Spirit of Romance* to – more importantly – his *ABC of Reading* (1934) and *Guide to Kulchur* (1938). They are presented as classroom materials, while his anthologies and translations point to methods of teaching and learning. During the period of these publications in the 1930s, Pound continued living in Rapallo, where he presided as rector and sole faculty of his own 'Ezuversity':

Apparently convened at a dinner table, in the tradition of the nineteenth-century books of "table-talk," the Ezuversity never [...] went on holiday [...] He lectured, sometimes hectored, conducted correspondences, and whenever possible conversed with just about anyone willing to listen. The name "Ezuversity" inevitably suggests a certain arrogance in the conviction that any one man could replace an entire faculty of scholars and teachers [...] But the name also suggests an informality and even self-mockery.²⁵

²³ *Ezra Pound and Music*. ed. R. Murray Schaffer. New York: New Directions, 1977. 483

²⁴ Laughlin, James. *Pound as Wuz*. Graywolf Press, 1988. 34

²⁵ *Ezra Pound and Education*. ed. Yao and Coyle. Orono: National Poetry Foundation, 2012. xiv

In Italy, Laughlin submitted himself to Pound's tutelage in 1934 – 35, when the Great Poet insisted that Laughlin give up writing poetry and fiction and instead work on publishing books. This intervention changed the course of twentieth-century literary publishing, with the advent of New Directions, and ensured Pound a reliable imprint for decades to come.²⁶

The Eziversity was an ideal institution for a twentieth-century goliard. First of all, there was no tuition. Ezra was always hard up, but he wouldn't take any payment. The only expenses I had were renting a room and paying my meals with Mrs. Pound [...] The classes usually met at the lunch table. They might begin with Ezra going through the day's mail, commenting on the subjects that it raised.²⁷

Letter correspondence was crucial to Pound, who commented that his single greatest expense in Italy was postage. His voluminous letter writing formed what poet Robert Creeley would later refer to as a 'college of letters.'²⁸ Pound saw the advantage in grooming potential publishers, and also in connecting with other poets – his 'students' in the Eziversity – who would carry his poetics back to the United States and England, poets such as Louis Zukofsky and Basil Bunting (to whom *Guide to Kulchur* is dedicated). It is clear from these letters that Pound aimed to teach a new generation of poets, forming them in his powerful, combative pedagogical mold. In the case of Olson and Creeley, this college of letters formed the vortex of their rejection of Pound, who they refer to in their letters as 'the Master.' Olson and Creeley criticized Pound's politics, while maintaining respect for his body of poetic and critical work. On closer interrogation, however, we see that these elements of Pound's writing are not so easily separated.

III

David Barnes has published an important article in the *Journal of Modern Literature* (Fall 2010), 'Ezra Pound's Cultural Negotiations in 1930s Italy.' Instead of presenting Pound's politics as peripheral to his cultural aims, this essay persuasively argues that the 'cultural

²⁶ Laughlin. *Ez as Wuz* 3

²⁷ Laughlin. *Ez as Wuz* 4

²⁸ Creeley, Robert & Charles Olson. *The Complete Correspondence Vol. 1*. ed. George F. Butterick. Black Sparrow Press, 1980. ix

negotiations' he undertook at the peak of Italian Fascism were engaged directly with supporting the regime and the 'new' understanding of cultural production through its lens.

Barnes begins with an archival piece tied to the college of letters Pound maintained, in this instance regarding a postcard correspondence between the poet and Congressman George Tinkham, from the state of Massachusetts. (At the time, Pound was still interested in influencing the U.S. government from within.) 'The exchange of postcards,' Barnes writes, 'which is a means of reminiscing upon and preserving the touristic encounter, becomes in this context a further comment on Fascism's role in Pound's mind as guardian of culture.' Further to the point, he argues that the 'postcard exchange also aptly demonstrates the difficulty of separating political and esthetic questions within the Poundian universe.' In November 1926 Pound makes this clear to Harriet Monroe:

'I personally think extremely well of Mussolini,' with whom it was impossible to compare the last three American presidents or British prime ministers without insulting him. If the intelligentsia did not think well of him it was because they knew nothing about "the state" and government and had no particularly large sense of values.²⁹

By the late 1930s and early 1940s, with European fascism showing signs of its disastrous effects, Pound doubled down on his commitment to the cause. Massimo Bacigalupo³⁰ and Barbara C. Eastman³¹ have written on Pound's expurgated 'Italian Cantos,' written in archaic Italian in homage to Cavalcanti. The poems were originally published in a fascist newspaper, seemingly with the expressed purpose of directly addressing Mussolini, then in exile from Rome. For years, these cantos were left out of published editions of the entire work in English. In the *Journal of Modern Literature*, Patricia Cockram writes that:

[The 'Italian Cantos'] may have been composed expressly to promote the Fascist cause. These poems, written in a time of terror and confusion, are interesting for their political, philosophical, and aesthetic relation to the larger work; they may be considered as important for their poetic failings as the Pisan Cantos are for their merits, for despite those failings, they bring Pound back to poetry after a long hiatus, and the ethical and aesthetic collapse

²⁹ Stock. *Life of Ezra Pound*. 335

³⁰ Bacigalupo, Massimo. 'The Poet at War: Ezra Pound's Suppressed Italian Cantos.' *The South Atlantic Quarterly*. 83 / 1. 1983.

³¹ Eastman, Barbara C. 'The Gap in *The Cantos*' *Paideuma*. 8. no.3 1979.

which they represent makes the exquisite recovery that occurs in the Pisan Cantos both necessary and possible.³²

Context is of course critical, and Cockram provides it:

Hugh Kenner's term "fault line" for the Italian Cantos can now be used to indicate what appears to be an even more consequential rupture, a sign of ethical and aesthetic breakdown. Pound must surely have been disturbed by the way the war was turning out at the end of 1944. Although most Italians recognized by this time that the war was about to end, the Mussolini faction at Salò refused to admit defeat. The propaganda machines of both sides in the war were at full throttle, and Mussolini was calling for a *riscossa*--a renewal, military turnaround, or revival--a term that would appear prominently in Pound's Canto LXXIII. There was a desperate solidarity among those who had remained loyal to Mussolini, but many who had joined the Fascists purely out of fear defected now that the movement was in trouble. It was in this atmosphere that the Italian Cantos were written.

So, more than relying on the damning Rome broadcasts for which Pound was tried and incarcerated, study of these 'missing' cantos might lead us to a more complex, and more poetic understanding of Pound's negotiations with Italian Fascism. That he was not repentant, that the poet refused to accept the loss of the war and his disastrously misplaced allegiances, that these poems cleared a path to the composition of the superior Pisan Cantos, for all of these reasons we can consider the centrality of Italy to the poet's life as both generative and ruinous, both musical and political. Where once Venice stood as a celestial city suffused in light, vibrating with musical tones, the Italy of the Italian Cantos is aggressive, muscular and unbending. Both Bacigalupo and Cockram read them as vaguely comic in their overt propaganda and poetic deficiencies. Barnes sums it up nicely: for 'Pound, Fascist nationalism synthesized a contemporary order and discipline with a quasi-spiritual appeal to unbroken chains of past civilizations.'³³

IV

Despite the events in Italy and Pound's subsequent troubles, many younger poets continued to pay their respects and allegiance to Pound's influential, pedagogical poetics. At the end of

³² Cockram, Patricia. 'Collapse and Recall: Ezra Pound's Italian Cantos. *Journal of Modern Literature* 23 no ¾ 535-44; summer 2000

³³ Barnes, David. 'Fascist Aesthetics: Ezra Pound's Cultural Negotiations in 1930s Italy.' *Journal of Modern Literature*. 34 no. 1 Fall 2010.

Charles Olson's first piece in a three-poem sequence responding to Pound, 'ABCs', he announces, 'Pound / is verse'.³⁴ His reverence for the Master was in many respects inevitable and necessary (*The Cantos* are perhaps the most obvious model for Olson's *Maximus Poems*) But so was his forceful repudiation. In 'ABCs (2),' Olson digests Pound's textbook in striking language:

what we do not know of ourselves
of who they are who lie
coiled or unflown
in the marrow of the bone

Our own unknowing reveals the impossibility of knowing the past through history.

one sd:

of rhythm is image
of image is knowing
of knowing there is
a construct

The utterance, what 'one sd', comes from a nameless voice – perhaps from the past, perhaps not.

or to find in a night who it is dwells in that wood where shapes hide
who is this woman or this man whose face we give a name to, whose shoulder
we bite, what landscape
figures ride small horses over, what bloody stumps
these dogs have, how they tear the golden cloak

The 'figures [who] ride small horses over' the landscape also march through history. Each 'face we give a name to' materializes in one time or another, reduced – in a very Poundian attitude – to 'bloody stumps / these dogs have.' They 'tear the golden fleece,' rending the symbol of authority and kingship. Olson ends with his own fine poetic music, recalling Pound's images of sea voyage with force and danger:

how he swerves it to avoid the yelping rocks
where the tidal river rushes³⁵

And the boat,

What Olson learned from Pound culminated in the younger poet's visits to St. Elizabeth's Hospital, where Pound was incarcerated under doctors' supervision after the war. One of the most fascinating texts in the Olson oeuvre is one compiled by editor Catherine Seelye,

³⁴ Olson, Charles. *Archaeologist of Morning*. The Book Service, 1970.

³⁵ *Archaeologist of Morning*

from notes ('Cantos,' Olson calls them) taken around those visits. *Charles Olson and Ezra Pound: An Encounter at St. Elizabeths* records Olson's rejection of Pound on political and poetic grounds; it signals Olson's shedding of a singularly dominant influence. In a journal from 1945, Olson writes to himself, 'maybe Pound discloses to you a method you spontaneously reached for Write as the fathers to be the father.'³⁶ There is a sense that Olson plans his rejection of Pound, needing to kill off the father in order to take his place.

Olson visited Pound as early as 1946, and returned sometimes weekly over a period of the following two-and-a-half years. James Laughlin had suggested to Olson that he visit Pound, after Olson had sent the publisher 'A Lustrum for You, E.P.':

So, Pound, you have found the gallows tree
you with your thumb at your nose
the word in your mouth dirty, and otherwise

They'll cant your body, canto maker.
Sudden, and your freckled neck will break
as others', nameless, broke.

If Pound is executed as a traitor, he will join the nameless in history. The hypocrisy implied in 'cant' forms into 'canto maker,' undercutting the significance of the *macher*, Pound's preferred Yiddish for his role as poet; Olson's ironic use of the title 'Cantos' for the journal fragments further diminishes Pound's life's work. The discord between the traitorous Pound and Pound the authority, the guiding force behind Olson's poetics to that point, required a reformation of Olson's sense as a poet, and specifically as an American poet. Again from 'Lustrum,'

You wanted to be historic, Yorick.
Mug the mike with your ABCs
you even made Sligo Willie sneeze:
revolutionary simpleton.
Ezra Pound, American.

'Lustrum' denotes both purification – the purification of Pound? Or the purification of poetry by challenging Pound's hate? – and end of a period of time, the close of a five-year cycle. Olson puns on the word 'order,' 'There is a court / where order, traitor / –you stood with the lovers of ORDER.' The order kept by justice, the order of the poem and the tyrannical order of the fascist state collide. Olson refers to '19 years' Pound has been on the 'case' of this poetic order. See what it has come to:

³⁶ Olson, Charles. *Encounter at St. Elizabeth's*. New York: Paragon House. 1975. xvii

Where the wind is a warm breath
it does not smell of flesh in a furnace

Olson then concludes:

The sentence reads: lover of the obscene
by the obscene undone
fecit, Pound fecit³⁷

The Latin 'fecit' is apt for the creator, coming from 'facere,' to make or to do. In this case it is the past tense to identify the maker of an art object: as in, 'created by.' However, in English 'fecit' is often translated another way: not created, but executed.

Olson did not doubt the seriousness of Pound's actions in supporting Mussolini's fascist regime: 'Pound broadcast, the State speaks back. His penny postcards come home to roost.' But he wonders, 'when and how come did his sense of authority, a poet's possession, slip off and become identified with the Authoritarian State?'³⁸ Pound's Italian life locates this pointed question, this accusation. How did the poet of those early San Trovaso Notebooks become the Pound of the Italian cantos?

Olson adopts the voice of a figure authoritative to both himself and Pound, in 'This Is Yeats Speaking.' All three poets are patently political: Yeats in the context of the Irish Free State and nationalism, Olson in his service for the Roosevelt administration and rejection of the 'salesman' President Truman, and Pound in his Italian associations and economic theories. Each has inherited traditions and tried to formulate the present based on that history. As Yeats, Olson writes,

It was our glory, Pound's and mine, I except Eliot – tradition is too organized with him, his uncertainty before chaos leads him to confuse authority with orthodoxy – to reassert the claims of authority in a world of whiggery. It is true what Pound said, we men of the mind do stand with the lovers of order. We value it, with what labor we purchase it in our work. We opposed ourselves to a leveling, rancorous, rational time.³⁹

But Olson perceives a rupture that occurs when the mind is divided and the impulse to create battles a stifling urge to destroy:

Pound can talk all he likes about the *cultural lag* in America [...] but he's got a 200 year *political lag* himself. It comes down to this: a rejection of the single most important fact of the last 100 years, the most important human fact between Newton and the Atomic Bomb –

³⁷ 'A Lustrum for You, E.P.' *St. Eliz.* 5

³⁸ *St. Eliz* 23

³⁹ 'This is Yeats Speaking' *St. Eliz* 28

the sudden multiple increase of the earth's population, the coming existence of the *MASSSES*. Pound and his kind want to ignore them [...] And in their little place Pound and his kind suffocate, their fear turns to hate. And their hate breeds death. They want to kill. And [...] they do kill – millions.⁴⁰

Yet he sees Pound more as a tragic figure than one who is co-responsible for the deaths of millions:

In Pound I am confronted by the tragic Double of our day. He is the demonstration of our duality. In language and form he is as forward, as much the revolutionist as Lenin. But in social, economic and political action he is as retrogressive as the Czar.⁴¹

This all points back to the poet's place in history – how Olson and Creeley demand a kind of *eternal present* (Olson proposes the term "istorin," making history a present action - a personal, atemporal involvement with the past.) Olson sees Pound as a contradiction in this regard. He argues first that 'the presence of blindness in [Pound's] work of the worship for past accomplishments and a kind of blindness to the underground vigor of the present,' mars his poems.⁴² In Pound's cantos, the underworld (and the poet's mind) serves as a site to bring layers of past history into a dreamy, often hellish present. But as the economic issues take over, 'great figures' stand resolutely in the past. In the present, Benito Mussolini is their inheritor. As Pound writes in a letter to Joyce, "too much future, and nobody but me and Muss/[Mussolini] and half a dozen others to attend to it."⁴³ To be sure, there is plenty of 'present' in *The Cantos*, but here it is Olson's own negotiations with history that are tangled up in Pound's outsized influence.⁴⁴

Olson observes that Pound 'would rest his claim not, as I have put it, on the past, but forward, as teacher of history to come, Culture-Bearer in the desert and shame of now.'⁴⁵ Yet, immediately, Olson undercuts this with a jibe: 'I don't think it is possible to exaggerate the distance he goes with his notion of himself.'⁴⁶

⁴⁰ *St Eliz* 53

⁴¹ *St Eliz* 53

⁴² *St. Eliz* 89

⁴³ Pound, Ezra. *The Letters of Ezra Pound to James Joyce*. New York: New Directions, 1970. 234

⁴⁴ See the discussion between Olson, Creeley, Duncan, Ginsberg, et. al. at the Vancouver Poetry Conference, 1963. (re. 'histology') Text in *Muthologos: Charles Olson Lectures and Interviews*. ed. Ralph Maud. Talon Press 2010. 45

⁴⁵ *St. Eliz* 101

⁴⁶ *St. Eliz*.

Olson feels at one point that Pound ‘remains, on the creative side of him, whole, and as charming and open and warm a human being as I know. Despite all the corruption of his body politic.’⁴⁷ But eventually he writes in utter exasperation, ‘I hate this anti-semitic! this revolutionary simpleton, as Yeats called him.’ He follows with the heaviest blow that could be struck by one who sought to put the musical, poetic pedagogies of Pound ‘to use’: ‘No man can attack a race and remain useful to anyone as an artist.’⁴⁸ He concludes the relationship in ‘Grandpa, Goodbye’:

I left that day and shall not see [Pound] again[.] He went on to say something which is true, that what has made Bill [Williams] important is that Bill has never said one god damned thing that hasn’t first circulated entirely through his head before it comes out his mouth. Bill never faked, and that’s why he has been of such use to all us young men who grew up after him.⁴⁹

This is praise of Williams, but also lament for Pound. For the titan of modern verse, the teacher to whom Olson, Creeley and so many others once looked for guidance, had fallen into uselessness – so Olson saw it.

Pound returned to Italy after his release from St. Elizabeth’s, but he never fully reconstituted the Ezuversity. Instead, he was known for a heavy silence. ‘For forty years of exile he had turned his tongue against America,’ Olson writes, ‘for twenty years he had damned democracy and its works.’⁵⁰ Stock draws our attention to Pound’s comparison of himself to his old friend Williams:

Where Pound became angry with America, Williams was able to examine it with calm. ‘And by just this susceptibility on my part Williams, as author, has the no small advantage... Where I see scoundrels and vandals, he sees a spectacle or an ineluctable process of nature. Where I want to kill at once, he ruminates, and if this rumination leads to anger it is an almost inarticulate anger, that may but lend colour to style.’⁵¹

Pound’s initial encounters with Italy gave colour and light to his style. Along the way, his entanglements with politics, and the new, ‘futuristic’ world of mayhem and wanton murder dragged his writing underneath a surface of factional tensions. At times, flashes of that old light appeared, in the Pisan Cantos above all. But in attempting to clear the waters of

⁴⁷ *St. Eliz* 56

⁴⁸ *St. Eliz* 15

⁴⁹ ‘Grandpa, Goodbye.’ *St. Eliz* 101 - 102

⁵⁰ *St Eliz* 35

⁵¹ Stock. *Life of Ezra Pound*. 354

political mud, we cannot ignore the central focus that dominated Pound's thinking and writing in the 1930s and '40s in Italy. The country that early on had promised him escape led to his confinement in a cage. Italy's art and music turned to the folly of its abhorrent political overreach. It is said that when Pound returned to Italy after release from St. Elizabeth's, coming off the boat he greeted reporters with a Fascist salute; a possible reminder of how we must beware the trouble, when an indisputable poetic authority becomes an unmitigated Authoritarian.



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WILDE'S ITALIAN POEMS: THROUGH SIN AND SHAME TO ROME

Oscar Wilde was amongst the most memorable transgressors of the *fin de siècle* era. His iconoclasm and nonconformity were integral characteristics in both his life and art. Indeed, Wilde was the epitome of incongruous disparity; only he, an Anglo-Irish Protestant was capable of being alternatively attracted to Catholicism and Freemasonry, or befriending and socialising with the British aristocracy and monarchy, while remaining an ardent Irish nationalist and republican all his life. His paradoxical eclecticism influenced every facet of his life, art, politics, religion and sexuality. The focus of this paper will be to examine the impact Wilde's inaugural journey to Italy in 1875 and a subsequent trip to Italy and Greece in 1877, played in influencing his burgeoning poetic sensibility, yet leaving his aesthetic and spiritual direction conflicted and competing for ascendancy.

In an excerpt from the pages of an American 'Confession Album'¹⁰⁶ filled out by Oscar Wilde in 1877 whilst still an undergraduate student at Oxford University, there is evidence of his classical education and Hellenic appreciation in his choice of favourite authors and poets – Plato, Sappho, Theocritus and Euripides. His favourite historical figures include Alexander the Great, yet somewhat surprisingly, when asked in the album, 'what epoch he would have chosen to live in?' he does not choose classical Greece with all the complimentary wonders of Plato's Academy or Aristotle's Lyceum; instead he states, "The Italian Renaissance". The ensuing question asks him 'where would you like to live?' once again, going on his previously answers one would have expected Athens or Alexandria;

¹⁰⁶ Samantha Matthews, 'Psychological Crystal Palace? Late Victorian Confession Albums', (*Book History* 3, 2000), pp. 126-30. The exact origins of the 'Confessional Album' are unknown but Matthews refers to 'oracle' games of the first half of the nineteenth century (she cites examples from 1810 to 1852). These games included interactive books with questions that resemble those of the 'Confession Albums'.

Wilde answered "Florence and Rome".¹⁰⁷ It was no surprise that Wilde appeared enamoured by all things Italian during this period in his life; two years previously during the summer of 1875, he had visited Italy and his Italian experience in particular would greatly influence his expanding artistic outlook.

Today Wilde is revered and established as arguably the most important, and definitely one of the most popular literary artists of the 1890's. His enduring popularity with the public is a testament to his life and art. His readers love him as much for his weakness and his fallibility, as they do for his dramatic wit, satire and his *fin de siècle* daring, and they remain endlessly fascinated by his outrageous behaviour and tragic demise. The same public that crucified him for his lack of conformity and respect for Victorian values in 1895 today holds him up as a martyr for individuality. Twenty years earlier, Wilde was yet to share his dramatic talents with his public, but it was during his 1875 Italian expedition that Wilde's burgeoning poetic appreciation was cultivated. As Karl Beckson and Bobby Fong have stated:

Though Oscar Wilde has usually been regarded as an Aesthete or Decadent whose devotion to art for art's sake was immutable, in fact he never adhered rigidly to such a doctrine. From the beginning of his career, he wrote poems as a conventional Victorian, expressing moral, political and religious attitudes expected in serious art. His concern with the cultural crisis of the time found expression in much of his early verse written during and after his Oxford years (1874-78) – that is, before he turned his attention to the nature of art in advancing the Aesthetic Movement. But even while rejecting the Victorian notion of art as moral edification, Wilde could not sustain his aestheticism, for he was driven by the conviction, drawn from such disparate figures as Baudelaire, Ruskin, Pater and Whistler, that life and art were ultimately shaped by one's moral and spiritual nature. Inevitably, the tension between his avowed aestheticism and his Victorian sensibility resulted in contradictions throughout his work...¹⁰⁸

Ideological and artistic contradictions would become part of Wilde's paradoxical *modus operandi* as he would later state, 'A Truth in art is that whose contradictory is also true'¹⁰⁹. For Wilde what was true of art was also true of life and consequently Wilde found no contradiction in his parallel attractiveness to both freemasonry and Catholicism during his Oxford years. His father, Sir William Robert Wills Wilde (1815-1876) had been an active

¹⁰⁷ See Merlin Holland, *The Wilde Album* (London, Fourth Estate, 1997), p.45.

¹⁰⁸ Karl Beckson and Bobby Fong, 'Wilde as Poet', in Peter Raby (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde*, (Cambridge University Press, 1997) p.57.

¹⁰⁹ Oscar Wilde, 'The Truth of Masks' in *Intentions* (1891)

Mason in Ireland¹¹⁰ and he would have been very proud to hear that on the 23 February 1875 Oscar was received into the Oxford University Freemasons, Apollo Lodge. According to Yasha Beresiner:

Oscar Wilde's Masonic career only spanned the four-year period in which he studied at Magdalen College, Oxford. It began and ended there, but he did take to Freemasonry like a duck takes to water. He was fascinated by the Craft - and the degrees beyond and participated in many of them. In his maiden speech at the festive board following his initiation, Oscar, who had been told that J & B stood for (St) J(ohn) the B(aptist), and was the founder of the Order, stated:

'I hope we shall emulate his life but not his death - I mean we ought to keep our heads!'¹¹¹

Two significant events would influence Wilde's decision to visit Italy in 1875 the first was his genuine interest in Greek and Roman art and culture. Formerly under the tutelage of Professor John Pentland Mahaffy at Trinity College Dublin and later Walter Pater and John Ruskin at Oxford, Wilde's interest in Greek and Roman antiquity grew stronger. The second event that influenced him happened in March of 1875 when Wilde's good friend, David Hunter Blair, converted to Roman Catholicism in Rome and on his return to Oxford in late April he urged Oscar to follow him. Wilde had displayed a brief interest in Roman Catholicism when studying at Trinity College Dublin (1871-1874), much to the annoyance of his father, Sir William Wilde. Sir William must have been rather relieved when Oscar was awarded a Demyship to Magdalen College, Oxford in 1874 as that would likely remove any lingering curiosity Oscar might have towards Rome – but unbeknownst to his father, since the 1830s Oxford had been the epicentre of a movement advocating that the Anglican Church should move away from Protestantism and closer to its Catholic origins. By the 1850s the 'Oxford Movement' had seen several prominent Anglican clerics such as John Henry Newman and Henry Edward Manning's conversion to Roman Catholicism, and by the time Oscar Wilde was studying at Magdalen, his fellow Oxonian, Gerard Manley Hopkins had converted to the Church of Rome only eight years earlier.

¹¹⁰ W.Bro. Yasha Beresiner 'Oscar Wilde A University Mason' [Sir William Wilde was] *Initiated in the Shakespeare Lodge Number 143 on 12th December 1838, passed on the 16th March 1839, and raised on the 21st June 1839, he became Master of the Lodge in 1841, serving for just six months as was the practice in Ireland at that time. Sir William also became a joining member of the St Patrick Lodge NO.50 on the 29th June 1844.* See <http://www.freemasons-freemasonry.com/beresiner8.html>

¹¹¹ Yasha Beresiner, 'The Wilde Oxford Mason' in *MQ Magazine* (Issue 4, January 2003) <http://www.mqmagazine.co.uk/issue-4/p-07.php>

Wilde's correspondence makes it very clear that he knew from his Trinity days, any serious contemplation he had about converting to the Church of Rome would threaten his family inheritance – and that was not something he was willing to do. He would later admit as much in a letter to his friend William Ward:

If I *could* hope that the church would wake in me some earnestness and purity would go over *as a luxury*, if for no better reasons. But I can hardly hope it would, and to go over to Rome would be to sacrifice and give up my two great gods 'Money and Ambition'.¹¹²

That genuine confession would be made almost two years later; but when Wilde travelled to Italy in the summer of 1875 with his old tutor from Trinity, Professor Mahaffy, and William Goulding, the son of a wealthy Dublin businessman, Wilde had chosen two staunch Protestants to accompany him on his journey. Richard Ellmann surmises that Wilde's choice in travelling companions may have been to protect himself against Hunter Blair's persuasions of conversion on the latter's return from Rome.

His letters home gave his father no anxiety about a possible religious upheaval, and described Etruscan tombs and Titian's *Assumption* ('the best painting in Italy') with equal pleasure. What he did not describe was the turmoil he felt at the sight of so many artistic memorials of Catholic piety.¹¹³

During Wilde's first trip to Italy in June 1875 he was joined by Mahaffy and Goulding in Florence, after touring Florence they make a brief visit to Bologna on the 19th June and then on to Venice. They visit Padua on the 22nd June and the following evening they arrive late in Verona. On the 15th June, Wilde's visit to San Miniato in Florence was later captured in a poem which conveyed his sense of anxiety regarding his continuing metaphysical and artistic interest in Catholicism:

I
See, I have climbed the mountain side
Up to this holy house of God,
Where the Angelic Monk has trod
Who saw the heavens opened wide.
The oleander on the wall
Grows crimson in the morning light;
The silver shadows of the night

¹¹² Oscar Wilde, 'Letter to William Ward' [Week ending 3 March 1877], in *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, Merlin Holland and Rupert Hart-Davis (eds.), (New York, Henry Holt and Company, 2000), p.39.

¹¹³ Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (London, Hamish Hamilton, 1987), p.53.

Lie upon Florence as a pall.
The myrtle-leaves are gently stirred,
By the sad blowing of the gale,
And in the almond-scented vale
The lonely nightingale is heard.

II

The day will make thee silent soon
O! nightingale sing on for love,
While yet upon the shadowy grove
Fall the bright arrows of the moon.
While yet across the silent lawn
In golden mist the moonlight steals,
And from love-wearied eyes conceals
How the long fingers of the dawn
Come climbing up the Eastern sky
To grasp and slay the shuddering night,
All careless of my heart's delight,
Or if the nightingale should die.

In the original version of the poem, the piety and imagery of the Christian scenes are subverted by pagan imagery of nature and symbolic references to love, theft, and murder – arrows falling, moonlight stealing, the dawn slaying night. For Ellmann, in the ‘battle of sacred and profane for Wilde’s soul, the profane is inching ahead.’¹¹⁴ Ellmann goes on to state that when the poem was revised for publication in the *Dublin University Magazine* in March 1876, ‘the sacred had taken over all but the last words, and his passive tolerance of nature has given way to a desperate longing for supernatural intervention.’¹¹⁵

Beckson and Fong have proposed that poems such as ‘San Miniato’, in which Wilde describes his ascent, both physical and spiritual, to the twelfth-century church on one of the hills overlooking Florence, is a way for Wilde to measure his own life by that of the pure Virgin, and they further suggest ‘implying a parallel between the crucified Christ and the Romantic image of the martyred artist, he apostrophises:

O crowned by God with thorns and pain!
Mother of Christ! O mystic wife!

¹¹⁴ Richard Ellmann, *Ibid.*, p.54

¹¹⁵ Richard Ellmann, *Ibid.*, p.54

My heart is weary of this life...

After this address to the Virgin, the poem closes with the suggestive cry directed to her for help (the 'sun' perhaps an allusion to *her* Son):

O listen ere the searching sun
Show to the world my sin and shame.¹¹⁶

Interestingly, when Lady Wilde read the revised version of the poem in the *Dublin University Magazine* she was quick to make the following objection and distinction on the poem's last line: '*Sin* is respectable and highly poetical, *Shame* is not.'¹¹⁷

By the time the touring group had arrived in Verona, Wilde realised that he had exhausted his finances and so he had to cut short his Italian adventure and return home. Mahaffy and Goulding proceeded on to Rome. Wilde was crestfallen that he would not see the Holy City on this occasion – he expressed his longing in the subject of a new poem, 'Rome Unvisited'.

And here I set my face towards home,
For all my pilgrimage is done,
Although, methinks, yon blood-red sun
Marshals the way to holy Rome.

In this poem, Wilde regards his inaugural journey to Italy almost as if it were some sort of quasi-religious 'pilgrimage'; he imagines Rome as a 'Blessed Lady, who dost hold/Upon the seven hills thy reign!' He yearns to see the Pope before he dies¹¹⁸ – the 'only God-appointed King' and 'gentle Shepherd of the Fold' – borne in procession, 'A triumph as He passes by!' Visiting Rome in person would have to wait for another day – although he was probably closest to Rome spiritually at this time. The significance of that paradox was not lost on Hunter-Blair.

¹¹⁶ Karl Beckson and Bobby Fong, 'Wilde as Poet', in Peter Raby (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde*, (Cambridge University Press, 1997) p.57.

¹¹⁷ Lady Wilde, 'Letter to Oscar Wilde' [March 1876], cited in Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (London, Hamish Hamilton, 1987), p.54.

¹¹⁸ David Hunter Blair had been confirmed into the Catholic Church by Archbishop (later Cardinal) Howard and Pope Pius IX had blessed him and conferred on him the honorary post of papal chamberlain.

The poem delighted Hunter Blair, because it expressed Wilde's desire to meet the Pope as 'the only God-appointed King,' and his hope that, if he could sing as a religious poet, his heart would be free of fears. As he moved physically away from Rome, he moved imaginatively close to it.¹¹⁹

Wilde had hoped to visit Rome in 1876 as stated in a letter to his friend William Ward in September 1876:

...I have given up my pilgrimage to Rome for the present: Ronald Gower and Frank Mills were coming: (we would have been a great Trinity) but at the last hour Ronald couldn't get time, so I am staying in Dublin till the 20th, when I go down to Longford, and hope to have good sport.¹²⁰

In a letter to his friend William Ward and fellow Mason, dated 3rd March 1877, Wilde's recurrent paradoxical metaphysical struggle is evident when he reveals:

I have got rather keen on Masonry lately and believe in it awfully – in fact would be awfully sorry to have to give it up in case I secede from the Protestant Heresy. Hunter Blair had had to give it up for this reason.¹²¹

Another plan to visit Rome for Easter 1877 with his good friends Ward and Hunter Blair was initially cancelled due to some financial constraints Wilde was experiencing at the time which he explained in a letter to Ward around the 14th March:

I am sorry to say that I will not see the Holy City this Easter at any rate: I have been elected for the St Stephen's Club and £42 is a lot to pay down on the nail, so I will go up to town for a week and then to Bingham and then home. I am going first to see Newman at Birmingham to burn my fingers a little more.¹²² Do you remember young Wise of this place?¹²³ He is awfully caught with the wiles of the Scarlet Woman¹²⁴ and wrote to Newman about several things: and received the most charming letters back and invitations to come and see him: I am awfully keen for an interview, not of course to argue, but merely to be in the presence of that divine man.

¹¹⁹ Richard Ellmann, *Op cit.*, p.54 – Ellmann also notes that the poem also pleased John Henry Newman, to whom Wilde sent it.

¹²⁰ Oscar Wilde, 'Letter to William Ward' [? 6 September 1876], in *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, Merlin Holland and Rupert Hart-Davis (eds.), (New York, Henry Holt and Company, 2000), p.32.

¹²¹ Oscar Wilde, 'Letter to William Ward' [3 March 1877], in *Oscar Wilde: A Life in Letters*. (London: Fourth Estate, 2003), p.21.

¹²² There is no evidence that this visit ever took place. (cited in Holland, *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*)

¹²³ Henry Edward Wise (1856-1923), Magdalen undergraduate 1876-80; became a country gentleman and amateur musician. (cited in Holland, *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*)

¹²⁴ The term 'Scarlet Woman' was a term often used as a reference to Roman Catholicism.

I will send you a long account of it: but perhaps my courage will fail, as I could hardly resist Newman I am afraid.¹²⁵

Hunter Blair was determined that Wilde should see Rome as he believed that once Wilde experienced the magnificence of the Eternal City in person, any lingering doubts he held about converting to the Catholic faith would finally be allayed. Consequently, he proposed to Wilde that as he had plans to meet up with family in Mentone, he would stop first in Monte Carlo and place a wager of £2 on Wilde's behalf at the casino. Serendipity would smile on Oscar and later that month £60 would be forwarded to him, ostensibly from Hunter Blair's casino winnings. Wilde accepted Hunter Blair's invitation and agreed to meet up with his friends in Rome. However, Wilde also organized to first meet up with Mahaffy, who was also planning on travelling to Greece via Italy with two companions – perhaps Wilde was subconsciously hoping that by arranging to accompany the Mahaffy entourage as far as Genoa, he would not succumb to the attractiveness of Roman Catholicism by intentionally having the redoubtable Mahaffy alongside to act as a staunch bulwark of Protestantism.

In late March Wilde once again accompanied Mahaffy, Goulding and a new companion, George Macmillan¹²⁶ to Italy and subsequently on to Greece – Macmillan provides a wonderful insight into this touring party in a letter he wrote to his father from Genoa on the 28th march 1877. In this letter he shares his opinion of his travel companions – Mahaffy is considered 'most amusing and interesting, and I like him better the more I see of him'; Goulding is 'very full of spirits – delightfully innocent of what we call culture, but still thoroughly entering into the delight of what we see – whether scenery, pictures, palaces etc... - quite an entertaining companion, and a very good contrast to the last man of the party – for we are four.' Macmillan then turns his attention to Wilde:

This last, who joined us at Charing Cross just as we were starting, is an old pupil of Mahaffy's, and a scholar of Magdalen, Oxford, by name Oscar Wilde. He is a very nice fellow, whose line lies as decidedly in the direction of culture as Goulding's lies away from it. He is aesthetic to the last degree, passionately fond of secondary colours, low tones, Morris papers, and capable of talking a good deal

¹²⁵ Oscar Wilde, 'Letter to William Ward' [Circa 14 March 1877], in *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, Merlin Holland and Rupert Hart-Davis (eds.), (New York, Henry Holt and Company, 2000), p.41

¹²⁶ George Macmillan (1855-1936), son of Alexander Macmillan, one of the two founding brothers of the publishing firm, which he joined on leaving Eton in 1874. He was made a partner in 1879, and had a great deal to do with the publication of Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (1890). He became one of founders of the Hellenic Society in 1879. His elder brother Malcolm disappeared from the top of Mount Olympus in 1889.

of nonsense thereupon, but for all that a very sensible, well-informed and charming man. Being very impressionable he is just now rather fascinated by Roman Catholicism, and is indeed on his way to Rome, in order to see all the glories of the religion which seems to him the highest and the most sentimental. Mahaffy is quite determined to prevent this if possible, and is using every argument he can to check him. At first he tried hard to persuade him to come to Greece with us, pointing out to him by the way all the worst faults of Popery. Finding this not altogether effective, though it had some weight, he changed his tack, and when Wilde began to say that perhaps he would come, Mahaffy said 'I won't take you. I wouldn't have such a fellow with me,' which of course, as Wilde is somewhat of a wilful disposition, has raised in him a firm determination to come, and I quite expect he will, and hope so.¹²⁷

Wilde would indeed travel to Greece by way of Italy with Mahaffy's retinue; this time their travel itinerary included Genoa, Ravenna, Brindisi and Corfu. Their visit to Ravenna would have serendipitous significance for Wilde, mirroring Hunter Blair's good fortune at Monte Casino, as the town of Ravenna would be the next subject for Oxford University's Newdigate Prize¹²⁸ - giving Wilde an obvious advantage over other competitors and ensuring that he would win the prize in 1878.

'Ravenna' is often seen as the point of commencement in any study of Wilde's poetry. Wilde is not generally known as a pastoral poet, yet bucolic and rustic elements enlighten portions of 'Ravenna'; that said, much of the poem is in essence a poetic recitation of the town's history. Ravenna's classical past is referenced to both Greek and Roman historical and mythological figures and images, but the evening convent bell for vespers returns him to a more solemn and sombre Christian world:

O idle heart! O fond Hellenic dream!
Ere long, with melancholy rise and swell,
The evening chimes, the convent's vesper bell,
Struck on mine ears amid the amorous flowers.
Alas! alas! these sweet and honied hours
Had whelmed my heart like some encroaching sea,
And drowned all thoughts of black Gethsemane.

¹²⁷ George Macmillan, 'Letter to his father' [28th March 1877], cited in *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, Merlin Holland and Rupert Hart-Davis (eds.), (New York, Henry Holt and Company, 2000), pp. 43-44

¹²⁸ The Newdigate Prize is awarded to students of the University of Oxford for the 'Best Composition in English Verse' by an undergraduate who has been admitted to Oxford within the previous four years. It was founded in 1806 as a memorial to Sir Roger Newdigate (1719-1806), politician, antiquarian and patron of the university. Competition instructions are published as follows: "The length of the poem is not to exceed 300 lines. The metre is not restricted to heroic couplets, but dramatic form of composition is not allowed."

Wilde pays homage to Ravenna's historical and cultural associations to the Renaissance. He is particularly impassioned when speaking of Dante's final resting place in Ravenna at the Church of San Pietro Maggiore (later called San Francesco). The memorial was built in the neo-classical style by Camillo Morigia in 1780. Over the urn, there is the bas-relief by Pietro Lombardo (1483) depicting Dante, absorbed in work and thoughts and Wilde manages to capture both the physicality and pain of the exiled native Florentine.

Beside the grave where Dante rests from pain.
His gilded shrine lies open to the air;
And cunning sculptor's hands have carven there
The calm white brow, as calm as earliest morn,
The eyes that flashed with passionate love and scorn,
The lips that sang of Heaven and of Hell,
The almond-face which Giotto drew so well,
The weary face of Dante; - to this day,
Here in his place of resting, far away

He closes the poem with further references to Dante and Byron.

Adieu! Adieu! yon silver lamp, the moon,
Which turns our midnight into perfect noon,
Doth surely light thy towers, guarding well
Where Dante sleeps, where Byron loved to dwell.

Similar to several of his longer poems 'Ravenna' is predicated on binary opposites and the poem develops through familiar disparities already considered in earlier poems such as 'San Miniato' – the contrast between classical and Christian, innocence and experience, past and present are all revisited in 'Ravenna'. After Ravenna, Wilde and Mahaffy's entourage travelled to Brindisi and from there they sailed to Greece. In Corfu, he writes a postcard to Reginald Harding telling him that he has come to Greece, not Rome as he had planned, but that 'I will take Rome on my way back'¹²⁹. That same day Wilde also writes to the Rev. H. R. Bramley, Senior Dean of Arts at Magdalen College, Oxford, informing him of his extended travels and apologising that:

¹²⁹ Oscar Wilde, 'Postcard to Reginald Harding' [2nd April 1877], in *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, Merlin Holland and Rupert Hart-Davis (eds.), (New York, Henry Holt and Company, 2000), p.44.

I will not be able to be back for the beginning of term [4 April]. I hope you will not mind if I miss ten days at the beginning: seeing Greece is really a great education for anyone and will I think benefit me greatly, and Mr Mahaffy is such a clever man that it is quite as good as going to lectures to be in his society...We expect to be in Athens by the 17th and I will post back to Oxford immediately.¹³⁰

Greece awakened Wilde's Hellenic spirit and refocused his aesthetic temperament – the ancient wonders of Corfu, Zante, Olympia, Andritzena, Argos, Mycenae and Athens helped him forget the metaphysical attractiveness of Rome. Beckson and Fong suggest that Wilde's decision to accompany Mahaffy to Greece:

...would lead to a gradual waning of interest in Roman Catholicism and a growing enthusiasm for all things Greek. Unable to be in the Holy City on Easter Sunday, Wilde wrote 'Sonnet Written in Holy Week at Genoa', which recalls the death of Jesus during Holy Week. But 'those dear Hellenic hours' (looked forward to after his sojourn in Italy) drown 'all memory of Thy bitter pain,/The Cross, the Crown, the Soldiers, and the Spear'.¹³¹

Hellenism may have begun to eclipse Catholicism in Wilde's mind but he finally got to visit Rome circuitously on the return leg of their journey from Greece – thus keeping his promise to Reginald Harding. Arriving in Rome he hurried to join his close friends William Ward and Hunter Blair at the Hotel d'Inghilterra. They were shown around the city by G.G. Ramsay, a professor of humanities from Glasgow; Hunter Blair had one final grand gesture to try and persuade Wilde to convert to Catholicism, a meeting with the Pope. At this time, Pope Pius IX, who now regarded himself effectively 'imprisoned' in the Vatican for his refusal to recognise the united kingdom of Italy – unification having only taken place seven years earlier in 1870. Ellmann reminds us that:

Wilde had in several poems expressed his sympathy with Pius IX, 'the prisoned shepherd of the Church of God' and regretted that because Victor Emmanuel had marched into the papal states in 1870, 'In evil bonds a second Peter lay' ('Sonnet on Approaching Italy'). Pius IX received them in a private audience, and expressed to Wilde the hope that he would follow his '*condiscipulus*' (so popes

¹³⁰ Oscar Wilde, 'Letter to the Rev. H.R. Bramley' [2nd April 1877], in *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, Merlin Holland and Rupert Hart-Davis (eds.), (New York, Henry Holt and Company, 2000), p.44.

The Easter Term at Oxford started on 4th April 1877 and on 26th April, when Wilde is still absent without permission after three weeks, the Magdalen Officers meet and 'resolve' that he shall be 'rusticated' [suspended] for the rest of the academic year and fined half a year's Demyship [scholarship] money; and that if he does not return punctually in October 'with an amount of work prescribed by his Tutor satisfactorily prepared, the Officers will consider whether he shall retain his Demyship' (President Bulley's 'President's Note-Book, *Magdalen Archives*)

¹³¹ Karl Beckson and Bobby Fong, 'Wilde as Poet', in Peter Raby (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde*, (Cambridge University Press, 1997) p.58.

talk) into the city of God. On the way back to the hotel Wilde was too awestricken to speak, and once there he locked himself in his room. When he emerged he had completed a sonnet, perhaps 'Urbs Sacra Aeterna' which Hunter Blair liked, feeling, as often before, that his long struggle for Wilde's soul was successful at last...As before, Wilde's soul was elusive. There was Ward to keep it Protestant. There was Greece to keep it Hellenic.¹³²

For Hunter Blair it would regretfully be another false dawn; only hours after being received by the Pope, Wilde insisted on visiting the Cimitero Protestante (Protestant Cemetery) or locally known as Cimitero degli Inglesi ("Englishmen's Cemetery") located near Porta San Paolo, so he could visit the grave of Keats.

There, before the grave of Keats, 'the holiest place in Rome', he prostrated himself on the grass. It was a humbler obeisance than he had offered to the Pope, and irritated Hunter Blair because of its confusion of aesthetic and religious postures. To submit to a poet as one should to a prelate was to undermine the meaning of submission...Pagan Greece was having some of the subversive effect upon Papal Rome that Mahaffy desired.¹³³

Both Italy and Greece would leave an indelible artistic imprint on Wilde's art and philosophy. He would remain enamoured with the ritual, ceremonial grandeur and pageantry of Roman Catholicism for the rest of his life – but in a similar fashion to the idea of the craft and Freemasonry – it was to a large extent a matter of style over substance. Andrew McCracken has suggested that Wilde's apprehensive and at times flippant relationship with Catholicism was perhaps a defence mechanism:

"I am not a Catholic," said Oscar Wilde. "I am simply a violent Papist." This statement, like so many of Wilde's outrageous paradoxes, conceals a sober truth beneath its blithe wit. Another example would be his jest that, of all religions, Catholicism is the only one worth dying in.¹³⁴

Wilde's long vacillating attraction to Catholicism would only finally be substantiated on his deathbed:

On November 28, 1900, as Wilde lay dying on his bed in Paris, Robbie Ross called in a priest, an English Passionist, Father Dunne. Wilde was given conditional Baptism and was anointed. For a short time he

¹³² Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (London, Hamish Hamilton, 1987), pp.70-71.

¹³³ Richard Ellmann, *Ibid.*, p.71.

¹³⁴ Andrew McCracken, 'The Long Conversion of Oscar Wilde.' (CERC, April 2003).

<http://www.catholiceducation.org/en/culture/art/the-long-conversion-of-oscar-wilde.html>

emerged from delirium into lucidity, and Father Dunne, examining him, was satisfied that Wilde freely desired reception into the Church. Wilde died a Catholic on November 30.¹³⁵

Rome at last.

¹³⁵ Andrew McCracken, 'The Long Conversion of Oscar Wilde.' (CERC, April 2003).
<http://www.catholiceducation.org/en/culture/art/the-long-conversion-of-oscar-wilde.html>

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LUKE WHITINGTON

HEADLESS GODDESS IN NAPLES

Her head is lost but not forgotten, her ancient gaze
Absorbed by sand, clay and pebbles —
A critical absence stares through layers
Of misplaced time — up to a spectre of an idea.

However her navel is left there for us — a knot placed
On the curve of her stomach —
A curled distraction, a twist in another ending —
A send off present from her Homeric birthing ...
Yes, all of that and if that doesn't work — a convenient pocket for a pearl or a sapphire.

But on this afternoon a few thousand years later — it will be another kind
Another form of an eye, that mimes for missing lips and a mouth
That tells just as much for an absent smile
That sees right through an empire's groaning secrets...
You might try to imagine — closing both eyes tightly —

The navel now reminding you it had been discovered again
To refresh a memory of the many undulations of a life
Launched once, into raunchy dips, from side to side
As those golden hips and resolute thighs swayed their way through the world

Of gods and goddesses' business, heavenly wars and soaring stars' prophecies
Summoning all kinds of contrivances — to disturb our chosen fate —
An unintended oracle, a quick turn to our beginnings and endings.

Above all, this orifice had got up to several tricks — to seduce minds

And sooth and beguile human flesh — it was not required to devise
A way of foreseeing things — seen through parted or breeze-blown veils

Was good enough just to be very pretty — a nice swirl — like an eyebrow arching
Over a secret — or like lips curled about an intriguing question —
And was never intended to be a soothsayer, or a surrogate oracle either —
And continually stare through one spiralling epitaph forever, left

As a porthole for a headless, blind, expressionless life ...
Now let's try to forget the missing eyes, the nose, the chin and the throat
Gone to their heavenly absences — look at the nipples —
Sense how they might protrude, penetrate, even point to kiss
The pout inside your mind — see the curve of the belly —

See how it moves slowly across your lips — moistening imaginings
Igniting your senses, blurring across your future tenses —

And feel her fingers, as liberated, they slide blindly over your lips —
With slowed heartbeats feel her buttocks push back against your palms
You have it all — enough in spades to fulfil all your requisites, all the big ticks for love—
The absence of a head, eyes, face, smile — only persuades your heart to grow fonder

Now you know — I think, I would really like to do it — the idea now warming
Nicely — although really I'm not in a position to take her home —
And if I could somehow haul her — lug her whole thwarted loveliness
Out to the car park ... but it still wouldn't work; I don't have a car boot
Or a passenger door big enough to fit in all her curved abundance —

No use to try to stuff in the elegant drama — those swan-curved legs
The one tentative arm, the durable myth of breasts
And all those other missing bits ...
And what if I returned home one day and I kissed

Her – and found her lips still warm? And what, if like Pygmalion, I tried
To make a child; my only issue, spawned from those marble thighs?

And it goes on and on – until when she suddenly cracked apart
With passion — would her remaining arm crush me to death?
Curled in our last mortal embrace? — Her breasts
Still curved murderously down against my nose

As I died for love, moaning fidelity for the first timeNo ...

I must not join that coterie; centuries of dreaming painters and sculptors
The bard himself and the modern playwrights – the lonely poets, even some pop singers -
There will be no “Winter’s Tale” — awakened by all this – she — a so sensitively
Sculptured Creature – and now I see reluctantly, her navel ... is really only sweet debris –

A coiled shell – relic of a Virgin’s wish — and her sigh
That never had time
To soften – her final place should remain
Here in this museum room – Those lineaments
Poised, set against light slowed forever

Her missing eyes counting leaves on some autumnal pond
Glimmering into its wintry future — floating under farewell clouds
Turning around, uncaring in time, turning for no one, always, always –
Her navel her last exhaled, spinning, goodbye –
A gorgeous reflection; a knot enclosing a golden moment, long gone.

SARINA AT SANTO STEFANO

Not far from the old bridge
Under the celestial architecture
Of the cathedral, assembled tiers
Arches and columns of serene blue stone

Orderly artifice swooping
And rising as much as heavy
Ornamentation is able to do — launched
From a mortal creator's hand —

The wizardry of Brunelleschi
Seamed through all of this —
We wait in attendance
For you to come out

Wearing your long black lace gown
No wings attached to this angel yet —
The chorus flows round you and settles
And the baton finally falls

And voices come rising in flutes of wind
Winds as light and devilish as swallows
Spiralling higher into the surprised columns and arches...
Unexplainably lovely, I thought

Closing my eyes to the tumult swaying —
What beautiful winds do I hear?

Or is this a dream of a god, let flow
Like a gilded cloak into our muffled grey world

Or is it just a door in heaven falling open
And the voices of angels in conversation
Floating in silvery glints to momentarily
Light up a lower world?

A vision, a sound, to see and hear in timeless seconds
And I can imagine you hours after
As I am walking through the midnight streets
Of Florence, under each pool of lamplight

You return; your body like a rag, a scarf — a veil
As you sing, wavering amongst other swaying figures
As if just about to lift and blow away in the surges of sound
Your legs and feet trailing after, head and shining hair

Following the swallows in their arching paths.

BACK IN TOWN

Walking across the city after a year of absence, eyes rejoicing in the tapestries of stone I pause for a moment to touch the column of blue-grey Pietra Serena stone In Via Maggio passing Saint Marks — a good luck talisman for me I revisit each time I return to the city; remembering that 13 is a lucky number in Italy and that to appease the spirits — you touch iron not wood for a safe journey.

Thinking as I walk, about all this stone that was brought to Florence that has been witness to this city's events for centuries; Pietra Serena used for entrances, ornamental sections over doors and windows — quarried and carted in by oxen from the surrounding hills; and, the green marble brought down from Prato, and the white marble without flaws, brought from the lonely heights of Carrara — not far from the sea where Shelley drowned, and where Michelangelo spent time sleeping and contemplating for days amongst the marble he would finally choose...

Ornamental flourishes against the dun or burnt red colours of the brick and stone used to construct the palaces along the streets of the city — typical of the city of artisans — the attention to finishing things; like a final word in a piece of prose or poetry that is a kind of signature. The walls on either side as I walk are like a moving tapestry — keeping pace beside me as I head toward the last opening against the sky — where the buildings form a stage enclosing a section of blue air clotted with weightless clouds and the inevitable hills beyond, with the cypresses and vines climbing toward the sky; A pastoral fresco changing and floating with the light.

I turn left instead away from the beckoning view and walk up a laneway that spouts out into the piazza of Palazzo Pitti —the home of Cosimo and Elanora — Grand Duke and Duchess of Tuscany, drivers like the rest of the Medici family of the patronage that maintained the genius of the Renaissance. The light of the evening now shifting its accent to dusk —here I like to walk along under the walls of this stern unyielding palace with its inscrutable arches, set into the stone surrounds, crablike, as furtive as an arch might ever be.

The light is now easing out of its scarlet into a silky brown-grey and I look across to the small piazza tucked into the crook of the right arm of the massive building —and yes — they are there as

they had promised — at the usual meeting place, by the giant stone trough; Victor, Patrizia, Sarina, Marco, Lucia, Guido, Charles, Ricardo and Doroteo — most of the gang of expatriates or Anglo-Italians I knocked around with last year and for several years before —

“Hello there — stranger!” Victor calls out as I approach the incorrigible group — “still here, where I last saw all of you.” I exclaim — amongst a round of hugs and kisses, to seal our re engagement. —“ So my friends, what’s happening tonight, anything I should come to? ”

“Sarina is singing tonight” Victor says, slinging an arm about my shoulder, winking across at Sarina mounting her black bicycle, her divine bottom rising as she pedals her bike away, across the piazza toward the Ponte Vecchio —“we’ve got a ticket for you —and you don’t have to wear a tie, or even a jacket, so come along with us — vecchio amico! ”

Florence, Italy
Autumn, 2014.

REVIEWS

MICHELLE O'RIORDAN

Irish Centre for Poetry Studies

VERSE HISTORY AND PERPLEXITY

Barry Keane, *A Verse Translation with Introduction and Commentary: Anna Stanisławska A Transaction, or an Account of the Entire Life of an Orphan Girl by Way of Plaintful Threnodies in the Year 1685 — the Aesop Episode*. [Sub Lupa Academic Publishing] Warszawa n.d. [2013]

The versified memoir of the title is the epic production of Polish Baroque Poet Anna Stanisławska. The work has been re-edited and re-translated by Barry Keane in an attractively presented publication, under a title closer to the original in style and in sense than an earlier edition (referred to as *A Description of the Whole Life of One Orphan* in Czesław Miłosz, *The History of Polish Literature* University of California Press: 1983, p. 140). An edition of the surviving manuscripts was published in 1935 by I. Kotowa and the current editor acknowledges his debt to this earlier work. The published book [SubLupa Academic Publishing] is nicely designed, printed on lightweight cream bookwove, with facing page translations, useful notes and bibliography. Editorial expansion of the side-notes[Keane, pp. 263 — 283] guide the reader through the oblique and, sometimes very local, references. Just as helpful is the editorial division of the 'Episode' into titled sections. This device makes

the highly subjective matter more easily understood against the scaffold of the factual outlines provided in the introduction and in the notes.

Keane's introduction provides a brief and informative history of the manuscript and the vicissitudes affecting it since the 17th century. Stanisławska's manuscript [it is not suggested that the work is an autograph] has been available to scholars in the National Library of Warsaw since 1934. Keane also gives a brief outline of the known facts of the poet and a usefully brief account of the history of her times.

Anna Stanisławska lived in the the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, a federal multi-ethnic and multi-religious union [from 1386 to 1795] of the Kingdom of Poland and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. Keane's introduction contains a succinct account of the nature of 'Polish' politics in the years relevant for the life of the poet. Her life began in c. 1651 as the daughter of the Governor of Kiev. His background was wholly noble and became linked to royalty when his kinsman Jan Sobieski [1629—1696] was made king in 1674. Anna's mother, a member of the Syzszkowski family, was related to powerful nobles — the Potocki (in modern Ukraine) and the Zebrzydowski (based in Krakow) families.

It is clear, therefore, that Anna Stanisławska belonged to the inner powerful cadres of one of the biggest and most populous kingdoms of Early Modern Europe. Her mother died when she was three years old and her maternal great-aunt took care of her in the Dominican convent (in Gródek) near Krakow, of which she was prioress.

At the age of 16, her father her brought home to live on the family estate of Maciejowice, some 70k south-east of Warsaw. Anna's step-mother urged her marriage to a member of the Krakow nobility, a senator, and the son of a well-known and renowned military hero. This man, Jan Kazimierz Warszcki is the 'Aesop' of the title. 'Aesop' because of the tradition that that fabled man was one of the ugliest of his time. Anna's husband was unsuitable in every way, a matter of fact accepted by the father of the bride and of the groom. Two years after her wedding, Anna found herself, once again, residing in a convent in Warsaw, not as a penitent or a postulant, but as a harassed ex-wife awaiting the disentanglement of her inheritance from the affairs of her step-mother and those of her husband. Anna's father had given her guardianship into the powerful hands of Jan Sobieski before he himself died in 1669. Sobieski's political interests coincided with her personal

interests, and from the sanctuary of the convent, and with Sobieski-faction support, and with the unexpected support of her step-mother, an annulment of the marriage was secured. This was a matter of public comment, and Anna's plight was the subject of unflattering doggerel.

Nothing daunted, she married again, this time a cavalry officer in the service of Sobieski, Jan Oleśnicki. Stanisławska described this marriage as one of 'two hearts in one body' (from part of her poem not included in the edition). He died in 1675 of cholera while on one the interminable contemporary military campaigns. At 24 years of age, Stanisławska found herself once again without a husband. Two years after the death of Oleśnicki, she married Jan Zbąski, a brother of the Bishop of Warmia. She lived with him on his estate near Lublin in what, by her own account, was a supremely happy union. His death in 1683, as a result of wounds he suffered during the Siege of Vienna by the Turks, caused her immense pain and heartbreak. Her poem, the 'Transactions' finishes at this point of grief. The remainder of her relatively short life (she died in 1701 at the age of 50) was spent in retirement on her estate, and she bequeathed the bulk her remaining considerable wealth to a number of religious orders — occasioning yet another long-drawn-out legal challenge after her death.

1685, therefore, was the year of her 'third' widow-hood and her final period as a wife. Anna Stanisławska used her new status to commit an account of her life to verse [at age c. 34]. It might be useful to consider Stanisławska as a typical amateur 'poet'—though 'rhymster' is probably more appropriate—of her period. A 'mania' for versification overtook the leisured hours of the privileged in this period in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (Czesław Miłosz, *The History of Polish Literature*, p. 118). Keane tells us that Anna's step-mother was herself a patron of letters [Keane, p. 30], and, indeed, a woman of Anna's means, education and cultural milieu might naturally have turned to writing in the enforced leisure of her widow-hood. Polish Baroque literature/writing, at the leisured amateur level, was typically coterie publication (in manuscript, 'as merely a desirable ornament of social intercourse' [Miłosz, p. 118]). Writers celebrated religion, rural life, and politics in prose, poetry, satire, lampoon, and memoir. Almost a frenzy of production in a variety of styles, and in uneven quality, is now associated with the Baroque in the Commonwealth. In that hyper-religious period, all literary works were to an extent impacted by the influence of

prominent religious groups, not least among them—in the case of Commonwealth Catholics—the pervasive Jesuit education.

This style of Baroque literary production, often identified under the term ‘Sarmatian Baroque’ is that in which Stanisławska participated, and under whose influence she clearly found herself. Miłosz describes this literary style as ‘sometimes graceful, but often hair-raising in its combination of the most disparate and contradictory elements’ [Miłosz, p. 119]. The ‘Sarmatian’ Sensibility—both term and concept have attracted equally vehement support and dismissal—involved a form of quietism, an appreciation of home, prudence, devotion to church and family, and a deep sense of the antiquity of the Polish nobility and its sources. The ‘Sarmatian’ belief in a remote ‘Scythian’ origin, was a one that Polish noble literary culture shared with contemporaneous and earlier Irish literary culture. In its Baroque phase in the Commonwealth, this sensibility indulged itself in the freedom offered by the soundly-based education afforded to the nobility, allowing the literate and those who were serious or dilettante writers to select and reject as they chose from a rich literary hinterland—including classical and mediaeval Latin.

The uneven, almost burlesque sequences in the ‘Aesop Episode’, rightly related to farce by the Editor [Keane, p. 33], are characteristic of the eclecticism in this period of manic production in Polish literature. The vagaries of chance and the violent political life of the Commonwealth probably caused the destruction of much of what was produced, especially that which subsisted solely in manuscript form. Anna Stanisławska’s work is a fortunate survival, but need not be seen, perhaps, as either particularly idiosyncratic, nor especially noteworthy, in its time. It happens that the details of her life were, by any standard, intriguing and ‘epic’. Her committal of her memoir to paper in the style she did is indicative of her active participation in the cultural life of her time, in a manner entirely in keeping with her education, social, economic and marital status.

The Preface ‘To the Reader’ sets a rollicking tone for what is to come. The coy admission of its authorship ‘by one of the fairer sex’, suggests a ‘special pleading’ and indicates the level of gravity which might be expected in the composition. The verses are accompanied by side-notes giving a simple prose background for the content of the verse—though these can also be somewhat riddling and oblique. The author, clearly, does not

expect the material to stand alone, or to take its place as a literary statement requiring no other crib but the well-stocked mind of the learned reader. The driving conceit of this 'Episode' is the chance hand of Fortune playing with real characters in Life. The life of the author is in the hands of Fate, and the unfolding of the 'Orphan's' life is depicted as having been set on a random course from the death of her mother at the age of three. The logic behind this indicates that there was 'another' life unlived, but striven after by the protagonist. All life events are therefore subject—in this literary configuration—to an invisible measure of predictable rectitude, an ideal trajectory, thrown out of kilter by the fell hand of fate that 'orphaned' the author in babyhood.

Stanisławska, in keeping with the 'Sarmatian' privileging of rural quiet retreat, rejects the revelry of the court [T1, v 5] for the 'deep forest [T1, v 6] to sit with 'care and grace' [T1, v8] to collect her thoughts and take us back to her earliest memories [Stanisławska did, in fact, retire to her estates on her third widowhood at the age of about 34]. Her mother's death when she was 3 years old, left her and her brother 'orphans'. Her description of the years spent in the convent of which her great-aunt was prioress is equivocal both in the verse and in the accompanying side-note: 'While living in the cloister I almost died of pox'. The translation here might have been refined to specify smallpox [*ospę*], rather than unspecified 'pox' which would attract the translation *kita* — with its venereal connotations, inappropriate and therefore inaccurate — and more than likely unintended (by the author) at this point in the epic. The stepmother, welcomed at first as a second mother, is dismissed with a possible proverbial saying: ' . . . love will travel the distance / When finances make sound sense' [T1, v 14].

The marriage match made for Stanisławska initially appeared to be suitable. Her description of the deception, that eventually revealed itself, involves Biblical comparisons with the matching of Jacob with Leah — instead of his true-love Rachel (by the scheming uncle, Laban) — including a reference to the period of seven-years bondage for which Jacob worked for Laban to secure his preferred wife. These allusive references are delivered without comment — a clear indication that Stanisławska expected her readership to follow her thought sequences.

The designation of her husband as 'Aesop' is probably the most creative element in this awkward work [I am not in a position to judge of the felicity or grace of the original Polish writing]. 'Aesop' .i. Jan Kazimierz Warszycki, son of the Castellan of Kraków, is a gross and unsuitable husband. Her, almost forced, marriage to this beastly individual is the central 'plaint' of this part of the Threnodic verses. The efforts of her father to reconcile her to this fate are well described and the efforts made to alleviate the predictable consequences of this politic, but ultimately unfeasible match, are outlined. Because of the juvenile, almost naive tone of the poem, it is difficult to gauge whether some of the humour is sophisticated and intended, or merely the jejune indulgence of the author. There is no denying the burlesque effect of the following, however:

When he enters into the yard,
My family rushes out to bid
Him welcome. He looks like a gander
Peering out the carriage window.
He barely bows to my father;
With the rest he doesn't bother.
They're pulling me by my dress
And pushing me towards . . . This! [T 6, v 36]

The Editor suggests that the Author may have intended the poem for performance [p. 33] and indeed, most of the episodes concerning the marriage and its aftermath lend themselves to a style of very broad farce. The events surrounding the coaxing of the groom are surely the stuff of popular theatre: after three days, the unconsummated marriage has created uproar between the families with the interventions of a venal priest attracting the imprecations of all involved. The 'third day' is depicted, graphically as follows:

All this takes place on the third day.
As for the groom, what can one say?
They keep pushing him towards me,
But he to this: 'What for, tell me?
On occasion he looks me over,
Eyeing up my jewellery.
Whenever he opens his mouth,
Only gibberish dribbles out. [T 10, v 80]

Violence, ignorance, gluttony, avarice, slobbering and all manner of vices and uglinesses are depicted as pervading the new marital home. The humour of the piece is difficult to locate or properly to identify for two reasons: the translation may conceal word-play or proverbial statements and witticisms that are impossible to render in English; the matter of the farce is so subjective and essentially abhorrent that in its current form the material seems neither to be truly farcical nor truly tragic. It may be that the author has not the artifice to attempt either a clear verse biography, or commit fully to a comic account of a *mésalliance* — as in the French dramatic tradition (and probably in the hands of a true artist, in the Polish tradition).

The failure to realize either true farce or true memoir resides, perhaps, in the chronological imperative of the narration which drives the account. The effort to account for every step in the sorry history of the *mésalliance* leads to wordy banalities typified in the account of the father's death and his remorse at the 'bondage' into which he 'sold' his daughter [T14, vv. 120—125]. It is as though Stanisławska could not forgo the full narration of events for the artistic achievement of a truly burlesque, farcical production — a witty lampoon that would have a universal rather than a totally subjective application.

As it is, the Episode becomes an uneven — at times hilarious (and I suspect, unwitting) — account of a self-important and socially consequential young lady whose first marriage was a notable failure. Her own interest in her status and her financial entitlements mark her out as no romantic heroine nor fey victim of a Caliban. Indeed, her enduring to tell the tale reveals her to be a hard-headed survivor. Having secured an annulment [c. 1668 — a year after the wedding] Anna's account deals with her own reception of her next suitor (she married Jan Oleśenski, in 1669, he died 1675) [T 26, v. 270] . The verses indicate a sensibility unable to make the artistic leap into the fantastical which the subject matter clearly called for:

He has built his hopes up too high,
Imagining that somehow I'm free.
Sure the judgement has not been seen,
It's being kept under lock and key.
His are flattering attentions,

But this is no time for romance.

'Please see things from my point of view,

This is about me, and not you.'

The bathos of this verse is not in keeping with the high farce of the better parts of those verses excoriating her hapless first husband. Perhaps the register chosen in the translation compounds the bathetic note in this self-regarding verse, but nothing in the other verses suggests that much could have been lost either way.

Altogether, Dr Barry Keane has generously chosen to give readers of English an absorbing and perplexing piece of work to contend with in this difficult epic. A clearer picture of its place in European literature will emerge when Polish literary commentators can identify a surer place for writings like this which are only recently being subjected to the critical scrutiny they deserve.



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MOUNTAIN MAN

Lost Tribe of the Wicklow Mountains, Dave Lordan, Salmon Poetry, 2014

Dave Lordan: laureate of Superquinn, critic of hypocrisy, mocker of the Irish Catholic Church (those 'soft-chorusing rosary nuns'). But also protective father, tender elegist, and fervent believer in pagan ritual, in 'Samhain's high moon / of the spirits' and, as the title poem tells us, in the 'Lost Tribe of the Wicklow Mountains'. 'I believe in them, so they do exist': the opening lines are almost a manifesto. With his third collection Lordan cements his reputation as Ireland's most socially engaged poetic agitator while at the same time proving more difficult to categorize than his previous books, *Boy in the Ring* and *Invitation to a Sacrifice*, might have suggested. His epigraph, taken from Vasari's *Lives of the Artists*, makes Lordan's aspiration clear. It describes Di Cosimo gazing 'at a wall against which sick people had been for a long time discharging their spittle', and the artist's transformation of such a degraded scene into 'battles of horsemen, and the most fantastic and widest landscapes that were ever seen.' Making art from ugly subject matter has always been part of Lordan's agenda; but the second part of the epigraph is what suggests his embrace of more traditionally poetic subject matter too. Vasari writes of Di Cosimo, 'he did the same with the clouds in the sky... it may be said, in truth, that he changed his manner almost for every work that he executed'. The poems in this book are tonally various, and yet they each bear an imprint that is distinctively Lordan's own.

Renowned as a performer, the religious element in Lordan's poetry lies in his devotion to the spoken word, his belief in storytelling, in invocation, and in prayer. The simple anaphoric credo of 'Lost Tribe of the Wicklow Mountains' sums it up:

Strong is my faith.
Strong is my beat.
Strong is my magic.
Strong is my want.

Such belief is something that Lordan especially associates with Denis Boothman in his twenty-part elegy, 'Notes for a Player'.

You knew everyday holy
and worshipped

he writes in the second part;

You knew that worlds could return
in the stories

you plucked from your phases
and potted around.

‘Phases’ (of the moon—with which Boothman is associated throughout), but it might equally be ‘phrases’; lunar mysticism and word spinning are intricately linked in Lordan’s Blake-influenced spirit world. Similarly, in section vi, he has Boothman charming (in both senses) an after-dinner audience

to dismiss their belief
in an unhappy ending with
a reel from your old Dublin Am-Dram

or of your stretch in the Saudian desert.

It becomes clear that faith in the exotic, strange, and unworldly is not merely about entertainment for Lordan but is a question of morality. Imagination, after all, is what allows for hope (‘Hope, ya old mutt,’ one poem begins, ‘I hear yer in bits’). Imagination is also what engenders empathy; it is the necessary counterpoint to the unforgiving realities that Lordan also sees it as his responsibility to document. The central question that Lordan seems to be asking, then—both of his readers and of Irish society more generally—is: ‘Is your faith strong enough?’ To which we might respond, is Lordan’s own?

A poet is someone who knows how to manipulate the transformative power of words, and even to transform some words into others. ‘Fertility Poem’ relates an everyday deception, a father trying to protect his daughter from understanding an obscene piece of graffiti. But the poem is anxious and ambivalent. By pretending that the word ‘CUNT’ is really ‘COUNT’ and that the ‘O’ is a phantom letter, the poet betrays the ‘absolute trust’ he has shared with his daughter ‘around the alphabet’; this tiny and private alteration of the language is understandable enough, but—no matter how dextrous it is—the turn that makes the initial term of abuse into a fertility symbol is, arguably, a further betrayal, a deliberate misinterpretation that is at odds with Lordan’s usual impulse to tell things straight:

Lies are the womb and seed of us.

Their fertility is marvellous.

Lies are not the same as imagination, however. The obscenity has been concealed, not transformed, lies allowing a means by which to turn away from affront.

A similar question arises at the end of the most felt of the poems about contemporary Ireland, ‘My Mother Speaks to Me of Suicide’. ‘Here’s a cliché with some life in it’, Lordan declares: ‘hope is what the spirit breathes’. A catalogue of premature deaths concludes in the book’s baldest and most personal statement of fact:

I can decipher no more
than this one thing so obvious and sure:
young men in Irish small towns and townlands,
suburbs and exurbs, flat-blocks and villages

are going to go on killing themselves
until this life, this incredible life I adore
and which must not be wasted
be made worth living and living
and living again, for everyone.

The poet recognizes that he is one of the lucky ones, 'Alive and not unhappy now,' able to draw upon the resources of imagination and hope; and yet, in turning from imaginative reconstructions of his peers' death to a declaration of his own happiness, the taint of superiority risks intruding. Even in the diagnosis of this problem, there is—perhaps inevitably—a turning away from it. The point is not that Lordan is writing irresponsibly, but rather that he is confronted with certain situations from which imagination can offer much less respite than he would like to believe. The poem that follows, 'Love commands the neighbourhood'—a literal-minded spin on 'Love thy neighbour as thyself'—feels as though it ought to be consolatory, as though we ought to finish reading it (and the book) believing that love really is the answer. But this poem, too, is ambivalent, and Lordan is too wise to know that such love can be so easily achieved or that life is that simple. Think of how he presents those that we are asked to love:

Teenage thief who nicked your MacBook
in the park and in the cafe your keys
and will anyway die sometime tomorrow afternoon
in a glass or a powder.
Speeding mother
of four on her smartphone in the car
yet to crash into a toddler.

Is this loving forgiveness, or, in the imagination of the fate that will befall the young vagabond, a kind of wishful revenge? Is there a sense here of the speaker willing the mother's comeuppance (if not the toddler's death), horrific as that would be?

'Love them', Lordan implores: 'They are helpless like you are'. Lordan has most love for those most rejected by society: the immigrant workers in the abattoir, for example, treated like the cattle they must slaughter.

At the end of each weekday the second man
is covered, head to toe, in hoof-shaped bruises.
Black-and-blue patches,
reminiscent of cowhide.

It is much harder for him to find any love for those who are complicit in society's ills. 'Workmate', for instance, is uncompromising, going for the jugular of an office worker who uselessly 'plays Farmville and pokes friends / on Facebook most of the day' but who passionately believes in cutting '*the benefits // of those who refuse a reasonable / offer of employment*'. (Those opening lines, incidentally, expose one of the challenges of writing to the contemporary moment: reading them in 2014, we can look back on poking and Farmville as so 2011). The sardonic bitterness of 'Irish History'—a parody of the Irish misery narrative, a masque of grotesques—is also hard to reconcile with Lordan's vision of love. The concluding montage of a conjoined triplet scrapping for survival by hacking off the other two 'with a saw / made of mother's lost teeth' is offset by a bilious 'fuck you' to the father who abandoned them.

He had to – I know; sometimes
shard and excrement by chance or fate

or ecstasy will sprout
and shove the nethermost to light.

He seems to be recovering.
You won't be. Goodnight.

The characters Lordan maligns may not deserve much love. They may not deserve redemption through imagination either. Nonetheless, Lordan's depictions of them expose the limitations of the love and imagination that he so prizes. He is a poet of contradictions: a polemicist who hates authority, a believer whose hope is borne of despair, a lover whose beautiful moments are ugly. In the end, these limitations and contradictions may, rather than simply exposing a failure of vision, be the greatest attribute of *Lost Tribe of the Wicklow Mountains*. In resisting easy solutions, the collection is a manifestation of the flawed, human, chequered lives that Lordan prizes most of all.

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GOOD INTERSTICES MAKE GOOD NEIGHBOURS

Maintaining a Place: Conditions of Metaphor in Modern American Literature ed. Maria Stuart, Fionnghuala Sweeney and Fionnuala Dillane (Dublin: UCD Press, 2014) 206pp, hbk.

'Guard these interstices with care/They are not for mending,' read the last lines of Nerys Williams' poem, 'In Which', one of three (the others are by Harry Clifton and Peggy O'Brien) in this book of essays honouring Ron Callan on his retirement from the School of English at University College Dublin. Good interstices make good neighbours, as Frost's 'old-stone savage' might have commented, were he to find himself in a modern English department. The mood disseminated by this volume is one of neighbourliness and generosity, with many well-deserved commendations of Callan's personal warmth, inspiring teaching and careful scholarship.

Adam Kelly's essay, the first in the book, uses Callan's discussions of Romanticism and Transcendentalism in his monograph *William Carlos Williams and Transcendentalism: Fitting the Crab in the Box* (1992) to explore *The Temptations of Big Bear* (1973), Rudy Weibe's novel dramatizing the confrontations between the Cree Nation and the forces of the 19th century British empire. It's a fascinating approach to a text in which Callan taught for many years. Maria Stuart's chapter, meanwhile, comes to Emily Dickinson's rhetoric of speechlessness and vocal impediment through Puritan preachers and Emersonian style. J.C.C. Mays writes, with formidable range of reference, on Coleridge's influence on Pound, extending his reflections to close with thoughts on some of the more Poundian of contemporary Irish poets. Poundian influence is also a theme in Stephen Wilson's article, which begins with a nuanced account of Pound's sometimes fractious relationship with William Carlos Williams, and moves into a fine close reading of ideas of legacy in *The Cantos*. Wilson's conclusion, that Pound's most problematic poems demand our serious attention all the more for their unpalatability, evokes a mood similar to Declan Kiberd's tribute to Callan in his Afterword: 'There were no pat, pre-cooked answers in a Callan lecture, just plenty of issues for debate [...] By the close of each, one could see why these questions were so real and pressing.'

The next three chapters all concern William Carlos Williams: Lee M. Jenkins contributes a scholarly and precise analysis of nativism and transnationalism in Williams and D.H. Lawrence, while Stephen Matterson reads *In the American Grain* as a text crucial to and inextricable from any consideration of Williams' poetry and fiction. Michael Hinds' essay on *Paterson* and Sappho is notable for bold speculation and a wry scepticism concerning creative motivation. Philip MacGowan is concerned with forms of knowledge and making in Elizabeth Bishop's work. Quoting Callan's essay on Carl Rakosi, MacGowan links Marianne Moore, Bishop and Rakosi 'into a triumvirate of American poets "sensitive to the importance of the line as a unit of grammar" and self-consciously aware of their own "comfort and discomfort with figurative language" '. That offers an interesting point of contact with Philip Coleman's chapter on Rakosi, as an extremely valuable setting in context of that poet's long but fractured career. Ana Nunes broadens the scope of the book with an assessment of Ellen Gallagher's visual art, which uses fantastic and hybrid forms to confront and protest the sustained assaults of white supremacy on the bodies of African-Americans, a history of abuse and horror to which realism is insultingly inadequate. Frank McGuinness' article also draws interesting attention to African-American art, comparing Lorraine Hansberry's explorations of inheritance both genetic and financial to Sean O'Casey's.

Maintaining a Place does an excellent job in suggesting why Callan's teaching, mentorship and scholarship is so important to academics and writers in Ireland and beyond: it reflects his wide interests, questioning approach and personal sincerity. Thoughtfully arranged and attractively produced, it can also, unlike many volumes of the Festschrift type, be confidently recommended to general readers with an interest in American literature. 'Like a parenthesis / a small walled garden / in the midst of verbiage', writes Peggy O'Brien in her poem 'Permission to Burn'; this volume preserves a space for study and reflection.

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