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## **Becoming a Critic: An Academic Memoir**

**Marjorie Perloff**

**Stanford University (Emerita), USA**

**Abstract:** In this essay, originally written as a lecture for Sun-Yat-Sen University, in which I tried to explain the trajectory of my career as a literary critic, I detail my critical education from the heyday of the “New Criticism,” studied, along with Formalist criticism at Catholic University in Washington, D.C. and go on to explain how I moved from this work to Russian Formalism and the Frankfurt School, and then beyond these to a specific concern for the avant-garde—both the avant-garde of the early twentieth century and our current avant-garde. I argue that in all these cases, my conviction was and still is that one must read closely, paying attention to language, syntax, imagery, tone so as to understand what is really happening in an individual poem as well as in the larger period style.

**Keywords:** New Criticism, Russian Formalism, defamiliarization, W. K. Wimsatt, Walter Benjamin, Frank O’Hara, John Cage, Language poetry.

I came to the study of poetry relatively late in my career. As an undergraduate, I was, like most students, much more interested in fiction than in poetry; my favorite novels were the “big” ones of the nineteenth century by Balzac and Flaubert, Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, but I was also keen on Modernism and wrote my undergraduate honors thesis on “James Joyce and The Stream-of-Consciousness Novel,” followed by an M.A. thesis on “Privileged Moments in Proust and Virginia Woolf.” It was only in my first year of graduate school at the Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C. that I began to discover the pleasures and challenges of poetry. Three amazing professors — James Hafley, Craig La Dri ère, and Giovanni Giovannini— taught me basically HOW TO READ. They, in turn, had been influenced by an extraordinary body of criticism then available — not only to specialists but to the larger literary public.

The fifties and early sixties are regarded today as the heyday of the “New Criticism” — a term that has become a dirty word, signifying the narrow or “close” reading of autonomous poems while ignoring their political and cultural significance, their treatment of race, ethnicity, and gender. It is true that most (though not all) of

the poems discussed by the so-called New Critics were by white men and that some of these critics were writing from a conservative Christian perspective: Cleanth Brooks, for example, read T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* as exhibiting the central Christian paradox that life without faith in God is really a form of death and that conversely death can be life-giving (Brooks, *Modern Poetry*). Again, Brooks and his colleague Robert Penn Warren — the two wrote the key textbook of the period, *Understanding Poetry* — tended to equate poetry with metaphor: they especially admired the lyric of the Metaphysical poets — say, John Donne's "A Valediction forbidding Mourning," which makes an extended comparison between two lovers who must be briefly separated and twin compasses that cannot be severed even as the outer leg (male) goes around the circle, bending away from its (female) partner.

But there were other studies, more historical than "merely" formal, that we read and that shaped our thinking in the late 1950s. The first I want to talk about here is W. K. Wimsatt's *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry*, which was completed in 1953, the year I graduated from college. The first essay in this collection, written together with Monroe Beardsley, was called "The Intentional Fallacy," and I still think it is basically correct. The fallacy in question is the belief that we can judge an author's work by his or her *stated intention*. It is, of course, always useful to learn what the author was trying to do, but, as Wimsatt argues, "the design or intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging the success of a work of literary art" (*Verbal Icon* 3). The word "success" here implies that there is such a thing as literary value, that there are "better" poems and "worse" poems — a very unfashionable view today but one which, in fact, we all espouse by our choices of what to read, teach, etc. And we might also note that long before Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault talked about "the death of the author," Wimsatt and his colleagues were insisting that authors say all kinds of things to "explain" or account for their work — and yet that interpretation and evaluation must finally rely on the text itself.

I still warn students to beware the intentional fallacy. It's wonderful, say, to read the many interviews given by the late Robert Creeley or the great volumes of letters, recently published, by T. S. Eliot: these interviews, letters, and diaries shed important light on the poetry, but they can also be partial or misleading. Consider the response to Kenneth Goldsmith's repeated insistence that his "uncreative writing" needn't be read at all, that it is much too "boring" to read and only the idea counts. Even if Goldsmith believes this himself — and I think he is of course being playful — once the book — say, *Traffic* — is there: proofread, copy-edited, and



printed with a special design and cover — it is obviously demanding to be read. And when it is, authorial surprises are certainly in store for the reader. Or again, when Brian Reed took up the challenge of Craig Dworkin's parody grammar book *Parse* — another ostensibly “unreadable” book, whose author claims that he is making no “personal” intervention — he discovered that fifty pages or so into the text, “errors begin to creep in [...] and *Parse* turns out to be intermittently fascinating, even at times laugh-out-loud funny” (Reed 150).

But to return to *The Verbal Icon*. One of my favorite Wimsatt essays encountered in graduate school was a fairly technical one called “One Relation of Rhyme to Reason.” Here Wimsatt argues that the poet can use the sound coupling of rhyme to create a semantic charge as well. In the heroic couplets of Alexander Pope's “The Rape of the Lock,” for example, we read, “One speaks the glory of the British Queen,/ And one describes a charming Indian screen,” where the implication is that there is little difference in the regard felt for Queen Anne and a piece of exotic furniture. Or take the couplet: “Whether the nymph shall break Diana's law,/ Or some frail China jar receive a flaw.” Wimsatt writes, “In the first line the breakage [Diana's law is that of chastity]; in the second line another fragile thing (the jar) and then its breaking (the flaw). The parallel is given a kind of roundness and completeness” (*Verbal Icon* 162). Again, the implication is that we are dealing with a society where young girls are equated to delicate objects — things not to be “broken.”

The New Criticism is always charged with ignoring the cultural dimensions of the text, but the fact is that Wimsatt is here calling attention to Pope's trenchant critique of the high society world of early 18<sup>th</sup> century London, which equated virginity with a perfectly intact China jar — a luxury item carrying a high price and hence to be carefully protected. Another poet who used rhyme thus brilliantly was Byron who could round out an *ottava rima* (abababcc) stanza with a devastating rhyme, as in this stanza from *Don Juan*:

T'is pity learnéd virgins ever wed  
With persons of no sort of education,  
Or gentlemen, who, though well born and bred,  
Grow tired of scientific conversation:  
I don't choose to say much upon this head,  
I'm a plain man, and in a single station,  
But—Oh! ye lords of ladies intellectual,

Inform us truly, have they not hen-pecked you all?

(Canto 1, stanza 22)

Here it is the tongue-twisting couplet rhyme itself that makes the pseudo-intellectual Donna Inez, the hero's mother, look so wonderfully absurd. Or again, consider the wit of Eliot's intermittent rhyme in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," for example: "Shall I, after tea and cakes and ices,/ Have the strength to force the moment to its crisis?"

Wimsatt's essay on rhyme stands behind my Ph.D. dissertation *Rhyme and Meaning in the Poetry of Yeats* (1970), where I similarly tried to show how Yeats's rhyme words often epitomize — and even create — the meaning of a particular poem. Yeats usually began the first draft of a poem by jotting down a series of rhyme words in the right margin; then he filled in the lines: for example, the opening stanza of the famous "Wild Swans at Coole":

The trees are in their autumn beauty,  
The woodland paths are *dry*.  
Under the October twilight the water  
Mirrors a still *sky*;  
Upon the brimming water among the *stones*  
Are nine and fifty *swans*.

Here a ballad stanza — abcb — of uneven line lengths culminates in a couplet whose harsh rhyme epitomizes the import of the poem: swans — beautiful, graceful, traditional symbols of the soul — are juxtaposed to the harsh reality of the "stones": for Yeats, it is among *stones* — in a bad or at least difficult environment — that swans are to be found. The rhyme is pivotal.

But to return to Wimsatt. There is another crucial essay in *The Verbal Icon* called "The Structure of Romantic Nature Imagery." Here Wimsatt asks himself the question whether Romantic poetry "exhibits any imaginative *structure* which may be considered a special counterpart of the philosophy, the sensibility, and the theory" of Romanticism (*Verbal Icon* 104). Note that such a project can only be undertaken by a critic well-versed in the intellectual history of a particular period — something the New Critics are always accused of ignoring. Wimsatt's way of proceeding, however, is not to perform some kind of background study but to look

closely at the imagery of particular Romantic poems. Consider these lines from the opening stanza of Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey":

These plots of cottage-ground, these orchard-tufts,  
Which at this season, with their unripe fruits,  
Are clad in one green hue, and lose themselves  
'Mid groves and copses. Once again I see  
These hedge-rows, hardly hedge-rows, little lines  
Of sportive wood run wild: these pastoral farms,  
Green to the very door; and wreaths of smoke  
Sent up, in silence, from among the trees!

The images, seemingly just descriptive, are, on closer inspection, chosen to define the absence of outline or distinction in this rural landscape, where the undefined sights and sounds seem to blend into one whole. The stage is thus set for the assertion of the poet's "sense sublime/ Of something far more deeply interfused,/ Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns." *Interfusion*, or blending, is the dominant motif here. Unlike traditional metaphor, in which two disparate objects are yoked together so as to assert their identity (e.g. Shakespeare's "Kingdoms are clay," where the subject, kingdoms, is rendered by the vehicle "clay" so as to form a figure of identity), Romantic poetry does away with the distinction between A and B, preferring "to read meanings into the landscape" (Wimsatt, *Verbal Icon* 110). For these poets, nature is itself understood as hieroglyphic: everything seen and heard and perceived in the external world has a deeper mysterious and spiritual dimension. Such nature imagery is the inevitable expression of the then sacramental view of nature as the indwelling of God. "Nature," as Emerson put it, "always wears the colours of the spirit" (4). From here, we might add, it just a step to the Symbolist poetry of the twentieth century: to the "curveship" of Hart Crane's Brooklyn Bridge or the yellow fog of Eliot's "Prufrock."

I can't begin to convey to you the range and brilliance of the literary criticism we read in graduate school in the 1960s: from Wimsatt and Joseph Frank (the author of "Spatial Form in Modern Literature") to the more cultural criticism of Lionel Trilling's *The Liberal Imagination*, the semiotics of William Empson's *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, and the synoptic theory of Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism*, which provided encyclopedic accounts of the different literary modes, forms, and genres from ancient times to the present.

One thing missing in this critical literature, however, was an understanding of such Modernist experiments as James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* or Ezra Pound's *Cantos*. These, after all, did not exhibit what the New Critic Reuben Brower called a "Key Design" — a design boasting an "Aura around a Bright Clear Centre" (*Fields of Light* 31). On the contrary, Gertrude Stein's "Rooms," the third section of *Tender Buttons*, begins with the sentence, "Act so that there is no use in a centre" (63). At Catholic University, I was introduced to the work of these poets, especially Ezra Pound, then incarcerated (for eleven years!) at St. Elizabeth's Hospital in downtown Washington. My professors paid regular visits to Pound at St E's, as it was called; some of my classmates tagged along out of curiosity and came back with mixed reports on Pound's behavior. I never quite wanted to participate in these visits, disliking, as I did, the poet's politics, his displays of racism and anti-Semitism. But when in Professor Giovanni Giovannini's Modern Poetry class we read "A Retrospect," and the other pieces collected in *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound* (1954: I still have the same copy), I was hooked.

"A Retrospect" (1918) opens with the three principles of Imagism:

1. Direct treatment of the 'thing' whether subjective or objective
2. To use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation
3. As regarding rhythm: to compose in the sequence of the musical phrase not in sequence of a metronome.

It was not that I took up Imagism — a short-lived movement that Pound himself soon abandoned in favor of his adaptation of the Chinese ideogram — but that especially his tenets 2 and 3 seemed so sensible. Circumlocution and what the Romantics dismissed as Poetic Diction seemed then — as it did at the beginning of the nineteenth century and as it does today—to be the bugbear of poetry. Use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation: this principle, which Pound derived from his studies of Chinese poetry, has always been a yardstick for me, as has the notion of the "musical phrase" rather than the *tum-ti-tum* of the metronome. More important were Pound's negative prescriptions:

*Vers libre* [free verse] has become as prolix and as verbose as any of the flaccid varieties that preceded it. A hundred years after free

verse became the norm for poetry, this is truer than ever. And here are its corollaries:

Use no superfluous word, no adjective which does not reveal something.

Don't use such an expression as "dim lands of *peace*." It dulls the image. It mixes an abstraction with the concrete.

Go in fear of abstractions. Do not retell in mediocre verse what has already been done in good prose.

Don't imagine that a thing will 'go' in verse just because it is too dull to go in prose.

A rhyme must have in it some slight element of surprise if it is to give pleasure.

Note that this last prescription was one Wimsatt endorsed, without being aware, I would guess, that Pound had made it.

This set of axioms could easily apply to the poetry of the twenty-first century, as we confront it in such "leading" magazines as the *New Yorker*. The path of least resistance — and Pound knew it — is the confessional free-verse lyric in which the poet defines his feelings vis-à-vis some object or event s/he has encountered. But what makes such self-revelation poetry?

In the next essay, "How to Read," we are given a broader definition of literature that follows upon these axioms: "Great literature is simply language charged with meaning to the utmost possible degree" (Pound, *Literary Essays* 23). "Poetry," as Pound was to add in the *ABC of Reading*, "is news that stays news" (29). Or, as he put it in a related formulation, in response to the question, "What is the difference between poetry and prose?": "Poetry is the more highly energized." (*Literary Essays* 49).

The New Critics like Wimsatt would have had no quarrel with most of these prescriptions, although their emphasis was on figurative language and organic unity rather than on the sound and visual appearance of the poem. But Pound's own poetry—especially the *Cantos*, written over a fifty-year span-- uses techniques

unanticipated in most of his own prescriptions, important as they are. When the New Critics confronted Pound's elaborate montage, they found it hopelessly formless. For what to make of a passage like the following at the opening of Canto 81:

Zeus lies in Ceres' bosom  
Taishan is attended of loves  
    Under Cythera, before sunrise  
and he said: "Hay aquí mucho catolicismo — (sounded  
    catol*ith*ismo)  
    y muy poco reli*Hi*ón"  
and he said: Yo creo que los reyes desaparecen"  
(Kings will, I think, disappear)  
That was Padre Jos éElizondo  
    In 1906 and in 1917  
or about 1917  
    and Dolores said: "Come pan, niño," (eat bread, me lad)  
Sargent had painted her  
    Before he descended  
(i.e. if he descended)  
    but in those days he did thumb sketches,  
impressions of the Velázquez in the Museo del Prado  
and books cost a peseta,  
    brass candlesticks in proportion,  
hot wind came from the marshes  
    and death-chill from the mountains.

Even Pound's friend Yeats complained of such passages that "he [*sc.* Pound] has not got all the wine into the bowl," and that "form must be full, sphere-like, single." (Yeats, "Preface" xxvi; xxv). Yeats himself, after all, wrote in complex rhyming stanzas; his poems moved, however obliquely toward closure. *The Cantos*, by contrast, struck the major critics of the 1950s and 60s as merely random, disorganized, and incomprehensible. The reading into the landscape that was the mode of Romantic and classical Modernist poems here gives way to a dense network of allusions, documentary references, proper names of persons and places, and snatches of remembered conversation, primarily in a foreign language although — and this is one of Pound's jokes — the English translation immediately follows

the foreign — in this case Spanish — phrase. Coleridge's stable "I," confronting childhood memory, is here replaced by spatial and temporal indeterminacy. Only in the last two lines of the passage — "hot wind came from the marshes/ and death-chill from the mountains" — does Pound set the scene where he is located. But then again the opening has already set the scene at night ("Zeus lies in Ceres's bosom") under the stars: "Taishan," evidently the mountain seen from his prison cell at Pisa which Pound names for the sacred mountain in China, is seen under the light of Cythera (Venus). In the happier days of 1906, we learn, the young poet, travelling in Spain, chatted with a priest, Padre Jos é Elizondo, who said (and of course this was about to happen) "Kings will, I think, disappear." To recreate the scene, Pound provides the exact Spanish pronunciation where the soft "c" is pronounced "th" and the "g" of "religion" becomes "H." Again, the poet remembers a girl at an inn named Dolores, whom he compares to a figure in a painting by John Singer Sargent. And the thought of that painting leads in turn to a memory of the copies of Vel ázquez paintings Sargent made in the Museo del Prado.

The structure of this passage — metonymic rather than metaphoric, with its juxtaposition of parenthetical remarks ("i.e., if he descended"), casually remembered detail ("and books cost a peseta"), foreign citations, and the invocation of the dead via proper names — looks ahead, I came to see, to the citational poetics which is my subject in *Unoriginal Genius* (2010). But at the time I first read *The Cantos*, I was especially aware of the fragmentation and dislocation of images, the absence of time signals or first-person pronouns, even as the "free" verse line repeated the dactylic-trochaic unit of line 1 again and again with slight variation, as in "hót wind c áme from the m árshes." No one else I knew wrote the way Pound did: he was, as I discovered when I assigned students to write their own sample Cantos, unique — and uniquely appealing to read and memorize.

The critic who did most to disseminate Pound's poetry was the great Canadian-American scholar Hugh Kenner, the author of *The Pound Era*, which was to become a classic. I recently wrote an essay reevaluating this book for the journal *Modernist Cultures*. Kenner, who wrote brilliant, well-known books on Joyce and Beckett, was a student of Cleanth Brooks at Yale, but his sensibility was entirely different. It was Kenner's conviction that a new age demanded the poet to make it new, that, as Pound put it, "No good poetry is ever written in a manner twenty years old" ("A Retrospect" 11). The technological age of World War I demanded a new poetics of speed — of graphic layout on the page as well as rapid transformation.

Not stanzas as in Yeats or long verse paragraphs as in Eliot, but a verbal collage rather like the visual ones of Kurt Schwitters or the assemblages of Moholy-Nagy.

In *The Pound Era*, Kenner also wrote perceptively about such of Pound's poet-friends as William Carlos Williams and later Louis Zukofsky. Again, the New Critics had paid little attention to Williams, considering his lines too flat, his images too trivial to create much interest. Kenner knew better: here he is on a Williams lyric called simply "Poem":

As the cat  
climbed over  
the top of  
  
the jamcloset  
first the right  
forefoot  
  
carefully  
then the hind  
stepped down  
  
into the pit of  
the empty  
flowerpot.

The poem, writes Kenner, "is one sinuous suspended sentence, feelings its way and never fumbling. Its gestures raise anticipatory tensions, its economy dislodges nothing" (*Pound Era* 398-99). Williams's great feat is syntactic and prosodic: his lineation tracks the actual movement of the cat as it climbs "Over / the top of/ the jamcloset": "first the right," and then, with some surprise, not "then the left," but "then the hind."

But what is a "jamcloset" anyway? The only slightly arcane word in the poem, and surrounded by simple monosyllables, "jamcloset" demands some explanation. Kenner, always insisting on knowing the etymology and history of a given word or word group, writes:



It pertains to a half-vanished America with cellars. . . . Into the cellar every fall went the preserves, after an orgy of home canning, to be carried up jar by jar for winter breakfasts from the cool closet where they were stored. That was the jamcloset. And things, unused in winter, like flowerpots, accumulated on jamclosets. They were in dark unvisited parts of basements, well away from the furnace. So any mention of the clutter atop a jamcloset might easily tip into nostalgia, and it is interesting that in “Poem” this does not happen. In that machine made out of words “jamcloset” is a term, not a focus for sentiment; simply a word, the exact and plausible word, not inviting the imagination to linger: an element in the economy of a sentence (*Pound Era* 404).

And Kenner goes on to argue that the Objectivist poets — Louis Zukofsky, George Oppen, Charles Reznikoff, etc. — similarly used language with such care.

Note here that Kenner’s notion of a poem as “a machine made out of words,” which was Williams’s own definition, is very different from the “organic” concept of the New Critics. For Kenner, the issue is not what a poem *is* but how it *works*. And in this case, although Kenner doesn’t say so, the key to “As the cat...” is probably the word “pit” in line 10. Pots, flower pots or otherwise, have a bottom; that bottom is not usually referred to negatively as a “pit.” But the use of “pit” gives the poem the slightly “dark” edge Kenner talks of. It works, moreover, to produce the intricate alliteration and consonance of t’s and p’s: “into the **pit** of the **empty** flower**pot**” — a brilliant sound structure. And of course the monosyllable “cat” fits into this system.

“Into the pit / of the empty / flowerpot.” In 1965, the year I received my Ph.D, there appeared a small book from the Regents Critics series at the University of Nebraska, called *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*. Because of the political situation of post-1917 Russia and resulting exile of many of its writers and artists, Russian Formalism came into the Anglophone world relatively late — not until the 1960s, well after the New Criticism. The first of the essays in the Nebraska collection, Viktor Shklovsky’s “Art as Technique,” originally published in 1917, became a sort of bible to many of us. Shklovsky, himself a poet and novelist, argued that art is a form of defamiliarization, of “making strange” (*ostranenie*):

Habitualization devours works, clothes, furniture, one's wife, and the fear of war.... Art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone *stony*. The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects "unfamiliar," to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception.... *Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object; the object is not important* (12).

I remember finding these words thrilling. Together with the collection *Readings in Russian Poetics*, edited by Ladislav Matejka and Krystyna Pomorska, published in 1972 (but now available in a Dalkey Archive paperback edition with an excellent introduction by Gerald Bruns), the Russian Formalist critics gave me a handle on poetry more systematic and radical than that of Anglo-American criticism.

This was the case although the examples Shklovsky himself gave in "Art as Technique" were not primarily from poetry but from fiction: the scene in *War and Peace*, for example, where the fourteen-year old Natasha is taken for the first time to the opera and tries to understand what's going on. As Tolstoy puts it, "The man in the tight-fitting pants on his fat legs finished his song alone; then the girl sang. After that both remained silent as the music resounded." Such seemingly simple sentences, Shklovsky showed, "increased the difficulty and length of perception," by casting the familiar (the opera scene onstage) in an entirely different light.

Defamiliarization, as many later critics have noted, is little more than a latter-day version of Romantic theory. The program laid out in Wordsworth's "Preface to the Lyrical Ballads" (1800), after all, had as its goal to make readers see familiar experiences in an unfamiliar light and vice-versa, to present the strange and unknown in a manner that would allow for what Coleridge called "the willing suspension of disbelief" on the reader's part (Coleridge, *Biographia* 52). Shklovsky, however, went further in reminding us that "the object is not important," what matters is the way it is rendered. At a time where journalistic criticism once again judges every artwork according to its topical subject-matter (e.g. this work gives us a devastating look at cancer or Aids or racism) — a situation that guarantees a short life to the work in question, as other issues come to the fore — defamiliarization must be understood as central to art-making. A good recent example would be Christian Marclay's brilliant conceptual work *The Clock*, a twenty-four hour sequence of one-minute (or less) film clips presented in the viewer's real time, each

one containing an image of a clock or wristwatch, a church-bell chiming or spoken reference to the actual time (e.g. 11.43 AM) — a shot that, sixty seconds or less into it, is cut and collaged with an entirely different sequence from a different film, the montage producing an extraordinary defamiliarization of *time* as we perceive it.

The notion of defamiliarization was especially valuable, as regards the important issue of literary change. I have already talked about Wimsatt's analysis of the difference between Romantic imagery and its predecessors. In his essay "On Literary Evolution," Jurij Tynianov begins with the important premise that "one cannot study literary phenomena outside of their interrelationships" (71). If we think of the literary field as a system, we can then understand literary history as a dialectical process. "Evolution is caused by the need for a ceaseless dynamics. Every dynamic system inevitably becomes automatized and an opposite constructive principle dialectically arises" (21). A device obsolete in one period can be restaged and reframed at a different moment and in a different context and once again made "perceptible." The poetry of Velimir Khlebnikov is a case in point. "Transrational language" [*zauum*], writes Tynianov, "always existed in the language of children and mystics, but only in our time did it become a literary fact" (74). The charade, on the other hand, currently dismissed as no more than a children's game, was in late eighteenth-century Russia a genre taken seriously.

Consider the fate of free verse. When first used by Whitman in the mid-nineteenth century, free verse seemed quite radical, the embodiment of a new freedom. And in the 1920s, when Pound and Williams discarded meter and stanzaic structure in favor of "free verse," their prosody was regarded as quintessentially modernist, even avant-garde. A century later, free verse is the staple of Establishment poetry magazines and even greeting cards. Far from being daring, free verse has indeed been automatized; it is now merely the norm, to be deconstructed by shifting to new spatial configurations, as in concrete poetry, to prose, to procedural poetries like those of the Oulipo where particular rules generate a surprising rhythmic and linear patterns, or even — and this is already happening — back to metrical norms, even if these are given a parodic edge, as in Charles Bernstein's recent elegiac lyrics for his daughter Emma.

The dialectic of literary change also animates the theoretical writings of Roman Jakobson, perhaps the best known of the Russian Formalist critics. Jakobson began as a Futurist poet: in his memoir *My Futurist Years*, he tells us how, as a high school student of fifteen or sixteen, he began frequenting poetry readings and performances at nightspots like the Stray Dog Café where he made the acquaintance of

Khlebnikov, Vladimir Mayakovsky, and Anna Akhmatova, among others. One of Jakobson's great essays is called "On a Generation that Squandered Its Poets," written shortly after Mayakovsky's fabled suicide in 1930. The latter, Jakobson argues, relied too heavily on his personal force as effecting revolution: drumbeating for Lenin and later even for Stalin. "Opposed to this creative urge toward a transformed future," writes Jakobson, "is the stabilizing force of an immutable present, overlaid, as this present is, by a stagnating slime, which stifles life in its tight, hard mold. The Russian name for this element is *byt*. (Jakobson, "Generation" 277). *Byt*, "with its swarm of heartbreaking trivia" (Jakobson, "Generation" 294) crushes both love and the hope for revolution, the Utopian vision. In assessing that vision, Jakobson notes shrewdly that Mayakovsky's cult of the future went hand in hand with a strange dislike of children — no doubt because the existence of a child threatens the poet's own claim to be at the forefront of new youth, the cutting edge. In the end, an entire generation, of which Mayakovsky was just the key representative, was defeated. "We strained toward the future too impetuously and avidly to leave any past behind us. The connection of one period with another was broken.... We lost a sense of the present." (Jakobson, "Generation" 299).

Note that Jakobson's analysis here is cultural as well as literary. Mayakovsky's poems are seen as cultural constructs, defining a particular moment — the decade after the 1917 Revolution, undone, in Jakobson's analysis by *byt*, the routine of everyday life. His essay is a profound elegy for a generation of which he himself was a part. A related essay, "Marginal Notes on the Prose of the Poet Pasternak," formulates Jakobson's famous distinction between metaphor (association by similarity) and metonymy (association by contiguity). In Pasternak's *Safe Conduct*, Jakobson notes, "action is replaced by topography": Pasternak's poetic grammar is designed to dissolve the self in its environment, thus emphasizing the self's passivity, its inability to act. "Show us your environment," Jakobson remarks, "and I will tell you who you are" (Jakobson, "Marginal" 313).

### **A Step Away From Them**

In the 1980s, the kind of critical study practiced by the Russian Formalists (and, in a related vein by the French phenomenologists like Jean-Pierre Richard and Jean Starobinski, whose studies of poetry have meant a great deal to me) increasingly gave way to the so-called New Historicism and Cultural Studies. The author, it was

argued, should be understood, not as an individual, but as a function of a larger cultural formation, a symptom of something else. In his wonderful essay “What’s Art Got to Do with It: The Status of the Subject of the Humanities in an age of Cultural Studies,” Charles Bernstein performs a hilarious send-up of what he calls the “cultural orthodontics” (teeth must be straightened!) of the Academy in these years. “Behind every successful artist,” Bernstein quipped, “is a new historian who says it’s all just a symptom. Behind every successful new historian is an artist who says you forget to mention my work — and boy, is it symptomatic!” (48). As for the fabled “death of the author,” proclaimed first by Foucault and Barthes but then, more systematically, by Pierre Bourdieu, Bernstein writes:

While one of the defining axioms of cultural studies is the death of the author, the authors of cultural studies seem to exempt themselves from the full effect of this theory, much the way a queen might be exempted from her own decrees. The theory death of the author seems to apply to other people’s authors” (45).

Such downplaying of the literary function can hardly be blamed on the great cultural critics. In his famous essays on Baudelaire, Walter Benjamin places the poetry in a minutely detailed and analyzed politico-social-cultural complex — that of Second Empire France, the cradle of Modern Capitalism and bourgeois sensibility. Baudelaire’s poems, like “A une passante” (“To a Passer-by”), are read in conjunction with Benjamin’s profound analysis of the new urban experience, the life of the *flan âir* on Paris’s crowded boulevards and in its shopping arcades, where the different social classes — and potential lovers — encounter one another. No detail — a leather glove, a shop sign, a popular song — is too small for Benjamin’s attention. Yet — and this is always Benjamin’s method — he never forgets that the curious “shock experience” defined in *Les Fleurs du Mal* and the *prose poems* is not merely a synecdoche for a general malaise experienced by the crowd in the mid-nineteenth-century city, but that, on the contrary, Baudelaire’s unique vision has itself created the phantasmagoria his reader associates with Paris. Indeed, that Paris is in many senses the creation, first of Baudelaire, and then of the Benjamin who expatiates on it.

What Benjamin understood, as have few later cultural critics, is that the poet is at once representative — but also quite unrepresentative — of his or her culture. Here Gertrude Stein, who, as an American writer, was unknown to Benjamin, is a

key example. Stein, born to a German-Jewish family, brought up in Oakland, California (the enclave, across the bay from San Francisco that, so Stein declared, had “no there there”), studied medicine at Johns Hopkins, gave it in midstream and moved to Paris with her brother Leo, and became an art collector and *salonnière*. An expatriate and lesbian (she lived the bulk of her life with her companion Alice B. Toklas), Stein refused to leave France when World War II broke out, even though the Jews were in great danger; indeed, in the early years of the German Occupation, she wrote and edited speeches for the Maréchal Pétain, the Chief of State of Vichy France.

These bare facts have led to countless attempts to classify Stein, to find the clue to her difficult work, her all but impenetrable (so critics still say) writing. Should she be labeled a Jewish writer? A feminist? Lesbian? An American Immigrant? Expatriate? Cubist (for her association with Picasso)? A connoisseur of neurology and physiology (her subjects at medical school)? A Modernist? A precursor of Postmodernism? The problem is that Stein did not fit into any of these rubrics. A secular Jew who wrote the opera *Four Saints in Three Acts*, a lesbian writer who distrusted most women, preferring the company of male artists, an expatriate who remained proud of her American ethos, a cubist whose poetry was closer to Dada than to Picasso, a Modernist who liked neither Joyce nor Proust and was, in turn, made fun of by Eliot and Pound, Hemingway and Wyndham Lewis.

Periodization and classification are thus tricky problems for the literary scholar, which makes them all the more fascinating. My own development as a critic took a decisive turn in 1975 when I began to write my book on Frank O’Hara. It happened fortuitously. In the 1970s, the critical journals used to run omnibus reviews: if they asked you to do the annual poetry review, they would send you about 150 books and you could sort them out and decide which to include. In 1973, *Contemporary Literature* asked me to do the omnibus piece. Among the hundreds of books arriving at my door — most of them throwaways — there was the Ron Padgett and David Shapiro *Anthology of New York Poets* (Random House, 1970), which included a sizable selection of O’Hara’s poems. In the New York art world, O’Hara (he died in 1966 at the age of 40 in an unfortunate accident), O’Hara was something of a cult figure, but in the Academy — at least not at the University of Maryland where I was then teaching — no one had heard of him: we were busy dissecting Robert Lowell and Sylvia Plath (on both of whom I wrote), or, if we were more adventurous, Charles Olson. I found O’Hara’s seemingly casual, graphic and documentary “I do this I do that” poems a breath of fresh air: the most casual details of a Manhattan

lunch hour or a newspaper headline could be *defamiliarized* and produce poems like “Khrushchev is coming on the wrong day!” My omnibus review, when I wrote it, centered on O’Hara. The next year, the MLA convention was in New York, and on the last day I found a free hour to visit the bookshop at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, which in those days had an unparalleled selection of art books. Here I came across O’Hara’s *Art Chronicles*, his reviews and articles about the Abstract Expressionists and related artists, produced while he was curator at MOMA. I asked Doris Grumbach, a writer-friend, who was then literary editor of *The New Republic*, whether I might review them and she said yes. My review came to the attention of the art book publisher George Braziller and, next thing you know, I had a contract to write a book on O’Hara.

My *Frank O’Hara: Poet among Painters* (1977) was not quite the popular biography Braziller wanted — it was, for their taste, too analytical, focusing on the mode and genre of the poems rather than the poet, but writing it opened up many doors for me. I was living in Philadelphia at the time and could go to New York to interview such O’Hara friends as the painters Grace Hartigan and Norman Bluhm and the poet John Ashbery. Theirs was a brave new world for a rather sheltered academic, and if they didn’t teach me much about O’Hara, they were fascinating in their own right. Through Ashbery, I came to know the work of John Cage, Jasper Johns, and Merce Cunningham. I travelled to Bolinas outside San Francisco so as to consult O’Hara’s editor Don Allen, an astonishingly learned — but quite unacademic — scholar-editor. And Don, in turn, introduced me to Robert Creeley and the poets of the so-called San Francisco Renaissance.

From then on, the avant-garde became my special interest. *The Poetics of Indeterminacy* (1981) was subtitled “From Rimbaud to Cage”: it began by tracing the line of what I called, following an Ashbery poem, “The Other Tradition” — a tradition of open, non-symbolist, non-discursive poetry that, I felt, began with the oddly literal, hallucinatory *Illuminations* of Rimbaud and culminated in the work of Ashbery and Cage as well as the “talk poet” David Antin, with Stein, Pound, Williams, and Samuel Beckett featured in the intermediary chapters.

When I reread *Poetics of Indeterminacy* now, I feel its central thesis as is not quite right. I argued that there were two branches of Modernism: the Eliot “Symbolist” school and the Rimbaud-Pound anti-Symbolist one. In fact, though, Eliot was himself, at least in his early poet, an avant-gardist who certainly had a major influence on Ashbery even as the Romantic poets had influenced O’Hara. Moreover, despite Beckett’s declaration in *Watt*, “No symbols where non intended,”

and the indeterminacy of Ashbery's imagery, a case for symbolism in both writers can certainly be made. The neat division between A and B, in any case, did not hold up. Still — and I would caution you all about this aspect of criticism — no theoretical generalization is foolproof: one advances a hypothesis in order to open up the discussion and to suspend the reader's disbelief in new ways of reading or in the value of unfamiliar new work. In retrospect, what I was really doing in this book was attacking not Eliot, but his latter-day heirs like Richard Wilbur and Anthony Hecht — poets highly considered in the Academy (they are still treated very respectfully) whom, I felt, had transformed Modernism into a kind of scholastic exercise in metaphor-making.

In order to make this case, one had to go back to the early twentieth-century and rethink Modernism itself: I tried to do this in *The Futurist Moment: Avant-Garde, Avant-Guerre, and the Language of Rupture* (1986). Continental Modernism, in its Futurist and Dada incarnations, had a very different trajectory from its then prominent Anglo-American counterpart. Marinetti's *Parole in Libertà*, with their verbal-visual-sonic configurations, the great war poems of Blaise Cendrars and Apollinaire, and especially the poets of the Russian avant-garde — Mayakovsky, Khlebnikov, Kruchenykh, Akhmatova — displayed a side of Modernism that made much of the neo-Modernist poetry, prominent in the American Academy of the post-World-War-II-era seem trivial. Jed Rasula's monumental new "metropolitan anthology" *Burning City* documents, more fully than any earlier such text I have seen, how rich and diverse the early Modernist tradition really was. Gone are the days when a critic as notable as Frank Kermode could criticize the politics of "Modernism," all the while tacitly referring only to British writing.

The inclusion of non-Anglophone materials demanded some familiarity with other languages. German is my native language (I can take no credit for that), and I do have a good reading knowledge of French and some Italian, the latter learned years earlier at the Berlitz School when I was planning a trip to Italy. But in order to write *The Futurist Moment*, I had to know at least a modicum of Russian; I spent a summer at the University of California at Irvine in a Russian immersion program where I was renamed Masha and struggled with the daily quizzes. I can't say I now know Russian — that is my daughter Nancy's domain — but it meant that I could read the Cyrillic alphabet and hence go to the library and check out Russian books, of which I could get some sense with a dictionary and an available translation). And I realized that the Russian Formalists I had already studied in graduate school now



stood me in good stead: the theories of *ostranenie* (making strange), *sdvig* (orientation toward the neighboring word), *faktura* (the materiality of the text), and *slovo kak takovoe* (the word as such), were directly relevant to a reading of Mayakovsky or Akhmatova or to the Russian artist books.

*The Futurist Moment* is more an historical than a theoretical study and from the late eighties on, literary history, rather neglected in my earlier training, became more important to me. Although, like everyone else at the time, I read Derrida and Foucault, Julia Kristeva and Jean-François Lyotard and cited their theoretical statements as a matter of course, I always had reservations about Deconstruction, the great exception being Roland Barthes, himself, like Benjamin, first and foremost a creative writer, and one whom I return to again and again. My reservation about works like Derrida's *Grammatology* was that the literary text was no longer primary: it became an example to illustrate a key point. Thus Rousseau's phrase in his *Confessions*, "le petit supplement," a phrase meaning both addition and replacement, became a buzz word for professors and graduate students who had never read the *Confessions*. Again, when Derrida wrote his essay "Two Words for Joyce" on the phrase "he war" from *Finnegans Wake*, the intricate artistry of Joyce seemed to disappear into the ether and it was Derrida's word play that was prominent.

I am simplifying enormously here, of course, but I have increasingly come to feel that the mystification endemic in Deconstruction was a dead end. When in the nineties, I became interested in Wittgenstein, it was precisely because he himself rejected theory and metalanguage for a philosophy that, in his words, "leaves everything as it is" — that describes rather than translates. Charles Bernstein pinpoints the difference in his essay "The Objects of Meaning." "In Wittgenstein's accounting," as Bernstein puts it, "one is not left sealed off from the world with only 'markings' to 'decipher' but rather *located* in a world with meanings to *respond to*" (181). Wittgenstein's aim, far from showing that *meaning* is always elusive, that the sign is never equal to the referent, tries to account for the way language is actually used *in the world*. And that makes him remarkably helpful for those who want to understand the language of poetry, even though he himself has little say about the *poetic* as such.

Not surprisingly, then, Wittgenstein, as Terry Eagleton pointed out in a 1994 essay, became the philosopher of poets and artists. In my *Wittgenstein's Ladder: Poetic Language and the Strangeness of the Ordinary* (1996), I tried to understand how this process works. And I have been writing on Wittgenstein ever since, each time revising a previous formulation as more and more elements in Wittgenstein's

work become known to me. He himself was always recasting his propositions, correcting, refining — and even changing his formulae as new things occurred to him. Such change, he understood was not a deficit because what matters in philosophy is not the product but the process of thinking. I believe of all twentieth-century philosophers, Wittgenstein is the one who most teaches us how think. At the same time, he is himself a poet. “Philosophy,” as he said, “should really be done only as a form of poetry” (cf. *Culture and Value* 24).

I cite this now famous sentence which has impacted on my own criticism from *Radical Artifice* (1991), the book that has just been translated into Chinese — an event for which I am very grateful — to the present. In the interim, my critical work has become less theory-dependent — at least in the strict sense of that term — and more likely to find its principles in the work of the poet or artists I write about, from Duchamp and Cage to Bernstein or Susan Howe, Caroline Bergvall or Yoko Tawada, as in my *Unoriginal Genius* (2010). Perhaps this is partly a function of age: as one gets older, one is less likely to feel the need to support one’s every assertion with phrases like, “As Foucault says...” or as “Julia Kristeva says....” But it is also the case, I think, that the power of Theory as metalanguage has been, paradoxically, undercut by the current interest in Conceptualism, where “theory” generally is *the art work* and vice-versa.

Yet though the value — or even the possibility — of Conceptualist poetry is now hotly debated, even here, as I have argued in recent essays, there is no escape from the sort of questions Wimsatt and critics like him posed. What sound repetitions occur and what do they accomplish? What is the “dominant” (Jakobson’s term) of this particular poetic formation and how do we differentiate it from an earlier aesthetic like that of Language Poetry? What claims are made by the new poets and why must they be taken with a grain of salt? What is the specific relationship of the “poetry” to its digital culture? And can a citational poetry be better than that which is cited? What, finally, makes the text before us poetry?.

To answer these questions is to begin, as has always been the case, with the practice of “close reading” — close reading of both text and context, which are always intertwined, whether historically or geographically. Close reading, after all, is merely *rereading*, and whatever else poetry is or is not, we can, I think, agree that poetry is that form of writing which cannot be “read” — it can only be reread.

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## **Cloud Nine: Caryl Churchill's Pre-emptive Response to Her Critics**

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**Abstract:** Caryl Churchill is well known for writing plays which engage feminist, Marxist, and gender issues in ways that have drawn the attention of literary critics interested in these same concerns, not all of it favorable. However, Churchill's concurrent interest in critiquing traditional epistemological and ontological commitments by exploring how truth is invested in power is perhaps less well known, except, perhaps, for those who see it as an inevitable component of her political concerns. The primary objective of this essay, however, is to explain that Churchill doesn't simply engage such issues as a byproduct of her investment in political issues, but, rather, quite the opposite, as I finally argue that her primary impulse is epistemological – and that all her other concerns stem from that first concern.

**Keywords:** Caryl Churchill, Postmodernism, Epistemology, ontology, ideology, drama, feminism

A spectre is haunting Western academia, the spectre of the Cartesian subject. All academic powers have entered into a holy alliance to exorcise this spectre: the New Age obscurantist (who wants to supersede the 'Cartesian paradigm' towards a new holistic approach) and the postmodern deconstructionist (for whom the Cartesian subject is a discursive fiction, an effect of decentered textual

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mechanisms). . . (Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology*, 1)

Caryl Churchill is well known for writing plays which engage feminist, Marxist, and gender issues in ways that have drawn the attention of literary critics interested in these same concerns, not all of it favorable. However, Churchill's concurrent interest in critiquing traditional epistemological attitudes by exploring how truth is invested in power is perhaps less well known, except, perhaps, for those who see it as an inevitable component of her other works. One objective of this essay is to note, however, that Churchill doesn't simply engage such issues as a byproduct of her investment in political issues, but, rather, quite the opposite. Indeed, the more we familiarize ourselves with her work the more we find various instances where "truth" is recognized as the means by which social systems perpetuate oppression (*Traps*, 1976), or where knowledge is seen as a tool that promotes status quo inequalities (*Softcops*, 1984), or where investigative reporting is recognized as part and parcel of this same power/knowledge machine (*Serious Money*, 1987) – to name but a few.

And while we may expect that Churchill's progressive credentials would make her relatively immune to criticism from feminists, post colonialists, and Marxist critics, Jane Thomas provides a useful summary of the negative attitude held by many of Churchill's feminist critics:

Critical readings of Caryl Churchill's plays as programmed for social advancement along socialist or socialist feminist lines are often unable to account for certain gaps and contradictions in the texts other than as oversights, aberrations or, in some cases, betrayals of the political paradigm. After juggling terms like 'bleak', 'ambiguous', 'murky', 'worrying', and 'irony', Michelene Wandor concludes that Churchill's plays display 'an equivocal attitude to change'. Helene Keyssar draws attention to Churchill's 'tricky political stance' and discusses 'the absence of any positive strategy to change the dismal enslavement of women'. (160)

This is quite a list of disgruntled academics for a playwright so commonly regarded as one of the leading feminist playwrights on the London stage throughout the 1970s



and 1980s and, as such, it is my contention that this disgruntlement is itself deserving of critical analysis.

According to one reading of the current critical landscape, Churchill's plight is a simple consequence of the fact that we have come of a theoretical age beyond the postmodern, an age where all of the various information technological developments have changed the theoretical climate by creating a kind of hyper-activity of theoretical discourse about discourse itself. Indeed, each and every new day of the week we can go to our favorite search engine, type in those words that we think are key to understanding our era (desire, subjectivity, discourse, terrorism, Tunisia, Obama), and find different hits from the day before, in a new order, a whole new history to be read, understood, critiqued, and, most importantly, added to so that the next day's list of hits will also be new. The end of the Soviet Union followed by intermittent periods of rampant economic growth and market collapse. . . Global warming inconsistently marked by disproportionately large heating bills. . . The pessimism of labour and environmentalism counterbalanced by the utopian rhetoric of the World Trade Organization. . . . Each cries out for evaluation – and each evaluation for additional hyper reevaluation for fear that one has forgotten Foucault's warnings about how knowledge is always and already becoming power.

In the face of such a conundrum about how to stay ahead of the power/knowledge information wave, some critics have grown more and more wary of the idea that they can't confidently critique what they find to be problematic; distressed that their resistance must always be reinscribed within that very system they are trying to resist. Indeed, at the tail end of postmodernism a new voice joins the debate, Slavoj Žižek, whose response to this climate is that we fully – and unapologetically – engage the authentic revolutionary act without fear for how it might eventually be reinscribed by the power/knowledge hierarchy: "Against all these temptations one should insist on the unconditional need to endorse the act fully in all its consequences" (377).

According to this perspective – and despite all of the mounting criticism to the contrary – Churchill has nothing to be ashamed of. And, to be sure, I do think that this captures at least part of Churchill's method for dealing with this issue. However, in addition to being uniquely unafraid of engaging the authentic revolutionary act, Churchill is also unafraid to privilege her epistemological concerns over her political ones, despite the fact that doing so leaves her open to critique from feminist and Marxist critics. Thus, even while Churchill has learned about the way in which power shapes knowledge from Foucault (*Discipline and Punish* served as inspiration

for her *Softcops*), as we will see in the discussion which follows, she refuses to acknowledge that Foucault “counsels quietism,”<sup>①</sup> or, rather, to pursue quietism herself (Indeed, I would argue that in some respects she is in fact far less quiet than her more political peers).

Žižek, continuing in the same mode that I quote in my epigraph, names an assortment of other conspirators that might give one such as Churchill pause: “the Habermasian theorist of communication. . . the Heideggerian proponent of the thought of Being. . . the cognitive scientist. . . and the Deep Ecologist”. And, perhaps most relevant to understanding the academic community currently at work redescribing and resituating Churchill, Žižek also mentions “the critical (post-) Marxist (who insists that the illusory freedom of the bourgeois thinking subject is rooted in class division) and the feminist (who emphasizes that the allegedly sexless *cogito* is in fact a male patriarchal formation).” Žižek is fundamentally important because he helps us to understand the nature of this discussion when he follows up this list of academic conspirators with two probing questions: “Where is the academic orientation which has not been accused by its opponents of not yet properly disowning the Cartesian heritage? And which has not hurled back the branding reproach of Cartesian subjectivity against its more ‘radical’ critics, as well as its ‘reactionary’ adversaries?” (1) Žižek’s point is tantamount to saying that contemporary academics are always accusing each other of defining truth according to their own, private, subjective position; and that such “subjectivist-conscious” critique is the *modus operandi* of the entire academy. Adding still more to how Churchill’s work responds to this current climate, I would add that Churchill is more than aware of that spectre described by Žižek, and, moreover, refuses to either be driven by it or cowed in the face of it.

It is no wonder, then, that subjectivist dilemmas arise at every turn when attempting to pin down where Churchill’s ideological positions place her relative to various academic orthodoxies, especially since many of the theorists and critics that I have referred to while making this assessment are central figures in that same academic scene (i.e., they are some of those very people that Žižek refers to as being haunted by the Cartesian subject). As such, Žižek’s understanding of the current

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<sup>①</sup> As Vincent Leitch says: “[Foucault’s project] leaves little room for resistance or transformation, not to mention revolution. Implicitly, it counsels quietism, as many of Foucault’s critics note.” For a fuller explanation of how Churchill’s attitude towards subjectivist criticism is complicated by her interest in Foucault, see my essay “*Traps, Softcops, Blue Heart, and This is a Chair: Tracking Epistemological Upheaval in Caryl Churchill’s Shorter Plays.*” *Modern Drama*. (Spring, 2004) 21-43.

academic landscape is ideally suited to finally discovering the fundamental distinction between Churchill and her critics, helpful as it is in explaining why Churchill invites so much fervor among feminist critics about the ideological implications of her work. My position, to put it simply, is that Churchill and her work compels even greater amounts of “subjectivist-conscious criticism” (i.e., that form of criticism described by Žižek) because of her investment in those very same theories that dominate the academic scene, including Foucauldian social analysis, socialist criticism, gender studies, etc.; and, moreover, that the more she becomes a part of that scene the more she is studied by critics, both feminist and otherwise, who describe, reinscribe, and otherwise perpetuate this same mode of criticism.

Indeed, to better understand why Churchill’s work inspires such academic discussion, I will look at what is, arguably, Churchill’s most critically acclaimed play, *Cloud Nine* (1979), as well as the play’s critical fallout, to try and understand those features that are symptomatic of a work which simultaneously identifies, bemoans, exorcises, and, in other ways, re-invigorates the sort of subjectivist conscious criticism which Žižek argues is haunting academia.

At the beginning of Act 1 of *Cloud Nine*, which is set in British Colonial Africa, Clive (a colonial administrator) and his “family” are singing “Come Gather Sons of England” – a wildly patriotic song in support of the colonial experience – as the Union Jack flies in the background. Ever the typical patriarch, Clive introduces each of his family members in turn, starting with himself: “I am a father to the natives here,/ And father to my family so dear” (1). Clive presents Betty first, whom the stage directions indicate should be “played by a man”: “My wife is all I dreamt a wife should be, and everything she is she owes to me.” Clive’s introduction of Joshua, his African servant whom the stage directions specify to be “played by a white,” serves as a poignant parallel to Betty’s own constructed nature: “My boy’s a Jewel. Really has the knack./ You’d hardly notice that the fellow’s black.” Joshua shows the full extent of his constructed nature by picking up where Clive leaves off: “My skin is black but oh my soul is white./ I hate my tribe. My master is my light./ I only live for him as you can see,/ What white men want is what I want to be” (2). Clive’s patriarchal control over his son is similar in kind: “My son is young. I’m doing all I can/ To teach him to grow up to be a man.” Edward, however, finally breaks from the imperialist mode, alluding to the difficulty he faces living up to his father’s expectations, clearly manifest in the fact that he is to be “played by a woman”: “What father wants I’d dearly like to be./ I find it rather hard as you can

see.” Clive’s (and, by association, British society’s) dismissive attitude about his daughter Victoria (who is to be played by “a dummy”), Maud, and Ellen also speaks to the way that patriarchy constructs its subordinates: “No need for any speeches by the rest./ My daughter, mother in law, and governess” (2).

As these introductions make clear, the epistemological attitude that Churchill invokes in *Cloud Nine* is, like most of the rest of her work, Foucauldian in nature. Whenever Clive, for instance, offers up a description of a particular subordinate, it only reinforces that subordinate’s subservient position to him. The very fact that none of the characters has a central, inherent, identity, except that which has been dictated by Clive – a fact made most evident in how Betty is to be played by a man, Joshua by a white, and Edward by a woman – is part and parcel of the control that he wields over them, power which makes its most significant mark on Victoria, whose identity has been so rigidly constructed that she has become inanimate.

The inevitable ideological impact of these constructions plays out as Act I progresses. The central occasion of Act 1 is a native uprising, which leads (among other things) to a visit by Mrs. Saunders, who has been driven from her home. Soon after Saunders’ arrival, Clive’s friend, the explorer Harry Bagley, also arrives to stay. With the arrival of these two visitors a number of sexual trysts ensue, between Clive and Mr. Saunders, Betty and Harry, Harry and Edward, Harry and Joshua, and, finally, Ellen and Betty. When Clive eventually becomes cognizant of these “infidelities” he redefines each (except for his own) as deviant, thus reinforcing heterosexual patriarchy as the norm. That such redefinitions are, moreover, necessary to the success of the imperialist hierarchy is evidenced by the way that Clive finds Harry’s homosexual effeminacy to be a danger to the machismo of colonial exploration: “I cannot keep a secret like this. Rivers will be named after you, it’s unthinkable. You must save yourself from depravity. You must get married” (41). But, of course, Clive can’t help but “keep a secret like this,” since allowing it to reveal itself is the true danger to the hierarchy, and reason enough for Clive to urgently encourage Harry to marry so that he reconstructs himself according to a norm that privileges the existing heterosexist hierarchy.

Jane Thomas takes this examination of the subjectivist-conscious implications of *Cloud Nine* further, explaining how it “examines the ways in which human beings, and in particular women, children and homosexuals, have been constituted as subjects and objects of knowledge through the relatively modern discourse of sexuality” (170). According to Thomas, Clive’s reaction to every other character explicitly serves the agenda of patriarchy:

Betty's adulterous fancy for Harry is construed as a product of 'dark female lust' which is normally neutralized by the domestic responsibilities of the wife and mother: a verdict dutifully echoed by Harry in his standard-bearing role. Harry's furtive but compulsive homosexuality is classified as "the most revolting perversion. . . . a disease more dangerous than diphtheria". . . . Edward's effeminacy and budding homosexuality are dismissed as an example of childish disobedience and a temporary aberration brought on by too-close and lengthy contact with women. As each articulates their desires in language their subjectivity or truth is constituted in ways which are culturally specific. Once classified as deviant they become immediate targets for normalisation. (173)

Thus, Thomas clearly points to the progressive subjectivist-conscious elements in Churchill's work, as description, redefinition, and normalisation do not so much serve the establishment of truth but, rather, become the ultimate means of retaining the status quo. Indeed, even the allegedly ideologically free scientific method of classification is recognized as an imperialist formation. Moreover, just as each of these characters is classified and constructed by patriarchy in ways which subjectify them to the dominant hierarchy, so too is Joshua's race reclassified as deviant and in need of normalisation: "You can tame a wild animal only so far. They revert to their true nature and savage your hand. Sometimes I feel the natives are the enemy. I know that is wrong. I know I have a responsibility towards them, to care for them and bring them all to be like Joshua" (33). The British take the upper hand through the simple act of classification – the only thing left for the native to do is to bend to the colonizer's benevolent and inevitable will.

What I mean to draw attention to is how Churchill herself is explicitly involved in exorcising the Cartesian subject; i.e., how *Cloud Nine*, among its various attacks on Cartesian subjectivity, "emphasizes that the allegedly sexless [not to mention, raceless] *cogito* is in fact a male patriarchal formation." This fact becomes clearest in Churchill's characterizations of Betty, Edward, and Joshua as objects constructed according to the needs of patriarchy. It should also be increasingly evident that *Cloud Nine* doesn't merely confront the spectre of the Cartesian subject, but, even more importantly, causes others to confront it as well, as Thomas, for one, does in her elucidation of Churchill's attack on patriarchy, showing that the subjectivist-conscious mode of criticism exists not only within Churchill's project, but also looms every which way around it.

Accordingly, while there are a number of critics who, like Thomas, point to the many ways that the work attempts to disrupt commitments to the Cartesian subject, there are others who, ironically, suggest that Churchill doesn't do enough to disown her Cartesian heritage. There is, in fact, so much such criticism that it is hard to ignore the possibility that the one type of criticism comes hand in hand with the other. Some of this criticism, in fact, accuses Churchill of not doing enough to reject traditional values in those very areas where she explicitly attempts to do so. Apollo Amoko, for example, rather than allow that Churchill has done anything to overturn the subjectivist attitudes which are implicit in imperialist hierarchies, expresses ambivalence about Churchill's attempt to "parallel sexual and gender oppression with colonial and racial oppression." According to Amoko, the "ease with which a playwright and company drawn exclusively from and implicated by racial and colonial privilege make direct comparisons and equivalencies between gender/sexual and colonialist oppressions" (45) is disturbing. Amoko expresses further concern at how the secondary criticism focuses on the play's "feminist accomplishments" while ignoring the fact that "the unique deprivation suffered by women and children was not featured in the play at all" (49). Amoko's point is that the play fails to articulate the way that women and children of color were not only subjugated by patriarchy, but also by the matriarchal complement to patriarchy, which was also "complicit, however contradictorily, in the colonial project" (46). The complaint is familiar; the all too easy exclusion of women and children of color recycles those same Victorian norms which were used to subjugate them in the first place, as the women and children simply "fail to materialize" (40).

Amoko's accusation that Churchill has not yet properly disowned her Cartesian heritage is most clear in her discussion of cross-casting. While recognizing that Churchill's technique is indeed meant to "challenge the conflation of skin color and racial identity by dominant ideology and seeks, by portraying a white skinned actor performing a black racial identity, to destabilize and problematize this conflation" (52), she finds the technique self-defeating:

This apparent cross-casting is, however, seemingly invalidated by the very process that facilitates it. In order to disaffirm, in performance, the notion of racial identities immutably defined by skin color, it must first be stabilized and reified during casting as well as in the perception of the audience. It seems, therefore, to be a strategy that cannot resist containment in the process of its materialization.

Further, the playwright seems to be trapped within dominant racial configurations. She unproblematically describes Joshua as a “black [man]” and the actor playing him as a “white [man]” in her cast list and in her introduction to the play, thereby re-conflating skin colour and racial identity and reiterating the existence of discrete and stable polar racial categories. (52)

Churchill is accused of not doing enough to reject those ideological constructions that have served the status quo so well, only in this instance it is the complaint of the postcolonialist emphasizing the concern that racial categories are white imperialist formations. In essence, Amoko accuses Churchill of not yet properly disowning her own Cartesian heritage, which all too easily allows women and children of color to be constructed right out of existence by a female matriarchal formation.

Amoko’s scrutiny of Churchill is curious, raising a number of questions regarding what it is in Churchill’s work that precipitates such an attack. Would Amoko have been as likely to consider *Cloud Nine*’s oversights if it hadn’t so successfully accomplished a disruption of misogynist norms? If it hadn’t, moreover, attempted a marginal disruption of imperialist norms in its attempt to explain how empire colonized its native subjects like Joshua by reconstructing them in its own image? Does, perhaps, Churchill’s political agenda attract the closest scrutiny from those most similarly inclined? Is the spectre described by Žižek most prone to perpetuate itself simply because of this close scrutiny? These questions become more telling if we consider the possibility that Amoko’s criticism of Churchill points to a simple oversight on Churchill’s part. It is worth wondering, for instance, what the subjectivity-conscious critical fallout might have been had Churchill more carefully disrupted matriarchal hierarchies as well as patriarchal ones.

While it remains possible that contemporary critics only react in this fashion when works contain such obvious reaffirmations of dominant subject positions, the critical reaction to Act 2 of *Cloud Nine* provides additional compelling evidence that the more careful an author is at avoiding invoking new and alienating subject positions, the likelier it is that their work will illicit accusations of the same. For Act 2 is explicitly honed in such a way as to mark the work as a cultural artifact of the current academic scene as it is described by Žižek, not only because it questions the Cartesian subjectivity implicit in misogyny and heterosexism, but also because it “hurl[s] back the branding reproach of Cartesian subjectivity” against those who seek to find a utopian ideal springing from feminist, socialist, and gay/lesbian

activism. Indeed, it soon becomes obvious that Churchill's very attempt to avoid privileging new subjectivist positions – which might, then, stand in and replace the old ones – ultimately perpetuates those symptoms Žižek recognizes as dominating contemporary academic discourse; i.e., her own adoption of a Foucauldian perspective – from which she might, simultaneously, critique traditional power structures even while pointing out the power/knowledge hierarchy implicit in each and every new social system – ultimately does very little to staunch the secondary criticism which, as always, is waiting in the wings to hurl back against Churchill the branding reproach of subjectivity against anything it finds suspect. For as we will see, it is in Churchill's very reservations about how new power structures might replace older ones that her socialist feminist peers determine that she is a subject worth targetting.

In Act 2 Victoria is now grown and married to Martin. They have one son, Tommy, with whom they frequent a park where Edward is employed as a gardener and Tommy plays with Cathy. At the park Victoria meets Lin, Cathy's single mother and a lesbian, who admits to having an attraction to her. Meanwhile, Victoria's relationship with Martin has reached an impasse, since she has received a job offer in Manchester. Much of the first half of Act 2 consists of Cathy's and Lin's conversations as they watch their children, occasionally interrupted by Martin, Edward, Gerry (Edward's lover) and Betty, who finally decides to leave Clive and make a go of it on her own. Soon enough Martin and Victoria undergo a trial separation, Victoria and Lin enter a trial relationship, and, after breaking up with his lover, Gerry, Edward joins their relationship as both the home-maker Gerry never allowed him to be, and as a full participant in their sex life--making it into an incestuous threesome.

Much about Act 2 serves to further disrupt the cultural norms that were identified and critiqued in the first act. Notably, while Act 2 recognizes that many of the misogynist and heterosexist attitudes of Act 1 have been rejected in the contemporary era, it also considers how residual elements continue to linger just below the surface. For while Edward does pursue homosexual relationships, he refuses to be openly gay for fear that he will lose his job. While Lin is allowed to leave the husband who beat her, the options for a single mother are, like Edward's, shown to be decidedly limited. And, most tellingly, Betty's situation presents a typical example of the tenuous nature of this rejection of Victorian norms. At the beginning of Act 2 Betty is still very much the product of traditional imperialist/misogynist thinking, where "real little boy[']s" are "brave not to cry,"



and Edward's interest in gardening derives from his dutiful tenure in colonial Africa: "I think the fresh air agrees with Edward. He likes the open air life because of growing up in Africa" (53).

At this point Betty is clearly nostalgic for her colonial past, questioning the way in which Victoria and Lin raise their children without any help (during one of Cathy's tantrum's Betty points out that "This is the point you see where one had help" [56]) and explaining to Lin that she "had never been so short of men's company that [she] had to bother with women" (64). Finally, just as had been explained to her so many times before by the male company she kept, Betty still believes that women "don't have such interesting conversations as men. There has never been a woman composer of genius. They don't have a sense of humour. They spoil things for themselves with their emotions. I can't say I do like women very much, no" (64). Victorian ideals lurk just beneath the surface, leaving the unmistakable impression that at any moment the pendulum could swing back in the other direction.

The fragility of the current era's rejection of Victorian era hierarchies is most evident in one of the play's structural devices. While Act 2 is set one hundred years later than Act 1, the characters have only aged 25 years. Caryl Churchill explains this anomaly as follows:

I felt that the first act would be stronger set in Victorian times, at the height of colonialism, rather than in Africa during the 1950's. And when the company talked about their childhoods and the attitudes to sex and marriage that they had been given when they were young, everyone felt that they had received very conventional, almost Victorian expectations and that they had made great changes and discoveries in their lifetimes. (89)

Having the characters only age twenty-five years while true time lapses one hundred and twenty-five years means that a single character can be seen socialized according to Victorian norms, only to shed those norms in adulthood; thus, patriarchal and heterosexism repression is seen as persisting in society (perhaps as a norm in child-rearing), even while society at large is more accepting of diversity.

This time lapse, however, doesn't simply emphasize the way in which Victorian norms lurk beneath the surface; it also points to how Churchill herself engages in subjectivist-conscious criticism. For its juxtaposition of new traditions with the old doesn't just point to how they are different, but also, how they are the same,

suggesting that new power structures continue to construct their subordinates however they see fit, and making it increasingly apparent that Churchill doesn't simply direct her subjectivist-conscious criticism at traditional hierarchies. A second structural anomaly (role-doubling) serves to bring this point home, since it is done in such a way as to shed new light on the cross-casting of Act 1. Churchill explains that while the doubling might proceed in any one of a variety of different ways, there should yet be a consistent method to it:

The doubling can be done in any way that seems right for any particular production. The first production went Clive-Cathy, Betty-Edward, Edward-Betty, Maud-Victoria, Mrs. Saunders/Ellen-Lin, Joshua-Gerry, Harry-Martin. When we did the play again, at the Royal Court in 1980, we decided to try a different doubling: Clive-Edward, Betty-Gerry, Edward-Victoria, Maud-Lin, Mrs. Saunders/Ellen-Betty, Joshua-Cathy, Harry-Martin. I've a slight preference for the first way because I like seeing Clive become Cathy, and enjoy the Edward Betty connections. Some doublings aren't practicable, but any way of doing the doubling seems to set up some interesting resonances between the two acts. (*Plays One* 247)

Doubling of one sort or another is, in fact, crucial to accomplishing the play's subjectivist disruptions. One immediate implication of the recasting is that it simultaneously emphasizes the constructed nature of the characters in Act 1, while also emphasizing the strength of those new power dynamics that have proven so capable of reconstructing their subordinates in such a fashion that they acquire new masks in place of the old.

Consider, for instance, the production described by Churchill where the actor who plays Clive in the first act plays Cathy in the second. This doubling, coupled with the fact that Clive fails to even appear on stage in the second act, points clearly to the development of a new power structure, which, simply, continues to construct identities, albeit according to new directives. Ironically, Clive has been so thoroughly reconstructed that his ontological status within the new power dynamic appears inferior even to that of Victoria in the first act, who was played by a dummy. Similarly, Clive's Grandson (and Victoria's son), Tommy, also fails to appear on stage, even while his existence to those who do appear proves far more influential than even Clive's. Cathy, moreover, is the most assertive character in Act 2.

As the play progresses, however, we see that this is not a one-to-one exchange of power; for even as Clive's indomitable will is replaced by Cathy's, many other

wills proliferate simultaneously, culminating in a power cooperative that's part socialist/feminist utopia and part anarchistic chaos. Thus it becomes increasingly apparent that Churchill isn't content to simply critique the way that the imperialist hierarchy made use of its position to define and construct truth (which we see in Act 1), nor to express concern that those old traditions yet threaten to return, nor even to replace that old hierarchy with a new one (as would be the case if Cathy, Victoria, and Lin simply dominated the postcolonial landscape), but must eventually turn this same subjectivist-conscious eye on those contemporary power structures that are wont to replace the old ones, rejecting each new tradition in kind. This is the early of that same academic landscape Zizek characterizes as haunted by the Cartesian subject. Churchill sees that there is no escaping it. This, of course, makes the criticism that Churchill is beholden to some new and devious subject position all the more ironic when it comes.

Much of Churchill's rejection of newly totalitarian subject positions occurs by focusing on the pastiche of relationships common to the contemporary era, and Act 2 is best understood by examining these relationships individually while also remembering that the pastiche, in and of itself, serves as a fitting rebuttal to the frustrated heterosexuality of Act 1. For even while Lin and Cathy, for instance, have, perhaps, the quintessential contemporary relationship (that of single mother and child) it is telling that rather than avoiding constructing Cathy to fit a particular norm – as we might expect from someone who is disgruntled about the way she herself was constructed – Lin explicitly tries to construct Cathy differently from how she was: "I give Cathy guns, my mum didn't give me guns. I dress her in jeans, she wants to wear dresses" (66). As a result, Cathy is half tom-girl – so tough that she joins with the neighborhood boys in a game of war even though they require that she "fall over in the mud" to play dead when they shoot her – and half a more traditional form of femininity, at least part of which she picks up both from Betty, who dresses her up in her jewelry, and part from girls at school who "called her a boy" (61). In turn, Cathy, reprising an attitude that the actor now playing her exhibited in the first act, pressures Lin to reconstruct herself according to more traditional feminine forms and also to participate in more traditional consumerist practices: "They're [i.e., Cathy's classmates] coming to tea and we've got to have trifle. Not trifle you make, trifle out of a packet. And you've got to wear a skirt. And tights" (62). Although Lin immediately dismisses the possibility that she herself might wear anything other than jeans, in a later conversation with Victoria about why she shouldn't use the image of a bogeyman to frighten her daughter into conformity, we see that Lin is at

least partly tempted by the image, as well as by forms of employment which support sexist consumerism:

VICTORIA. What man? Do you need a man to frighten your daughter with?

LIN. My mother said it.

VICTORIA. You're so inconsistent, Lin.

LIN. I've changed who I sleep with, I can't change everything.

VICTORIA. Like when I had to stop you getting a job in a boutique and collaborating with sexist consumerism.

LIN. I should have got that job, Cathy would have liked it. Why shouldn't I have some decent clothes? I'm sick of dressing like a boy, why can't I look sexy, wouldn't you love me? (66)

The conversation points to the conflicting impulses that a single, lesbian, politically conscious mother such as Lin faces. The impulse to reconstruct one's self according to a particular norm come from all sides, even from those such as Victoria who are concerned about what "collaborating with sexist consumerism" means to the attainment and retention of sovereign identity. There is a satirical undercurrent here, suggesting that feminist ideology does as much to construct and reconstruct its subjects as did that system which it means to replace, and Lin has to tread carefully to make sure she "properly disowns" her misogynist heritage.

Indeed, at every turn in the second act, a character seen as facing a similar crisis of conscience concerning how to navigate conflicting power hierarchies. Indeed, perhaps the most compelling confrontation between competing hierarchies sees Martin trying to coerce Victoria into being more concerned with "women's lib" than she already is (or, to put it another way, undertakes to foster in Victoria a commitment to those elements of "women's lib" which appeal to him). Consider, for instance, Martin's monologue where he attempts to explain to Victoria that his inability to perform sexually has nothing to do with typical male insecurities about women's lib:

I'm not like whatever percentage of American men have become impotent as a direct result of women's liberation, which I am totally in favour of, more I sometimes think than you are yourself. Nor am I one of your villains who sticks it in, bangs away, and falls asleep. My one aim is to give you pleasure. My one aim is to give you rolling orgasms like I do other women. So why the hell don't you have

them? My analysis for what it's worth is that despite all my efforts you still feel dominated by me. (63)

The irony of this last sentence clearly speaks to the way that Martin simply tries to use new ideas in old ways, so that he is nearly as guilty of dominating Victoria as her own father had been. Jane Thomas describes the residual misogynist impulse of Martin's actions as follows:

He sees his role as helping Victoria to free herself from gender repression through sexual pleasure. His analysis is that the road to independence lies in sexual experimentation and the achievement of multiple orgasms. At the same time he is unwilling and unable to refrain from the use of domination and coercion in the imposition of his own 'truth' on Victoria. Sexual essentialism becomes male liberationism and therefore supports rather than challenges the existing gender hierarchy, allowing men even greater access to women's bodies. (175)

We can see the full extent to which Martin desires to define and construct the female character in his attempt to write a "novel about women from the women's point of view" (65), an apt metaphor for the way that he tries to script his relationship with Victoria. Victoria, by contrast, would like nothing more than simple role reversal: "Why the hell can't he just be a wife and come with me" (65). As in the colonial era, power is still seen as asserting itself through defining and redefining the role of the other. This scene is, then, part rejection of those same Victorian traditions that Churchill sought to disrupt in Act 1, and part disruption of the new hierarchy that has re-employed those same power/knowledge techniques to empower itself.

The most telling way, however, in which *Cloud Nine* is ironically self-critical about how successful even the latest ideologies are in asserting their authority through reconstructing the character of their subjects can be seen in Betty's eventual transformation. Soon after Betty moves out on her own and begins to spend more time with Victoria and Edward, her Victorian ideals begin to erode. When she finds employment she is almost surprised by her ability to look after her own finances: "And the money, I feel like a child with money. Clive always paid everything but I do understand it perfectly well. Look, Cathy, let me show you my money" (79). Living on her own Betty also rediscovers sex, which initiates entirely new feelings of self-sovereignty as well as self-worth:

I used to think that Clive was the one who liked sex. But then I found I missed it. I used to touch myself when I was very little, I thought I had invented something wonderful. I used to do it to go to sleep with or to cheer myself up, and one day it was raining and I was under the kitchen table, and my mother saw me with my hand under my dress rubbing away, and she dragged me out so quickly I hit my head and it bled and I was sick, and nothing was said, and I never did it again till this year. I thought if Clive wasn't looking at me there wasn't a person there. And one night in bed in my flat I was so frightened I started touching myself. I thought my hand might go through space. I touched my face, it was there, my arm, my breast, and my hand went down where I thought it shouldn't, and I thought well there is somebody there. . . and I felt myself gathering together more and more and I felt angry with Clive and angry with my mother and I went on defying them. . . and no one could stop me and I was there and coming and coming. (82-83)

Thus, it is this single act of masturbation to climax that most serves Betty in reconstructing herself, in finding that her substance continues to exist even when Clive isn't there to notice it. After this act she is ready for anything; ready to begin a relationship with her daughter (84), ready to make a pass at Gerry, and even ready to accept that her son isn't about to discover what type of woman he wants, because his interest isn't, exactly, women:

Betty. I think Edward did try to tell me once but I didn't listen. So what I'm being told now is that Edward is 'gay' is that right? And you are too. And I've been making rather a fool of myself. But Edward does sleep with other women.

Gerry. He does, yes, I don't.

Betty. Well people always say it's the mother's fault but I don't intend to start blaming myself. He seems perfectly happy. (87)

The most important indicator of how far she has come resides in the simple fact that she doesn't even blame herself. She is finally prepared to ignore Clive, who has one last cameo: "You are not that sort of woman, Betty. I can't believe you are. I can't feel the same about you as I did. And Africa is to be communist I suppose" (87). Clive exits as quickly as he entered, making room for the Betty from Act 1 to come onstage and embrace the Betty from Act 2 and to be forgiven. Thus, Betty's transformation simultaneously speaks to Churchill's dual subjectivist concerns, intended to criticize both the way that dominant power structures of the imperial era

constructed their subjects, while also showing the way that the contemporary political landscape continues to construct (or, rather, reconstruct) those same subjects. For only after the reconstruction is complete does Betty become someone whom her politically conscious son and daughter feel comfortable having a relationship with.

In a passage which speaks to how thoroughly Churchill's work encourages critics to question her commitment to disavowing subjectivity, Jane Thomas shows us the full extent to which Churchill has been regarded suspiciously even by her most like-minded feminist critics:

Critical readings of Caryl Churchill's plays as programmed for social advancement along socialist or socialist feminist lines are often unable to account for certain gaps and contradictions in the texts other than as oversights, aberrations or, in some cases, betrayals of the political paradigm. After juggling terms like 'bleak', 'ambiguous', 'murky', 'worrying', and 'irony', Michelene Wandor concludes that Churchill's plays display 'an equivocal attitude to change'. Helene Keyssar draws attention to Churchill's 'tricky political stance' and discusses 'the absence of any positive strategy to change the dismal enslavement of women'. (160)

Thus, in seeming accordance with Žižek's description of the contemporary academic setting, feminist criticism has indeed examined Churchill's work and felt compelled to "hurl back against it the branding reproach of Cartesian subjectivity," despite the fact that the play itself is so adept at prefiguring this same means of critique. To look at a specific case, Michelene Wandor expresses concern that the work doesn't invoke a strong enough socialist-feminist dynamic, which she defines as follows:

Theoretically and strategically, socialist feminism is more far-reaching than either bourgeois or radical feminism; where radical feminism proposes a real surge of energy and solidarity between women, it does so by devaluing and ignoring men; bourgeois feminism values social power for women, but has no concern for class issues, and is still absolutely defined by men as the norm. Socialist feminism, on the other hand, proposes changes both in the position of women as women, and in the power relations of the very basis of society itself – its industrial production, and its political relations. (136)

Wandor brings this understanding of the various forms of feminism to bear in her interpretation of *Cloud Nine*'s second act, explaining that while "The ways in which the individuals deal with their lives are sharp and moving. . . there is no solid political dimension to the experiences, no cause and effect as there is in the first half. . ." (171) Wandor feels that this failure to invoke cause and effect explanations of social injustice leaves the close of the play too open-ended, potentially reinforcing "the radical feminist and bourgeois feminist dynamic which shows women in control of their lives" (172). To a member of the current academic scene such as Wandor, reinforcing bourgeois or radical feminism too easily reinforces the subjective social systems that both support and are supported by those norms.

I would argue that this criticism further emphasizes how Churchill criticism encapsulates the academic scene, at least as it is described by Žižek. For what Wandor is responding to is, quite simply, Churchill's own unwillingness to appropriate a new subjectivist position from which she could safely stand and critique each and every other subject position. Indeed, if Churchill is a feminist, she is a uniquely Foucauldian feminist, always working to avoid the adoption of a new subject position that might itself be charged with inconsistency by those invoking the specter of the Cartesian subject. This is the motivating factor for why she so consistently points to the reconstructive propensities of current era ideologies. Of all the critics who have noted and commented upon this tension in Churchill, only Marc Silverstein adequately explains the lengths to which Churchill will go in order to avoid being pigeon-holed according to one subject position or another: "What *Vinegar Tom* and *Cloud Nine* suggest (indeed, what Churchill's work as a whole suggests), is that opposition to and transformation of social organization and the network of ideological apparatus supporting that organization cannot separate itself from the establishment of an alternative representational framework in which to produce new subject positions" (14). Silverstein, however, in addition to ignoring the way in which Churchill identifies a increasingly problematic critical trend (which would only later be fully explicated by Žižek), also fails to notice how Churchill gets the last laugh (if she really wants it), as her throughgoing commitment to recognizing how the rejection of one subject positions inevitably leads to the next is so thoroughly misread and misrepresented by Wandor that,



finally, in accusing Churchill of failing to break fully with the traditional Cartesian hierarchy Wandor herself becomes the very target of Churchill's satirical impulse.<sup>①</sup>

*Edited by Zhang Yuejun*

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<sup>①</sup> That Churchill is well capable of preparing for such a response can be seen in *Serious Money*, which so successfully satirizes those same financiers who turned out to the play in droves. See my essay: *Serious Money* Becomes "Business by Other Means": Caryl Churchill's Unique Metatheatrical Subject," *Comparative Drama*. (Winter, 2004) 291-313.



## The Speaking Silence of Ghosts and Dreamers: Dead Women in Christina Rossetti's Death Lyrics\*

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**Abstract:** The speaker in most of Christina Rossetti's death lyrics is a dead woman who, under the guise of ghost or dreamer, vacillates between keeping silence and speaking. Through this process, the speaker arrives at her final state of "muteness," a muteness in which the speaker nevertheless still talks and prays calmly and optimistically in her heart, a Silence saturated with hope, faith, and belief. This pattern in Rossetti's work may be described by the paradigm "silence-voice-Silence".

**Keywords:** Christina Rossetti, death lyrics, dead women, the paradigm of silence-voice-Silence

They knelt in silent anguish by her bed,  
And could not weep; but calmly there she lay;  
All pain had left her; and the sun's last ray  
Shone through upon her, warming into red  
The shady curtains. In her heart she said:  
"Heaven opens; I leave these and go away;  
The Bridegroom calls, —shall the Bride seek to stay?" (116)

Among all Victorian female poets, or even among Victorian poets as a whole, Christina Rossetti may be one of the most obsessed by death. Death not only enters constantly into her poems in various forms and disguises, but also haunts her living memories and dreams. As Angela Leighton has written, "Rossetti rehearsed her death for more than forty years before the event." (Leighton 376) Both Rossetti's poetry and her life confirm this. Her literary fame is largely built upon sad and

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melancholy lyrics, and she dedicated almost all her life to the perfection of this genre, yet Rossetti's lyrics are by no means one-dimensional. Her death lyrics, in particular, are anything but the gentle moaning and groaning of a female poet. They feature harsh voices and demurrals, the profound thoughts and reflections of a marginalized poet who is keen to express herself. In these death lyrics, the speaker, usually dead or dying and under the guise of either a ghost who visits the living or a dreamer who speaks aloud, acts as spectator of life, monitoring and admonishing the living. However, the living remain immune to the voice of the ghost or dreamer, as they do to the poet's own cold and bitter indictments. These speakers are speaking yet no one hears. As a result, they become "silent", yet only to outward appearances. In essence, they are still talking, praying calmly and optimistically in their hearts, a heightened condition characterized by hope, faith, and belief which might be dubbed "Silence."

### 1. Death in Christina Rossetti's Lyrics

During her lifetime, Rossetti published five collections of poetry, including some 127 lyrics. And among these 127 lyrics, more than half are directly about or connected with death. Death is to Rossetti as Nature is to Wordsworth.

Some literary critics have sought to provide a theological interpretation of Rossetti's death lyrics. For example, Jerome McGann has related the prevailing influence of the pre-millenarian doctrine of "Soul Sleep" to her poems, and argued that soul sleep is the most important feature of Rossetti's poetry.<sup>①</sup> Linda E. Marshall counters McGann, contending that Rossetti's poems cannot be confined to the minor and limited interpretative rubric of "Soul Sleep". Marshall instead claims that the traditional and typically Anglican notion of the intermediate state of the soul finds its full expressions in Rossetti's poems, especially the concept of Hades. For some Church of England divines, Hades can be viewed as a "grave" where the soul

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<sup>①</sup> Jerome McGann claims in his article, "The Religious Poetry of Christina Rossetti," that Rossetti is deeply influenced by and adheres to the prevailing doctrine of "Soul Sleep". The doctrine holds that when a person dies, his soul will not directly go into heaven or hell. Instead, his death initiates a period of time during which the soul is placed in the state of "sleeping" or suspension. Only at the Millennium, or the Judgment Day, does the soul awake to face its final reward. McGann lists a number of Rossetti's poems, from lyrics to devotional verses, to show that the image of "sleep" is everywhere; he induces from this that "soul sleep" is the single most important feature of Rossetti's poetry, making Rossetti a true expounder of the doctrine. (Jerome J. McGann, "The Religious Poetry of Christina Rossetti", *Critical Inquiry* 10, 9 (1983) 127-144.)

sleeps in profound unconsciousness.<sup>①</sup> This provides a fitting description of Rossetti's death poems.

Not only do critics interpret Rossetti's poems from the theological perspective, but they also do offer other non-religious readings of such poems. Angela Leighton argues in her article "'When I Am Dead, My Dearest': The Secret of Christina Rossetti" that instead of being in a state of unconsciousness, the female speaker is rather conscious. Leighton further contends that the sleeping and dreaming state of the speaker "is not a theological resting place but a restless and skeptical in-between-land where doubt shadows faith" (Leighton 375). Margret Reynolds has also argued in this line, showing that the dying women's seemingly dreamy state can be rather conscious and disturbing, which can lead to "obscurity"—an obscurity which in turn lends Christina Rossetti's poetry complexity. In addition to Leighton and Reynolds, Susan Conley also states that the dying women in these lyrics not only "undermine the optimistic religious faith of the living", but also utter rather "ironic commentaries on Victorian sexual and textual politics" (Conley 267).

All these critics' interpretations of Rossetti's lyrics, whether religious or not, share a common thread worth mentioning here: first, the critics all agree that though the lyrics wear a rather simple surface, there are actually some "secrets" between the lines woven intentionally by the poet for the reader to unveil, suggesting a sophistication rather than a simplisticness in the work. Second, most of Rossetti's speakers in these lyrics are dead or dying women who stay in an intermediate place grounded between the living and the dead. It is this middle state that provides for Rossetti's beguiling appeal.

Yet, if one takes a close look at Rossetti's death lyrics, one finds that, in addition to placing her speaker in an in-between-land and deliberately baffling the reader with some contradictory narratives, Rossetti makes her dead women creep under the disguise of ghosts and dreamers into the living's life, watching as a spectator or speaking from behind. Though the ghosts and dreamers sometimes forget this distance—and there is no denying that paradox appears from time to time—they are still uttering something to the living. Unfortunately, the living can neither see them nor hear their words, and are immune to their emotions. So, their speaking silence can only lead them into ultimate Silence, be it taciturn, hopeful or prayerful.

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<sup>①</sup> On the concept of Hades in the Church of England see Linda E. Marshall, "What the Dead Are Doing Underground: Hades and Heaven in the Writings of Christina Rossetti", *The Victorian Newsletter*, 72 (1987):55

## **2. Ghosts Presented as Spectators**

For the Victorian reader, the ghost encounter is no novelty. Whether in Gothic fiction, detective series, medieval romance, or poetry, ghosts always prefigure something ominous and dreadful. However, in Christina Rossetti's death lyrics, ghosts appear to different effect, are less unnerving and intimidating. The poem "At Home", composed in 1858 when Rossetti was 28 years old, is a good example.

The poem begins by informing the reader directly that the speaker is dead and it is her spirit that is talking: "When I was dead, my spirit turned/To seek the much-frequented house" (Rossetti 22). The ghost passes the door and sees her friends feasting and singing at a party. They are drinking fine wines "under the green orange boughs" and "sucked the pulp of plum and peach". The ghost does not reveal a desire either to join them or not but stands there watching and listening. And then, in the next two stanzas, the ghost hears the friends talking and imagining a beautiful tomorrow which, of course, she herself is excluded from. Now, the ghost is moved to say: "Their life stood full at blessed noon; /I, only I, had passed away: / "To-morrow and to-day," they cried; /I was of yesterday" (22). It seems that the ghost now wants to interact with the living, or at least, have a word with them after keeping silence for so long a time. As the poem closes:

I shivered comfortless, but cast  
No chill across the tablecloth;  
I all-forgotten shivered, sad  
To stay and yet to part how loth:  
I passed from the familiar room,  
I who from love had passed away,  
Like the remembrance of a guest  
That tarrieth but a day. (22)

The first two lines state rather clearly that the ghost wishes that an action on her part—her "shiver" in this context—could stir something in the living. However, quite unfortunately, there is "no chill across the table-cloth". In other words, the dead speaker fails to take control by chilling the living, for they cannot see, hear or feel the existence of the ghost. Sadly, the ghost shivers still, though "all-forgotten." Next, she reveals her conflicting ideas that have troubled her so much: "...sad/ To stay, and yet to part how loth". To stay or not to stay becomes her dilemma. One the

one hand, the ghost considers it very sad to stay, for she cannot make herself interact with the living, be heard, or exercise some agency; on the other hand, she thinks that parting is also loathsome, for she does not want to leave the familiar house and everything which belonged to her. It is interesting to note here that the syntax and rhyme of these lines contribute a lot in achieving this paradox. The speaker, in the first place, breaks the phrase “sad to stay” in half in order to make the lines rhyme. Then, by isolating “sad” at the verge of the line, the speaker makes it act like a caesura which only pauses for a little while, and then will continue. This reflects well the ghost’s situation of reluctant lingering. In the end, the ghost has no other choice but to leave “as a remembrance of a guest that tarrieth but a day”. Although the ghost wishes to remain present as a spectator, she fails. Her conflicting instincts both to distance and involve herself eventually lead her to leave quietly and peacefully.

A comparable pattern of silence-voice-Silence, spectator-insider-Spectator, or repressed-controller-Repressed,<sup>①</sup> may be detected in many of Rossetti’s death lyrics. “Shut Out”, for example, is another poem in which the dead speaker suffers from vacillation between getting in and getting out. The poem begins with a ghost revisiting her old familiar garden. She stares through the iron bars at the lovely blooming garden, “pied with all flowers bedewed and green”, which is locked and guarded by a shadowless spirit. The speaker sighs: “With all its nests and stately trees / It had been mine, and it was lost” (55). She recognizes that she herself, as a ghost, a watcher, a spectator, cannot and will not have “some buds” to cheer her “outcast state” or get “one small twig from shrub or tree”. What belonged to her once belongs to her no more. Like the ghost in “At Home” who is supposed to stand outside as a spectator but attempts to touch the living, the speaker in this poem cannot, likewise, resist the temptation of her beautiful garden and decides to abandon her spectator role, thus begging the spirit for entry. Instead of giving her right to go in, the shadowless spirit took “mortar and stone to build a wall” and “left no loophole great or small/Through which my straining eyes might look” (50). Her desire to get in and have a word with her old acquaintances is, as the ghost’s failure to chill the living in “At Home”, denied cruelly, ruthlessly and relentlessly. The speaker continues:

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<sup>①</sup> Since the second silence, spectator and repressed is quite different from the first, a capitalized word is used to distinguish them.

So now I sit here quite alone  
Blinded with tears; nor grieve for that,  
For nought is left worth looking at  
Since my delightful land is gone. (51)

Faced with this confusing passage, the reader may easily conclude that the speaker, though “blinded with tears”, does not actually grieve at all, for the speaker claims to have no interest in the garden since all delightful memories have gone too. However, these words, especially “For nought is left worth looking at / Since my delightful land is gone”, can be interpreted in many ways apart from straightforward disinterest. They are comparable to the sour grapes in Aesop’s fables. Though pretending to not care for the lost and unattainable garden, the ghost actually cares about it. Accordingly, reducing her anxiety by stating the opposite becomes the speaker’s only solution. The next four lines also reinforce this feeling:

A violet bed is budding near,  
Wherein a lark has made her nest:  
And good they are, but not the best;  
And dear they are, but not so dear. (51)

The ghost sees a violet bed and a lark in front of her eyes. “Violet bed” and “Lark” are two of Rossetti’s favorite images in depicting and imaging paradise and heaven. Here the speaker asks God for help by turning her head toward heaven. She evaluates this vista thusly: “And good they are, but not the best; / And dear they are, but not so dear.” The speaker’s preference for her garden to heaven or paradise serves as a seemingly appropriate proof for Angela Leighton’s claim of the religious skepticism and doubt reflected in Christina Rossetti’s lyrics.

Yet, this is not the whole story. If we consider this poem again, we find that the paradigm of spectator-insider-Spectator is also working here. First, the ghost watches like a spectator her garden and everything which happened there. She is supposed to stay calm and cool, to detach herself from being emotional. As the narrative moves on, the ghost recognizes that it is impossible to be impersonal. Yet the temptation of the garden and every delightful memory which happened there forces her to get involved. Instead of standing outside, she decides to take action and move inside, turning from spectator to insider, from being silenced to voicing. After her entry permission is denied, the paradox of staying or leaving in “At Home”



reappears. Her pretense of not caring for what she cares so much about betrays her real intention. Then, the speaker's answer becomes even more perplexing and ambiguous. What does the "they" in "And good they are, but not the best" refer to? If "they" is understood as "violet bed" and "lark", one could easily draw the conclusion that Christina Rossetti does have a skeptical and doubtful attitude towards faith. However, a diachronic examination of her entire work, especially lyrics, negates such a disavowal. Hence, the "they" here can be best understood as the ghost's garden and her past memories. In this way, it's easier to understand that the ghost, like the one in "At Home", decides to leave what had belonged to her before and eventually finds comfort in faith and beliefs. This is another way of being Silent, the capitalized Silence of this paradigm. It might be mute in form, yet in essence it is saturated with hope, faith, and belief.

### **3. Dreamers Speaking from Remoteness**

Though Jerome McGann's "Soul Sleep" interpretation of Christina Rossetti's poems seems somewhat implausible and far-fetched, one cannot deny the fact that the image of "Sleep" "lurks" everywhere in her death lyrics. Poems like "Dream-Land", "After Death", "Remember", "Song (When I Am Dead, My Dearest)", "Echo", "Sound Sleep", "Rest", "Life and Death", "Fluttered Wings" etc. are all about death and sleep. The speakers in these lyrics are dying or dead. They lie, in most cases, either on the deathbed or in the grave, or occupy some other remoteness not clearly delineated. They are sleeping like Sleeping Beauty, yet are consciously speaking. "Song (When I Am Dead, My Dearest)" is a poem written in 1848 when Rossetti was 18 years old. It met with immediate success and enduring acclaim and remains Rossetti's best known poem after "Goblin Market". This poem is composed of two stanzas and has sixteen lines. Though not regularly rhymed, it does possess a melodic beauty:

When I am dead, my dearest,  
Sing no sad songs for me;  
Plant thou no roses at my head,  
Nor shady cypress tree:  
Be the green grass above me  
With showers and dewdrops wet;  
And if thou wilt, remember,

And if thou wilt, forget.

I shall not see the shadows,  
I shall not feel the rain;  
I shall not hear the nightingale  
Sing on, as if in pain:  
And dreaming through the twilight  
That doth not rise nor set,  
Haply I may remember,  
And haply may forget. (52)

The poem's purpose is to forbid the beloved's mourning, since the speaker says in the first place: "When I am dead, my dearest, / Sing no sad songs for me." The speaker, presumably dead or dying at the time of speaking, wants not to be remembered or memorialized. What she asks for is that the addressee could "be the green grass above me /With showers and dewdrops wet". The reader may be struck by the speaker's rather calm and impersonal tone; how has she become so cool and cruel? One reasonable explanation is that the poet prefers to detach her speaker and make her a spectator who will not get involved with earthly affairs. However, the first four lines in the second stanza seem to complicate this reading. Curiously, the speaker makes a list of sensations which thereby creep into the poem: "I shall not see the shadows, /I shall not feel the rain; /I shall not hear the nightingale /Sing on, as if in pain". By listing and detailing what is not seen, felt, or heard, the speaker really is talking about the opposite. She wants to see the shadow; she wants to feel the rain; and she wants to hear the nightingale sing, though dead she is and lies in an unspecified somewhere. In other words, she cannot completely detach and impersonalize herself. This paradox resurfaces in another of Rossetti's lyrics, "Dream-Land". Though the female protagonist is sound asleep, the poet still allows some sensations to find their way in to the poem:

She cannot see the grain,  
Ripening on hill and plain;  
She cannot feel the rain  
Upon her hand. (21)

And in "Life and Death":

Nor feel the wild flowers blow, nor birds dart by  
With flitting butterfly,  
Nor grass grow long above our heads and feet,  
Nor hear the happy lark that soars sky high,  
Nor sigh that spring is fleet and summer fleet,  
Nor mark the waxing wheat,  
Nor know who sits in our accustomed seat. (149)

No wonder Constance W. Hassett can say: "this paradoxical tendency to affirm-while-denying is also a habit among Rossetti's living and a source of wistful irony" (30). By stating what is not stated, the speaker places herself into a paradoxical and ironic state: the spectator who is supposed to distance himself gets involved instead. So, the paradigm mentioned above once again appears in "Song (When I Am Dead, My Dearest)". At the end of this poem, the speaker falls into a sleep in order to relieve herself from the pain and conflict of forgetting and remembering. One cannot know exactly as the speaker is conscious or not in her dreaming, yet the place where she is dreaming, with complete tranquility and silence, can exempt her from suffering and make her calm again. The last two lines well capture the speaker's mental state: "Haply I may remember, /And haply may forget." It is not that important to care or not to care, to remember or to forget, to detach or to be involved, to be silent or to voice, so long as the speaker can enjoy the tranquility of her inner peace, what else does she need?

Another well-acclaimed lyric written almost the same year as "Song (When I Am Dead, My Dearest)" renders comparably diverse interpretations. Written in the Petrarchan form, "After Death" is a sonnet which tells the story of a dead person's talking back to the living.

In the first half of the octave, the deathbed scene is well described. There are half drawn curtains; there is floor swept by rushes; and there is rosemary lying thick upon the deathbed which ivy shadows have crept upon. Four lines, simple, concise, yet rhymed, depict this deathbed scene for the reader. Then, a living person addressed as "He" jumps abruptly off the page:

He leaned above me, thinking that I slept  
And could not hear him; but I heard him say:

“Poor child, poor child:” and as he turned away  
Came a deep silence, and I knew he wept. (32)

Every movement and every word of the “He” is reported by the speaker who, as a spectator or watcher, oversees and overhears: she sees that he is leaning above her. Yet, what comes next goes beyond what a mere spectator could accomplish. Instead, this spectator imagines the man’s thoughts; thus, Rossetti’s persona breaks the line between the living and the dead, and becomes an insider. What’s more, when the man finishes saying of “Poor child, poor child” and turns away, a silence sets in. The speaker abandons her spectator’s role and says “I knew he wept.” The fact that he wept comes entirely out of the speaker’s imagination, in that there is no other sound but silence which, in turn, will make weeping strikingly noticeable if there is any. Besides, the “I lay”, “I slept”, “I heard”, “I knew” all denote that the speaker, instead of being looked at, silent and pitied, wishes to take control of the scene. She hopes that it is her who should do much of the talking. Sadly, her saying could not be heard by the living because of her state as a dead person. Then, the Rossettian strategy “affirming-while-denying” reappears: “He did not touch the shroud, or raise the fold / That hid my face, or take my hand in his, / Or ruffle the smooth pillows for my head: / He did not love me living; ...” In providing what this list of what he “did not” do, the speaker is in fact providing an alternate, preferred version of the scene. The speaker would like to be touched, to have her hands be taken in his, and to have her pillow ruffled. In a word, she would like to be loved even as a dead person. Here the conflicting impulses of remaining impersonal or growing personal, standing-by and getting involved reaches its climax. In the last three lines, the speaker presents a solution:

He did not love me living; but once dead  
He pitied me; and very sweet it is  
To know he still is warm though I am cold. (32)

Short as it is, these lines reaffirm the Rossettian paradigm. First of all, it is a sentence with an anticipatory subject. What is emphasized here is “sweet”. Literally, knowing he is warm while she is cold, or he is alive while she is dead she feels sweet. Although Susan Conley said “in such a context, ‘sweet’ invokes ‘bitter’” and “‘cold’ is the speaker’s voice,” coming accordingly to the conclusion that “such all-pervasive coldness enhances the irony of the final line” (Conley 272), another

interpretation is possible. If the speaker is entirely cold (i.e. dead), how could she feel this sweetness and know that he still is warm (i.e. alive)? Hence, one might argue that the speaker is actually not entirely dead but in an intermediate state defined by her true feeling of sweetness, not the ironic one. It's as if her knowledge of his "warmth" has kindled a little a spark, a little half-life in her, a "sweetness" by which she eventually grants the redemption of the man and ends the sonnet with self-effacing generosity. In this moment, the speaker finally effaces herself as the subject, the insider, the one who gets involved, and instead accepts willingly and sincerely her final state of being a spectator and a silent watcher who wishes hopefully and faithfully nothing but the best for her beloved.

All of the death lyrics this article has discussed are voiced by a dead or dying woman who, under the guise of either ghost or dreamer, vacillates between keeping silent and speaking. This speaker, like many other speakers in Rossetti's work, will not reach her final "muteness" until she goes through the paradigm of silence-voice-Silence. This is a paradigm of watching and involving, of forgetting and remembering, of being impersonal and personal, of being marginalized and being accepted. Though the living remain immune to the ghost and dreamer's voices, the speaker in these lyrics does not give up hope and faith. She is still talking silently, calmly and optimistically in her heart, though no one hears or cares. This is a form which Rossetti practices in her lyrics and perfects in her sonnet sequences, devotional verses and narrative poems. The speaking silence of the speaker can prove nothing but a heart that is still keen, a mind that is still lively, and a person who enjoys, as Alexander Pope once wrote in his long poem "Eloisa to Abelard":

Eternal sunshine of the spotless mind;  
Each prayer accepted, and each wish resign'd. (115)

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## Climate, Phenophase and Regionalism of Classical Chinese Poetry<sup>\*</sup>

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**Abstract:** This paper is based on an essential premise of literary geography, that is, there is a close relationship between the regionalism of literature and the diversity of climate and phenophase. Through discussing the climates and phenophase as recorded in the classical Chinese poetry of Tang dynasty and Song dynasty, this study aims to illustrate that the diversity of climate and phenophase as affected by latitude, longitude, altitude and periodicity enables Chinese poets to offer localized experience in their unique language.

**Keywords:** climate, phenophase, classical Chinese poetry, diversity

Literary geography, a subject that gains Chinese critics' attention since the late 1980s, offers one avenue of enquiry into the relationship between literary studies and geography. There are two major subfields of geography: physical geography and human geography. Physical geography studies landforms and geographic patterns of water, species distribution, climate and natural disasters. Human geography includes the study of politics, economy, culture, education and religion with an emphasis on relations of and across space and place. Literary writings reflect the influence of physical geography and human geography. Against the backdrop of a broad interest in literature and climate, this paper examines the relationship between classical Chinese poetry (mainly of Tang Dynasty and Song Dynasty) and climate.

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<sup>\*</sup> Zeng Da-xing (1958-) was born in Chibi city, Hubei Province. Being a professor at the Chinese Department of Guangzhou University, he is the director of Chinese Literary Geography Association. He is also a member of the standing committee of Chinese Ci-poetry Research Association. His research interests include classical Chinese poetry and literary geography. His major works include *Liuyong and His Ci* (Sun Yat-sen University press, 1990), *Research on the Famous Scholars on Lyric Studies in the 20th Century* (Zhong Hua Books Co., 2011), *Geographic Distribution of China's Literature Scholars in History* (Hubei Education Press, 1995), and *Literary Geography Research* (The Commercial Press, 2011).

## **1. Climate and Phenology**

A popular definition of climate goes like this, “climate encompasses meteorologic elemental measurements in a given region over a year or long periods.” (Yan 33) The most notable feature of climate is diversity: variations in region and variations over time.

Zhu Ke-zhen, a pioneer of Chinese Meteorology research, defines phenology poetically as the study of “cyclical changes of the moon, dews, winds, clouds, flowers and birds over a year.”(Zhu 14) As the simplicity of this explanation suggests, phenology studies natural phenomena in their annual cycle and how they are influenced by variations in climate. According to Zhu, phenology research is subdivided into three branches: phenology of plant life, which is principally concerned with the dates of the emergence of sprouts, leaves, flowers and fruits, and of leaf coloring and fall, and its agricultural applications, such as the timing of seeds planting, sprouting, flowering and sowing; phenology of animal life, such as the observation of the first appearance of migratory birds, the dates of the first and last buzz of insects and the time frame of amphibia's hibernating process, and periodic natural occurrences, such as the study of the dates of the first and last appearance of frosting, snowing and icing.

Phenological events, as Zhu points out, “indicate the annual variations in climate.”(Zhu 45) The features of climate determine that of phenological events: in others words, the spatial and temporal changes of phenological events are related to variations in climate. In his formulation of the connection of latitude, longitude and altitude to phenological phenomena, Andrew Delmar Hopkins, the renowned American forest entomologist, proposes that for every 1 degree latitude northward, 5 degrees of longitude eastward, or 400 feet (121.92 meters) higher in elevation, spring (or early summer) phenophases are 4 days later and autumn (or later summer) phenophases 4 days earlier. Based on the Hopkins Law and his phenological knowledge of China and some other countries, Zhu suggests four principles guiding the mapping of phenophase in China: the diversity of phenophase from “south to north” (latitude), “west to east” (longitude), “high to low” (altitude), and “past to present” (periodicity).



## 2. Phenology and Poetry

In *On Literature* Madame de Stael (1766-1817) argues for the connection of climate to distinct literary cultures. After contrasting “northern literature” (including the English, the German, the Danes and Swedes) and “southern literature” (of the Greeks, the Romans, the Italians, the Spanish, and the French), she claims that “the climate is certainly one of the main reasons for the differences between the images that one finds pleasing in the North and those that one loves to recall in the South.”(Madame de Stael 146-147) Here the images refer to the images in literary writings.

In the same vein, Zhong Rong, a Chinese literary critic of the 6th century, has already noticed such a connection. In the Preface to *Appreciation of Poetry*,<sup>①</sup> he writes, “The climate gives rise to changes in environment and the environment stirs people’s emotions. This is how dancing and chanting naturally occur.”(Zhong 1) In ancient China, dancing is usually accompanied with chanting of poetry, as poetry, music and dancing are interrelated in Chinese artistic tradition. Guo Shao-yu, a contemporary literary critic, believes that Zhong’s lines attempt to explain the process of how poetry is created.”(Guo 312) It is notable that the word “environment” has two levels of connotations. It could refer to environment in its abstract sense, or the environment that is subject to the changes of climate. In fact, by environment, Zhong is referring to phenological events, as he explains later in the same book, “wind and bird in spring, moon and cicada in autumn, cloud and rain in summer, moon and chill in winter, all kinds of feelings aroused can be transported into poetry.”(Zhong 28) The symbolic description of phenological events in four seasons and their connection to poetic creation reveals Zhong’s intuitive understanding of the relationship between poetry and phenology.

Madame de Stael and Zhong Rong, though realizing the links between literature and phenology, did not go further to provide a systematic and detailed discussion of such a connection.<sup>①</sup> Confronted with such a pressing task in the study of literary geography, this paper, by employing examples from classical Chinese poetry, aims to illustrate that the diversity of climate and phenophase as affected by latitude, longitude, altitude and periodicity enables Chinese poets to offer localized experience in their unique language.

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<sup>①</sup> For the discussion of how and in what ways climate has an impact on literature, see the author’s other related essays.

China is a big country that covers a wide range of latitude and longitude. Due to its extensive and complex topography, the climate differs drastically from region to region. For example, in terms of temperature, China can be divided into six zones: tropical, subtropical, warm-temperate, temperate, cold-temperate, and Qinghai-Tibet Plateau Temperate; in terms of precipitation, China can be divided into four areas: humid areas, semi-humid areas, semi-arid areas and arid areas. The variety of China's climatic condition and phenological events “from south to north, east to west, high to low, past to present” accounts for the regionalized experience of space and place as embodied in poetic images.

### 3. The Diversity of Climate and Phenophase “from South to North”

The climate distinction between South China and North China is chiefly determined by latitude. China stretches some 5500 kilometers across 49 degrees of latitude spanning from the southern tip of James Shoal at latitude 4° N to the main waterway centerline of Hei longjiang River's at latitude 53° N. With its vast territory, the climate in the South and the North is extremely diverse. For example, the average temperature in Antu County of Jilin Province is -7.3°C, while that of Paracel Islands reaches 26.4°C.

The diversity of climate from north to south affects the variations of phenological events. When Harbin snows heavily, Guangzhou is still as warm as spring. In his study of phenology in China, Zhu notices that “phenological events vary from place to place. The same natural occurrence between north and south may not be identical in time due to its climatic difference.”(Zhu 6) He further points out that, “phenological events vary from north to south in such a vast territory. In Tang Dynasty and Song Dynasty, China stretched across more than 30 degrees of latitude. The diversity of phenophase was already noticed by poets who often travelled in the areas of the Yellow River and the Yangzi River. Poems by Liu Zong-yuan and Su Shi, who were exiled to the south of the Nanlin range, reveal that the differences of phenophase in the Linnan area and Central china are not only in number but also in specie.” (Zhu 24)

Consider the two poems by Han Yu and Bai Ju-yi of Tang Dynasty :

At sunset it turns sunny after a long period of rain,  
The clear and blue sky sets off the towers.  
Tide is rising in Qu River and countless flowers are over the branches,

my dear friend, are you too busy to join us?

Han Yu, "To Bai Ju-yi during a Spring walk with Zhang Ji along the Qu River"

(*Complete Tang Poetry* Vol. 334. p.3864)

Cherry trees are newly planted in my little garden,  
Strolling around the pink flowers make it a spring walk.  
Why should I join the crowd of people and horses,  
on a muddy road by the banks of Qu river?

Bai Ju-yi, "Reply to the note of Han Yu and Zhang Ji's Walk along the Qu River after Rain"

(*Complete Tang Poetry* Vol.442. p.4942)

The two poems, which describe the scenery of the same city Chang'an (modern Xi'an), were composed approximately at the same time in mid-spring. It should be noted that with its annual mean temperature 1°C higher than today, the Tang dynasty (AD 618-907) coincides with the third period of warm climate in the past 5000 years of Chinese history. From the early 8th century to the mid-9th century, a period when Han Yu, Zhang Ji, Bai Ju-yi and Liu Zong-yuan lived, the climate was so warm and humid that even oranges and mandarines could be planted in Chang'an. As revealed in Han Yu's and Bai Ju-yi's poems, the mid-spring (with an average temperature ranging from 6°C-11°C) is a prime time for flower appreciation. In Han Yu's poem, he expresses a sense of pity for that Bai Ju-yi cannot join him in enjoying the blossom. Bai Ju-yi, however, in his poem, states that he could still share the moment of spring, as the cherry trees in his private garden are also in bloom.

In contrast to spring phenophases in Chang'an as depicted by Han Yu and Bai Ju-yi, Liuzhou in Liu Zong-yuan's poem "On February Banyan Leaves Fallen in Liuzhou" presents another picture:

Stricken with Demotion in civil service career and homesickness, I'm in solitude.

That mid-spring looks like autumn makes me confused.

In this mountain city, after rain blossoms are withered,

Leaves of banyan trees fall and birds are chirping in disturbance.

(*Complete Tang Poetry* Vol.352. p.3937)

We find that in Liuzhou, mid-spring phenophases of withered flowers and fallen leaves coincides with autumn phenophases in Chang'an. Liuzhou, located to the south of the Nanling range, belongs to the tropical temperate zone. Close to sea and with the Nanling mountains as a natural shield, it is humid and warm: there is no clear temperature differences between four seasons. Winters are cool and short (lasting for 30 days) and summers are hot and long (lasting for 210 days). Hence, it is more sensible to divide Liuzhou's seasons into cool season (from November to February), warm season (from March to May) and hot season (from June to October). In other words, the division between dry season and rainy season is more salient than that of summer and winter. The local saying that "Four seasons are like summer, yet autumn comes after rain" nicely summaries the climatic features of Liuzhou in the second moon as depicted in Liu Zong-yuan's poem. We shall be reminded that before Liu Zong-yuan exiled to the South, he had stayed in Chang'an for 33 years. Due to his unfamiliarity with the climate in liuzhou, the autumn phenophases in early spring perplex him and evoke his feeling of self-pity on banishment together with the sense of homesickness and loneliness. His inner world naturally emerges from the external environment.

To further illustrate the diversity of phenophase between the North and the South and its connection to poetic writings, compare the poems by two other Tang dynasty poets:

A gust of wind whirl up a burst of sand;  
I can only see travelers but not residents.  
The nine-turns of the Yellow River are frozen,  
At border there is no flowers even in the third moon.  
(*Complete Tang Poetry* Vol..673.p.7703)

To the south of the mountain range the landscape is another look,  
Legend has it that in capital,  
There is no snow in winters,  
People are walking under the parasol blossom.  
(*Complete Tang Poetry* Vol.514.p.5866)

The area depicted in Zhou Pu's "At a border-fortress" belong to the sub-warm temperature zone, with cold and dry winters. The poem depicts a picture that is characteristic of the bordering areas in the northern China: the Yellow River is

frozen in winters, flowers are rarely seen in springs and soldiers march through the strong and sandy wind. The natural environment is unfavorable for habitation. In contrast, the Lingnan area, located south of the tropic of Cancer, has a humid subtropical climate. With pleasant climate, it is evergreen all the year round. Living in such a conformable natural environment, people could walk leisurely in blossoms. As climate and phenophase inspire poets' literary creation, the localized experience of climate and phenophase has rendered a charm to their poetic pieces.

Noticing the association between geographical position and literary styles, critics attempt to explain the distinct features between literature by the Southerners and that by the Northerners. Kuang Zhou-yi, a literary critic in the Qing Dynasty, for example, notes that “while the Southerners praise the elegance of mountains and rivers, the Northerners value the clarity and purity of ice and frost. Accordingly, Southern literature is marked by artificiality, so much as that it is accused of over ornament, whereas Northern literature lacks crafts, unaware that with its usual topics, such as hunting on horses in leathered coats, are ridiculed by literary critics.”(Kuang 57) These lines were a paraphrase of a certain passage from Li Yan-shou's “Preface to *Wenyuanzhuan*” in *The History of the North* and are often cited by literary geographers. Kuang Zhou-yi's observation, though valid in certain degree, is simplistic, for that South China and North China are two vague terms. In fact, the southern part of China spans across two climatic zones, whereas the northern part of China spans across three climatic zones. Hence the climate is diverse greatly Within South China and North china. The temperature difference between the Jiangnan area and the Lingnan area in South China is as vast as that of the Qilu area and the Guangzhong area in North China. It is no wonder that on the two sides of a mountain the climate and phenophase differ dramatically, as Song Zhi-wen, a poet of Tang dynasty, writes in his poem “On Yuling's Plum Blossom,” “The southern side is warm but the northern side is cold, blossoms are in two forms in the same springwind.”<sup>①</sup> His poem describes an interesting phenomenon. The plum flowers on the southern side of the mountain bloom happily, whereas the plum flowers on the northern side look lonely and desolate.

To further illustrate the complexity of the climatic conditions between the South and the North, let's take a look at Zhang Jin-zhong's “At Border”:

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<sup>①</sup> The poem is also assumed to be written by Liu Yuanzai, titled “Early Plum Blossom.” *Complete Tang Poetry*, Vol.801,p.9018.

Spring comes late in Wuyuan,  
Willows are not yet budding in the Second month.  
When the icy river thaws,  
Petals are falling in Chang'an.  
(*Complete Tang Poetry* Vol.75.p.818)

Both Chang'an and Wuyuan (in modern inner Mongolia) are in the northern part of China. Chang'an (34°13'N latitude) has a warm-temperate climate, and Wuyuan (41°N latitude) has a temperate climate. The distinct climate determines the diversity of phenological events in Wuyuan and Chang'an. This proves that even within North China, the dates of phenological occurrences are diverse in the regions of different latitude.

Lu You's "The Tumi in Dongyang" serves as another example:

Farewell to Fuzhou with wine in the first moon,  
The Tumi blossoms are over the branches.  
As spring comes late in the Wu area,  
I gather the flower fragrance all the way home from the South.  
(*Complete Song Poetry* Vol.39.p.24258)

Close to sea, both Dongyang (in Zhejiang Province) (29°24'N altitude) and Fuzhou (in Fujian Province) (26°N altitude) have a sub-tropical climate. However, due to the difference of 3 degrees in latitude between Dongyang and Fuzhou, the spatial difference of the dates of a spring phenophase of the Tumi is 12 days. The poems show that even within South China the climate and phenophase in different places are affected by latitude, so are the poetic images. In this sense, in our discussion of the distinction of phenological occurrence in the South and the North, it is more accurate to examine such a distinction by taking latitude into consideration.

#### **4. The Diversity of Climate and Phenophase "from East to West"**

Western China has a continental climate (cold in winter and hot in summer), while Eastern China has coastal climate (comparatively cold in winter and spring and hot in summer). Because of the influence from the monsoon winds, the temperature distinction between the East and the West is bigger than that between

the South and the North. In summer and autumn, the eastern parts of China are generally warmer than that of the western parts of China, while in winter and spring, vice verse.

Such a climatic distinction from east to west and accordingly the diversity of phenophase are already perceived by our ancestors. Liu Xian-ting (from the Qing Dynasty), for example, notes that “in the second moon peach trees and plums trees are in bloom, green willows are as long as threads. These natural occurrences are thirty to forty days earlier than those in Wuxia.”(Liu 16) The difference of longitude between Changsha (113 °E longitude) and Wuxia (120 °60'E longitude, now Wujiang city in Jiangsu Province) is about 7 degrees. Liu Xian-ting's statement, though not in accordance to the Hopkins law, at least testifies to the close links between phenophase and longitude.

In classical Chinese poetry we could also find such examples. Consider the following three poems:

The north wind rolls the white grasses and breaks them;  
And the Eighth-month snow across the Tartar sky  
Is like a spring gale, come up in the night,  
Blowing open the petals of ten thousand peartrees.  
It enters the pearl blinds, it wets the silk curtains;  
A fur coat feels cold, a cotton mat flimsy;  
Bows become rigid, can hardly be drawn  
And the metal of armour congeals on the men;  
The sand-sea deepens with fathomless ice,  
And darkness masses its endless clouds;

...

Cen Shen, “A Song of White Snow in Farewell to Field-Clear Wu  
Going Home”

(*Complete Tang Poetry* Vol.199.p.2050)<sup>①</sup>

Memories of Chang'an in the Eighth-moon,  
It was our tradition that in the grand palace,  
People adjusted clothes and hat before the golden mirror,  
Elephants and rhinoceros danced on the dark red steps.

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<sup>①</sup> The English translation of this poem and Li Po's “At Border” is by Witter Bynner. The other translations are made by the translator.

Yet I prefer the water of Ba River,  
Where autumn weeds are green and lush.

Lu Wei, "Memories of Chang'an: Twelve Poems" No. 8  
(*Complete Tang Poetry* Vol.307.p.3488)

Butterflies appear in August,  
They are playing in pairs in the grass of my west-garden.  
It is sorrowful picture for the concubine,  
Mourning her fading beauty.

...

Li Po, "Journey over Changgang Bridge"  
(*Complete Tang Poetry* Vol.26.p.359)

The three poems illustrate the spacial difference of phenological occurrence in the eighth month. The first poem provides a vivid picture of the severe weather in Luntai (84 °E longitude) in Xinjiang Province: in the heavy snow, it is so chilly and windy that even grasses are broken. In contrast, in Chang'an (109°E longitude), it is cool and dry with green grasses showing no sign of coloring or withering. In Jiangning (119 °E longitude) we could still find summer phenophases: the weather is still hot with butterflies flying in the garden. The latitude range between the three places is from 32 ° to 42 °N, while the longitude range is from 84 ° to 119 °. As we can see, the drastic diversity of climate and phenophase between the three places is largely influenced by longitude rather than latitude.

The relationship between literature and the distinction of phenophase from north to south has predominately occupied the research interests of literary geographers. In contrast, there is little discussion on the connection between literature and the variety of phenophase from east to west. Perhaps critics have not yet realized that climate and phenology are also affected by longitude, landscape and Monsoon winds, which are, more often than not, more influential factors in accounting for the variations in climate and phenology. And such variations in natural environment eventually are transported into a myriad variety of poetic images in literary writings.

Like the terms of South china and North china, East china and West china are also two relative terms. In fact, in any part of China, the influence of longitude on the diversity of climate and phenophase is noticeable. Now let's look at Cui Hao's poem "A Youth's Journey in City Wei":



Pear-tree petals in Luoyang are flying in the second month,  
Travelers from Qin long for home in spring.  
When he came to the southern corner of city on horse,  
He met a messenger from Qin.  
The message was issued from two days ago,  
Spring came earlier in Chang'an,  
Swallows nested in the palace of Begonia and Pear,  
Flowers were in bloom in the garden of grape-vines.

...

On the way to Chang'an, spring is sweet,  
Brisk wind and sunny sky, playing a tune with the river.  
Thousands of houses and towers along the Wei River,  
Flowers and willows are everywhere in Qin.  
Qin is a prosperous place,  
The home-bounding wanderers must be glad to see the blossoms all the  
way home.

*(Complete Tang Poetry Vol.24.p.329)*

Compare Luoyang (34°40'N altitude, 112°25'E longitude, 155 meters elevation) and Chang'an (N 34°13'N altitude, 108°58'E longitude, 238 meters elevation), we find that it is in a large degree the difference in longitude and elevation that gives rise to sharp variations in climate and phenophase. As described in the poem, spring phenophases in Chang'an come later than those in Luoyang: when blossoms are withered in Luoyang, flowers are still in boom in Chang'an. It is poet's observation of the diversity of phenological occurrences that creates a poetic beauty established on the contrast of regional environments.

## **5. The Diversity of Climate and Phenophase “from High to Low”**

Besides longitude and latitude, variations in land elevation also contribute to the climatic differences. The higher one goes, the lower the temperature is. Generally speaking, the temperature is 1°C lower with every 200 meters' (150 meters in some areas) rise in elevation. The factor of altitude also accounts for the diversity of phenophases. According to the Hopkins' Law, when other variables

remain unchanged, a rise of 400-foot (121.92-meter) in elevation above the sea level will result in a 4-day delay in phenophases. In his study of the climate and phenophase in China, Zhu observes that “The greater the difference in elevation, the bigger the variation in the timing of phenological occurrence. In the Yangtze River area and Yellow River area with an elevation of over 4,000 meters, there is only winter phenophases.”

The following two poems provide an example of the diversity of climate and phenophase as affected by altitude.

The fifth-month Snow in Tianshan,  
Brought no blossoms but coldness.  
Through the flute tune we image dancing willows,  
For spring has not come yet.  
Fighting during daylight upon hearing the drumming,  
Sleeping at night holding cold saddles in chest,  
We will chop the Tartars' heads,  
With the swords hanging on our waist.

Li Po, “At a Border- Fortress”

*(Complete Tang Poetry Vol.164. p.1700)*

On Mirror Lake outspread for miles and miles,  
The lotus lilies in full blossom teem.  
In fifth moon Xi Shi gathers them with smiles,  
Watchers o'erwhelm the bank of Yuoye Stream.  
Her boat turns back without waiting moonrise  
To yoyal house amid amorous sighs.

Li Po, “Ballads of Four Seasons: Summer”

*(Complete Tang Poetry Vol.165, p.1711)*

Mirror Lake is located in Shaoxing, Zhejiang Province. When the lotus lilies in Mirror lake are in full blossom, the Tianshan mountains are still covered by snow and ice. Indeed, the Tianshan mountains soar over floating clouds. The highest peak in the Tianshan is 5, 445 meters above the sea level. In such a geographic condition, spring phenophases in Mirror lake are not expected.

The diversified natural environments have contributed to the temperaments of the local people. Mirror lake in May has a pleasant climate. Fair maidens, with their

rosy cheeks matching blossoms, are plucking lotus lilies on boat, and so many crowds come to appreciate blossoms that the waterway is jammed by boats, all of which evoke a sense of elegance and romance in the readers' mind. We are impressed by the leisure life style of the local community. Li Po's poem of the Tianshan range in May presents a contrasting picture. In such an area with snow-capped mountains, spring can only be imagined through picturing willows dancing in breeze from the melody of "Plucking Willows." Yet the severity of the natural environment shapes the temperament of soldiers. Although stricken with homesickness, they are determined and courageous. The poem captures the anxious moment of war preparations: staying alert at night, soldiers are waiting eagerly to march to the battle-line at dawn and fight against the Tartars.

In Bai Ju-yi's "Peach Blossoms in the Dalin Temple," we read

When petals fall in April,  
 Peach trees are beginning in bloom in the temple hidden.  
 I'm always in sorrow when the springtime has gone,  
 Without knowing that it hides in the mountain.  
 (*Complete Tang Poetry* Vol.439, p.4889)

As the poet explains in his prose "Tour in Dalin Temple," the poem was written on April 28, 817. By then Bai Juyi was exiled and demoted to a minor position in Jiangzhou. Dalin temple is located on the top of Xianglu peak of the Lushan. As recorded in his prose, "Dalin temple is not easily accessible, and with few human tracks. It is surrounded by pure brooks, heaped rocks, thick pines and tall bamboos. ... The mountains are high, and the seasons come late. I came there in early summer. Yet it felt like early spring, as peach trees and pear trees were in bloom, and weeds by the waterside are short. The scenery differs so much from the plain that I thought I was in another world when I first came here."<sup>①</sup> When flowers are fading at the foot of the mountain, petals are still over the branches in the mountain. Such a diversity of phenophase is attributed to the variation of altitude. As the Xianglu peak of Lushan is 1,100 to 1,200 meters in elevation, the temperature is 5 °C lower than that at the foot of the mountain and the dates of phenophase

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<sup>①</sup> Bai Ju-yi, "Tour in the Dalin Temple", *Bai Juyi's Collection in Changqing Period*, Vol. 43, *Complete Library in the Four Branches of Literature* (Wenyuange's version).

occurrence are 20 days later<sup>①</sup>. Here are a few more examples:

While petals are dancing like snow flakes in Luoyang,  
Trees are budding in the Lunhun Mountain.  
Saying good bye to willows by the waterside in the morning,  
I find myself asleep in Yichuan in the evening.  
In Yichuan flowers are in bloom,  
I enjoy another spring before Qingming by drinking wine.  
As a villager I don't have the power of an emperor,  
So I just sing out loudly for the peace in the country.  
Song Zhi-wen, "Returning to Luhun Villa in Hanshi"  
(*Complete Tang Poetry* Vol.51, p.626)

The narrow path winds into the clouds,  
I stop my horse on the mountain top.  
While it's mid-spring down the mountain,  
Up here the trees are still snow-capped.  
Luo Ye, "Passing the Baiyao Mountain in Spring"  
(*Complete Tang Poetry* Vol.654, p.7517)

On the cliff ancient pines and cypresses grow,  
In which monkeys climbing and cranes nesting.  
It has frost in May and it's stilly chilly in June,  
Old men are seen collecting snow.  
Ling Che, "In Jianji Temple"  
(*Complete Tang Poetry* Vol.810, p.9133)

Huanghua mountain is famous for its waterfall,  
which I first heard from Old man Xuexi.  
On the green cliff lies Gaohuan palace,  
With the waterfall running down like the milky way from the Heaven,  
...

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<sup>①</sup> According to Zhu, "That the occurrence of peach blossoms in Dalin temple is over 60 days later than that in Jiujiang is not accurate. The delay could be no more than 20 or 30 days." *Phenology*. p.34

It's already the third moon when I went there.  
Neither the mountain nor trees show the traces of spring.  
The storming waterfall falls into the gullies,  
with Snowflakes drifting on the chilly wind.

Yuan Hao-wen, "Tour in Huanghua Mountain"  
(Yuan 184)

It is notable that the landscapes in the same season depicted in the poems are of the same longitude and latitude. It is the difference in altitude that accounts for the difference of climate and phenophase. Such a phenomenon is invariably noticed by literary writers, who, though surprised at the nature's wonder, do not go beyond their artistic creation and engage in scientific examination.

## 6. The Diversity of Climate and Phenophase "from Past to Present"

Climate and phenological occurrence change in historical times. One theory suggests that as a result of climate change, the timing of phenophases of various species fluctuates cyclically, with an average periodicity of 12.2 years. Such a temporal difference of climate and phenophase also places a part in poets' perceptions of regional experience.

The change of climate and phenophase in China is evinced in classical poetry. In West Zhou Dynasty, the Yellow River basin had a warm climate and thus plum trees were widely planted. We find that in *The Book of Songs* plum flowers are mentioned five times. In "Qin Feng. Zhongnan," for example, a verse goes like this: "What's in the Zhongnan mountain? Sorbus and plum" (Zhongnan mountain is to the south of Chang'an.) Plum blossoms are described in Tang poems. For example, Yuanzhen writes in one of his poems "Writing about Qujiang's Autumn to Echo Le-tian." (*Complete Tang Poetry*, Vol.401, p.4488): "Plums and apricots are small in spring, water chestnuts and lotus lilies fade in fall." However, since the middle period of North Song Dynasty, there is no plum in the Guanzhong area (the middle part of Shanxi), as Su shi writes in "Apricot", "There is no plum in Guanzhong, so I have to use you, apricot, as ingredient in my pot." Such a phenomenon indicates that compared to the Tang Dynasty, the temperature in the Song Dynasty declines, as plum trees cannot survive a temperature lower than -14 °C. Meanwhile, plum is common in Hangzhou, which is warmer than the Guanzhong area, as evinced in the poems of the Song Dynasty poets such as Lin Bu, Jiang Huo and Lu You.

Let's take lychee for another example. As a tropical fruit, it is widely planted in Guangdong province, Guangxi province, and the southern parts of Fujian province and Sichuan province. In the Tang Dynasty, it could also be planted in Chengdu (in the middle part of Sichuan province) because of the warm climate, as Zhang Ji writes in "On Chengdu": "West Jin river is misty with green water, and lychees on the hills are ripe after rain." (*Complete Tang Poetry*, Vol.382, p.4290) Lychee can only survive a temperature above -4 °C. After the middle period of North Song Dynasty, there was no more lychee grown in Chengdu because of climate change. Yet in Meizhou and Jiazhou, 60 km and 120 km to the south of Chengdu, lychee trees were still grown. After the 12th century the temperature continues to decline that even in Meizhou lychee trees were hard to find, as we find in Su Che's "To Zizhan, On Lychee" : "There are few lychees to the north of Jiazhou, will there still be some in Meizhou?"(*Complete Song Poetry*, Vol.15, p.10073)

As we can see, the cyclical fluctuation of climate change places a significant part in the temporal and spatial difference of plum phenophases and lychee phenophases in China.

In our discussion of natural environment and human environment in literary works, we must also take into consideration the temporal difference of climate and phenophase. Physical geography and human geography are always in the flux of time. Classical Chinese Poets' description of geography dwell on striking features of region, which is emblematic not only of regional geography but also of their unique perception of life and the world.

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*Translated by Zhao Kai; Edited by Zheng Jie*





## **Literature Teaching Overseas: A Culture-loaded Process\***

**Ou Hong**

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**Abstract:** Literature teaching overseas involves a context and perspective other than that of the native land. Influenced by the alien cultural elements, the canon is modified, and the focus of emphasis shifted. Allowances should be made for these changes since literature teaching overseas is a culture-loaded process.

**Keywords:** literature teaching overseas, canon, meaning across cultures,

"Literature teaching overseas" is meant to highlight its distinct difference from the teaching of the same literature in its native land, hence referring to the teaching of literature to students of an alien cultural background and in a different social context. Generally speaking, the teacher also shares that alien cultural background and lives in the same social context as the student. For instance, a Chinese teacher teaches English literature to Chinese students. To use the terminology of the aesthetics of reception, they both belong to an interpretative community other than the native one, and their interpretation, analysis and evaluation of the literary text are under the influence of the shared values and social mores and other cultural factors of their own community. The cultural and social values of a literature in its native context may be generally quite close to the different world of the foreign student, as in the countries of Europe, which share common frontiers and have similar language systems. But the two different worlds may be very remote from each other, having widely separate historical evolutions, geographical situations and forms of basic language structure. Such remoteness is certainly the case in the teaching of a European literature to students from a Far Eastern background.

What is more, the linguistic medium of literature teaching overseas is a foreign language which the student is still striving to master, and therefore the literary text is, to a great extent, the source and instrument of second language learning. More often than not the teaching of the literary text tends to take on some features of TESL. However, as the student, usually a language major of the university, has already

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\* This Speech was presented at the Conference on Literature Teaching Overseas at Oxford University sponsored by the British Council in April, 1989.

gone through elementary training courses in the second language--at least that is the case in China--the linguistic approach to literature teaching is accordingly directed to an advanced level, such as stylistic appreciation and discourse analysis, which often evoke comparative and contrastive studies on the part of the teacher with reference to the mother tongue and the cultural heritage he shares with the student. By such means the student can be helped to gain a deeper understanding of the literary text and, at the same time, a better command of the second language.

In this short speech, I shall try to look more carefully into the three major aspects of the culture-loaded process of literature teaching overseas, namely the selection of texts, treatment of cultural elements and appreciation of style. My own experience as a teacher of English literature will also be referred to in due course.

### **1. A Modified Canon**

What on earth to teach? This is the first question every teacher has to answer when he begins preparing for his lectures. This question will be active for the individual teacher even if a prevailing curriculum has been imposed by higher authority or has become established by consensus. Only in the most rigidly controlled environment will all elements of choice by the teacher be completely eliminated. As a matter of fact, by finding their way into the making of the canon the alien cultural factors always begin to work even before the process of teaching starts. So far as the Chinese literary tradition is concerned, literary writing should have morality as its real substance. Thus one can hardly imagine that *Lady Chatterley's Lover* could be smuggled into the undergraduates' classroom in a country such as China where sexual explicitness is considered altogether filthy and anti-social, in spite of the fact that it did witness the creation of such an erotic novel as *The Golden Lotus*.

Apart from the predictable and routine censorship by social mores and public opinion, there is the censorship based on religious doctrines or political ideology: George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-four* was banned in several overseas countries; and there is the damnation of Salman Rushdie and his book *The Satanic Verses* by the religious leader of Iran. How could these censored books possibly be used as teaching materials in such countries?

What is even more deplorable and shocking is that the ideological dominance over a country by another state also affects literature teaching there. Such was the case with the teaching of English literature in China during the fifties. The senior

professors in my department at Sun Yat-sen University still remember how they were summoned by the Chinese Ministry of Higher Education to a training class in Beijing and lectured to patronisingly by the Soviet expert on how to teach English literature, and our course for the university students of English was designed under his supervision, too. Consequently, Jane Austen was expelled from the classroom since the Soviet scholars had produced a sneering verdict on her as a writer on minor themes and trivial subject matters. In contrast, a novel called *The Gadfly*, written by another English woman writer, Ethel Lilian Voynich, whose very existence was and still is almost totally unknown within literary circles and the academic world of Britain, was placed high at the top of the reading list for Chinese students of English because it tells of an Italian revolutionary's devotion to his cause at the cost of his love and a peaceful life, and for this reason it had also been highly recommended to the young people of the Soviet Union.

In view of the above-mentioned facts and the causes that bring them about, a distinctively modified canon is inevitable in literature teaching overseas.

## **2. Meaning across Cultures**

Modification, however, is not finally substitution. The modified canon taught in the overseas country is primarily based on that of the homeland. Yet different ways of treatment of even the same text are conspicuous from time to time. The most striking divergence is the shift in the focus of attention. The native students as a whole have a much better knowledge of their home culture than the overseas students. If we just take a look at BBC TV competitions such as *Mastermind* and *Every Minute Counts* etc., we are ready to be convinced of this point. Unfortunately, what is considered common sense and inherited as collective social consciousness by the native student appears to be most difficult, if not totally impossible, for the overseas students to comprehend, and often to his great disappointment even the dictionaries and encyclopaedias leave much to be desired. Now it is the teacher who can do something for him. Being better informed and perhaps having personal experience of life in the home country of the literature in question, the teacher can help the student get the meaning across cultures. For example, the evil omen represented by Hilda and Mr. Cannon as they each use one end of the same towel at the same time to dry their hands in *Hilda Lessways* must be explained, and the habitual relation of witches with their familiar cats should be pointed out in *Macbeth*. Even trickier are the culturally exclusive words and phrases, many of them being

proper names, such as Oxfam Shop, NatWest Bank and sportsmen with Blues, to mention just a few. The overseas student's dictionaries are immediately stripped of their omnipotence when confronted with these hard nuts to crack. Of course, to help him out becomes once again the teacher's strenuous task.

Such bewilderment on the part of the overseas student reading a foreign literary work may be likened to the culture shock awaiting the newcomer, especially an immigrant, to a foreign country. A vivid portrayal of this kind of perplexity mixed with curiosity is rendered in the second chapter of Kafka's *America*. Karl, the hero of the novel, was told by his uncle that the first days of a European in America might be like a rebirth. One very interesting episode is particularly worthy of our attention. When admiring the cleverly designed American writing desk, Karl could not help thinking of the enthralling traditional Christmas panorama he had seen in the market-place at home when he was a child, and he even went so far as to assure himself that in the history of the invention of the American writing desk there must have existed some vague connection similar to that of his memory. This shows how eager the newcomer can be to try to compare the culture he has just stepped into with that at home. A similar psychology often grips the overseas student while he is making efforts to familiarize himself with the cultural elements of the foreign literary text. At this crucial moment, some proper analogies or contrasts to the home culture, that is, the culture of the overseas country, can serve as the intermediary that helps to usher the student into the cultural depth of the foreign literary text. For instance, when Chaucer's "Nun's Priest's Tale" is being taught, the discussion about dreams between Chanticleer and Pertelote will be more impressive if the student is reminded of the similar sayings in the Chinese classic *Lie Zi*, and the astrological description foretelling the storm in *Sir Patrick Spens* can be compared with that in *The Book of Poetry* of China. In this sense, I may venture to say literature teaching overseas has to be a bit prescriptive.

The shift in the focus of attention is reflected in an interesting phenomenon. Certain viewpoints held by a minority of native literary critics, often highly controversial, are readily accepted by the overseas teacher if he can find a cultural correspondence in his own country. When I was a student, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was chosen as the text for our Shakespeare course. In the play, when Lysander asks Hermia, "Why is your cheek so pale? /How chance the roses there do fade so fast?" She answers, "Belike for want of rain." Our teacher told us that Hermia's reply had some sexual connotation. Since the word "rain" in Chinese is symbolic of man's life force and to have rain is a euphemism for a woman having

sex with a man, Chinese students naturally do not bother to question the credibility of the statement. It is only after I went to England that I found out this is considered a very shaky interpretation and not at all generally accepted by the English scholars, in spite of the fact that one book on Shakespeare's bawdy language does interpret Hermia's words in that way. So there it is an example of how a specific cultural influence can lead literature teaching overseas slightly astray. Yet such slanting of perspective should be tolerated because it is not altogether the spinning of tall tales.

Even tall tales sometimes do no harm to the student. Literary gossip like claims that Shakespeare's plays were written by Marlowe, that the author of *Alice in Wonderland* was probably Queen Victoria, and the allegation that Rudyard Kipling was homosexual, which are often laughed off by the native scholars, might whet the overseas student's curiosity and make him more inquisitive when dealing with the text. Therefore to use those unconventional and subcultural viewpoints in literature teaching can be helpful rather than misleading so long as the teacher handles them properly as mere literary anecdotes.

### **3. Norm and Deviation**

As stated at the beginning of this paper, in literature teaching overseas the text is a source of second language learning as well. The overseas student, not being as lucky as the native speaker, is deprived of the privilege of picking up the norm of the language through lifelong communication and cultural immersion. What he mostly relies on is the grammar book and some dictionaries. Due to the obsession with marked rules, overgeneralization becomes one of the major errors in his interlanguage. I have seen Chinese students using "more excellent" and "more parallel" in their English compositions, without any deliberate intention to achieve a stylistic effect. When an explanation was demanded, some of them cited George Orwell's well-known sarcastic remark in *Animal Farm* for support--"All animals are equal, but some are more equal than others." This is a typical case of confusing the deviation with the norm. As a means of prevention or cure of such errors, the teacher must help the student to distinguish between the norm and the deviation and to build up a working sense of style.

Besides marked rules, the norm consists of unmarked rules, which are even more difficult for a second-language learner to grasp. While the overseas student is trying his best to get the feel of the norm, the teacher's timely briefing on unmarked rules is extremely important. Take the question of syntactic structure for example.

Both English and Chinese sentences have an SVO word order, but the adverbial of the English sentence is usually put after the object, whereas that of the Chinese sentence generally appears either before the verb or the subject. Chinese students are thus very likely to produce left-weighted sentences as a result of the influence of the sentence structure of their mother tongue, in this way contradicting the underlying principles of end-focus and end-weight in characteristic English syntax. Without the teacher's help, it will take a long time for the student even to sense the existence of these principles, let alone to master them.

The more the student knows about the norm, the more he is capable of appreciating aspects of style, including deviations. In the process of stylistic appreciation, however, the cultural inheritance of the overseas student again plays the role of selector and monitor, letting in what is on the same wavelength and finding it hard to synchronise with what is culturally divergent. Hence Chinese students can admire profoundly the majestic parallel structure in Winston Churchill's powerful speech calling on the British people to defend their country, for parallelism, as seen in *Lu Shi* and *Pian Wen*, has been a traditional form of their literature. They can also easily grasp what is implied in Alexander Pope's juxtaposition of *the Bible* with the cosmetics on a lady's dressing table in *The Rape of the Lock*, because the Chinese often hint at an analogy in the same way. However, when they come across the stylistic features of modernism, such as the overlapping appositions of T. S. Eliot and the anaphoric indeterminacy of Wallace Stevens, their response is at first not so instinctive because they cannot find a pigeonhole for them in their own culture.

As we can see, literature teaching overseas is a culture-loaded process. When the cultural inheritance of the overseas teacher and student is in harmony with the cultural elements carried by the literary text, the teaching as well as the learning gain momentum; whereas when the two kinds of cultural factors are in discord, the teaching process is likely to be jammed and obstructed by inertia. To solve this problem both the teacher and the student must take pains to understand the new culture, instead of keeping it at arm's length indiscriminately. Then as a next step more efforts should be made to explore the features of cultural divergence. Here contrastive analysis is often very useful. As to the making of the canon of texts, social mores should be taken into consideration, since otherwise the teaching of the literature cannot survive.

In short, literature teaching overseas is not quite the same as the teaching of the literature in its homeland. Allowances should be made for the modification of the

canon and the shift of emphasis in teaching, because only in this way can the overseas study of a literature both communicate knowledge and contribute to the personal education of the student.

*Edited by Li Zhimin*





## ***In Unum Pluribus: Toward a More Perfect Invention***\*

**Charles Bernstein**

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**Abstract:** Emerson's moral perfectionism, as interpreted by American philosopher Stanley Cavell, emphasized that we don't achieve perfection but move toward it in an unending process. President Obama invokes this idea in discussion the racial divide in American, by speaking of "more perfect." Emersonian pragmatism might also be a model in considering the difficulties of translation between American English and Chinese. Translating contemporary poetry is model for possible cultural exchange.

**Keywords:** Moral perfectionism, Emerson, Stanley Cavell, Li Zhimin, Barack Obama, Chnglish, CAAP

On March 18, 2008, presidential candidate Barack Obama gave one of his most resonant speeches. His subject was, to use a phrase of Langston Hughes, America and the racial mountain. Obama's speech was entitled "More Perfect Union," a phrase he often used in speeches during this campaign and early in his presidency.<sup>①</sup>

"More perfect" is the sign of Ralph Waldo Emerson's Moral Perfectionism, to use the contemporary American philosopher Stanley Cavell's term for Emerson's view that while we move toward provisional goals, we do well not to fret about arriving at a destination: we dwell in process and betray that process if our orientation is toward predetermined results. Our journeys don't end, our business is unfinished, our poems open upon ever new poems. More perfect is a direction, a movement, not a final state of idealized perfection.

The poetics here is ethical not moral: dialogic and situational rather than fixed and rule-bound.

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\* This CAAP Inaugural Address was presented at the first convention of the Chinese / American Association of Poetry and Poetics, China Central Normal University, Wuhan, on September 30, 2011.

<sup>①</sup> Please refer to: <http://my.barackobama.com/page/content/hisownwords>.

Obama's speech begins with a slight truncation of the opening words of the Preamble to the U.S. Constitution (he elides "of the United States"): "We the People [of the United States,] in Order to form a more perfect Union." Not a perfect one but a more perfect one, with an emphasis on process rather than final destination: ever more perfect, never achieving perfection. It's no wonder Emerson's Moral Perfectionism is called pragmatic: We do the best we can. Obama's poetics are explicit:

... we perfect our union by understanding that we may have different stories, but we hold common hopes; that we may not look the same and we may not have come from the same place, but we all want to move in the same direction. ...

Without saying the word, Obama continues by holding forth the truth of miscegenation, of the syncretic, as the promise of a more perfect union: "I am the son of a black man from Kenya and a white woman from Kansas." And this is the grace note on which he ends his speech: "that is where the perfection begins."

We are always at that beginning; it is the promise of America.

So here today at this first conference of the Chinese American Association of Poetry and Poetics, with the theme of "dialog" – allow me to recast our national motto, *E pluribus unum* – from many one – in the name of an ever emerging dialogic poetics of the Americas – as *In unum pluribus*– in one many – but also *In pluribus unum* – within many one.

The question of what kind of union or unity exists in the diverse poetries of the Americas is vexing but rewarding. It is a founding question for the poetics of the Americas.

For the problem we face in American poetry is how to pursue affinities while resisting unities and how to resist unities without losing the capacity to be poetically responsible; that is, how to be responsive to, and supportive of, those poetic tendencies and affiliations that deepen, intensify, and extend the activity of poetry. The point is to pursue the collective and dialogic nature of poetry without necessarily defining the nature of this collectivity — call it a virtual collectivity or, to cite Cavell's Emerson: "this new yet unapproachable America": this

unrepresentable yet ever presenting collectivity that is at the heart of the poetics that I have come here to Wuhan to proclaim.

A syncretic poetics of ingenuity and invention, of collage and palimpsest, and of encounter and change through the encounter ...

The impossible poetics of the Americas of which I speak has, in the U.S., a history of breaks from the received literary language of England. The vernacular was a crucial factor in many of those breaks, particularly as explored by such African-Americans poets as Paul Laurence Dunbar, Langston Hughes, Sterling Brown, J. W. Johnson, and Melvin Tolson. At the same time, the American language was being transformed by the "bad" or "broken" English of the European immigrants from the 1880s through the early years of the new century: "new" syntaxes, new expressions came along with the new world. Here it is significant that first-wave modernists William Carlos Williams, Gertrude Stein, and second-wave modernist including Louis Zukofsky were themselves second-language speakers of English, while others were children of second-language speakers. So for these children of immigrants, English became less transparent, more a medium subject to reforming.

So the question is: "Can you find, in the massive plurality of recent American poetry, common reference points? Is there, in that 'cacophony,' some kind of harmony?" – It is always possible, I'd answer, to find points in common just as it is always possible to find differences. As to the points in common, the question for American poetry – and it has been a question for a long time – is what are the terms of the common? Emerson imagines an America that is in process, where the commonness is an aspiration, not something that is a given social fact. We are, to quote Langston Hughes, a "people in transition." The "point" is not to hurry through this *going* because we never arrive. Perhaps this is what we have in common, the particularities that we cultivate within the same space: our simultaneous presence to, and difference from, one another. <sup>①</sup>

CAAP was founded in 2008, both at the University of Pennsylvania's Center for Programs in Contemporary Writing and here at Central China Normal University, where I am honored to be a visiting professor. CAAP's founding was one result of the American Poetry conference we convened in July 2007, here at Wuhan, attended by Marjorie Perloff, myself and many of you again here today. The first publication

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<sup>①</sup> This section has been adapted from *Attack of the Difficult Poems: Essays and Inventions* (University of Chicago Press, 2011)

related to our fledging organization was *Our Common Sufferings: An Anthology of World Poets in Memoriam 2008 Sichuan Earthquake*, which was edited by Nie Zhenzhao and Luo Lianggong. The earthquake was among the reasons for the postponement of a visit to the University of Pennsylvania by group of poets from Wuhan, who finally did make it to Penn for a bilingual reading of Penn and Wuhan poets on December 9, 2010; video of the event is available on PennSound.<sup>①</sup> Also since 2008 we have hosted at Penn a Chinese scholar studying American poetry during every semester. Last year, Yanrong was in residence; and this year Luo is a Fulbright scholar at Penn, along with Zhang Yuejun, who I first met here in 2007.

CAAP, like this conference, is dedicated to dialog and, as I've suggested, I take this as a term of poetics more than just a gesture of friendship. Cultural exchanges and translation between Chinese and American poetry pose serious, but, I would also say, thrilling barriers and opportunities for dialog.

I take the rather perverse view that the more we focus on the barriers the great the possibility for the exchange.

Obstacles for translation provide opportunities for dialog.

The "same" words, phrases, gestures, styles, or forms – if the word "same" can be used provisionally here –often have the opposite, or in any case deviant, meanings in a Chinese poem and in an American poem. To translate a poem we need not only to translate the literal meaning but also account for the social and cultural and, for it is not the same, the aesthetic meaning and context. One could say that about all translations, so also, for example, translations between the French and the American, but the meaning of this injunction would itself need to be applied differently, for the U.S. and France have an intense history of poetic exchanges going back over 150 years and with special emphasis on the most formally inventive poetry of both cultures. With Chinese and American poetry, our cultures' relative isolation from one another over this same 150 years poses other, unique challenges, one of which is acknowledging the dissimilarities in our foundational poetic assumptions, the ground against which innovation and tradition figure.

Indeed, it is this very trope of innovation and tradition that means something quite different for a Chinese poet a hundred years ago and an American or European poet of that same moment. In Li Zhimin's illuminating lecture as a CAAP Fellow at Penn, he stressed that, thinking still of the modernist period, in a Chinese context what we in the West hear as a cry of radical individuality, noncomformity, or rebellion

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<sup>①</sup> Please refer to: <http://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Wuhan-Poets.php>

would be heard in a Chinese poem as “Western” – not the shock of the new but the importation of foreign goods.<sup>①</sup>

There is no simple way to make this apparent in a translation since the same words or content or gesture are understood culturally in opposite ways. Such key terms of poetics as conformity, deformity, difficulty, tradition, individual, talent, obedience, disobedience, rebellion, radicalism, and aversion are aversive – swerve from one another -- in American and Chinese poetry. For this reason, universalism is both nonproductive and monological. A simple way of putting this: If I use “Coke” (for Coca-Cola) in a poem it is not the same as Pepsi or soda. If “Coke” is in a Chinese poem it doesn’t mean the same thing and so can’t, exactly, be translated as “Coke” or if it is, still, it’s meaning is aversive to my meaning of the same word in my poem. Coke the product is international – and possibly the “same” substance – but its meaning in a poem is local.

Could this also be true of water?

Looking at it the other way around, it was initially difficult for me to grasp key aspect of Mao’s poems. For one thing, it’s hard to imagine any American political leader being so deeply engaged with poetry, or producing poetry that has been recognize as a major artistic achievement, so the social meaning of what it is to be a poet are not shared, are not common. During the campaign, Obama was sometimes accused of being poetic: just pretty words; he walked a thin line because the oratory of the black church, from which he sometimes drew, is viewed by as inappropriately poetic to those who associate a “just the facts” rhetorical style with good governance. There is well-known saying, that you should campaign in poetry but govern in prose. Certainly, in office Obama has adopted a very prosaic approach to his speeches, which I am sure is very conscious decision to avoid seeming too poetic, in the sense of “just talk” rather than action. I think it’s disappointing. In a recent poem, I wrote, “A President should campaign in prose and govern in poetry.” I wasn’t being ironic: I think this is the lesson of Moral Perfectionism.<sup>②</sup>

Mao, of course, was not just a head of state, but also a revolutionary leader. We do have a poetry of political and social rebellion and radicalism in America – one especially associated with the 1930s – and indeed Langston Hughes’s connection to

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<sup>①</sup> Li Zhimin, “New Chinese Poetry: The Origin and the Development — From the Perspective of Cultural Exchanges between China and the West,” in *International Literary Quarterly* #10 (Feb. 2010); <http://interlitq.org/issue10/zhimin-li/job.php>.

<sup>②</sup> President Jimmy Carter did publish a book of poetry after he left office; but this work is a sentimental pastime and not put forward as a significant artistic achievement. There was also a satiric book of mangled phrases spoken by President George Bush II set as poems.

the Communist Party is one part of that story. But Mao's poems have none of the markers of socialist realism or formal radicalism; they are prized, indeed, for their superb execution of traditional forms, and moreover by his great skill as a calligrapher. By the same token, if Bei Dao's poems are translated into conventional sounding American free-verse, as some were early on, the style chosen for the American version would fail to convey one of the most fundamental aspect of how the poems were heard, and how they mean, to Chinese ears, which is the most interesting aspect of the work. This would be true, perversely, in direct proportion to the literal accuracy of such a translation, because the apparently "same" or in any case mistily similar style does not mean the "same" thing is the different cultures. Indeed the term "misty" is itself an example of a vexed term because it conveys something quite different in the American than in Chinese

The incommensurable cultural divergence of American social space – the many in our putative one, the indissolvable multiples in our indivisible union, our states united by difference not sameness, is itself, crucially, something not shared by Chinese and American poetics. So the emergent meaning of American forms that mark the course of Moral Perfectionism, including our cultural agonism, the overlay and melting of African-American dialect, immigrant second languages, and the ghostly silence of scores of indigenous languages are not readily able to be articulated into Chinese. And vice versa: in Chinese and American poetics, linguist divergence, catachresis, "bad" grammar, vernacular, and accent would have different meanings and, in Chinese poetry are not present in the "same" way, because the history of Chinese dialects is not analogous to the history of American vernaculars.

*Our Common Sufferings* – as the book on the Wenchuan earthquake is called – explicitly acknowledges the catastrophic result of the earthquake, almost 70,000 dead. The scale of that is so horrific, that, if we begin to think, as Blake has it, of every cry of man, every woman, every child, of every parent, or every teacher, of every sister and brother, it is overwhelming; the mind, no matter how empathetic its heart, shuts down, we say "breaks." A parent's grief at the death of her or his child is so searing as to cut through cultural differences, or so I imagine. But whether that grief is understood in terms of individual deaths or collective deaths – well there cultural difference begins to fill up the void of sameness, for culture abhors a vacuum as much as nature.

Rachel Carvosso begins her poem in the volume: "natural disaster is not natural." For an American, thinking of the terrible devastation of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, the line immediately brings to mind the political context of that

disaster. It's not that any of the deaths "in themselves" are made more or less unbearable by their context, but the cultural meaning of the event surely changes. And that's where translating the literal and not the cultural creates a problem, because many poems are not, at heart, about the death itself, or the grief itself. If we want universal expression there, the expression of the body in pain, then I think of Artaud's mark of the outer limits of art, the piercing scream. But poems traffic in cultural, not unmediated, pain, even if through their cultural signs they give voices to something near to that unmediated pain.

If in a poem about Katrina I included some variant on "Brownie, your're doing a heck of a job" – well the Americans here will recognize that, but probably very few of the Chinese. No technical knowledge of English will get you there. And even if you looked up on the web the origin of the phrase – a remark then President Bush made to the head of the federal disaster relief organization – the significance of it would require commentary: not just to say that "Brownie" was in fact not doing a good job, but also why the expression "heck of a" played into it; why it's different than if President Bush has said "excellent" or "adequate" or "noble" or "fantastic," or if he had not used his nickname or even that nickname.

By the same token, when the Beijing artist Ai Weiwei, son of the poet, Ai Qing, after all, referred last month to his sense of deep alienation in the city, calling it "a constant nightmare," he is not saying the same thing, not referring to the same urban alienation, as T. S. Eliot in "The Waste Land." <sup>①</sup>

In the first translation of mine into Chinese, done primarily by my friend Zhang Ziqing in 1993, we entered into an illuminating dialog on cultural versus literal translation, which is recorded in Zhang's commentaries on the poem and in my poem "A Test of Poetry."<sup>②</sup> What interested me here is that no matter how formally difficult a poem is, in terms of syntax or structure, and many of mine poems are difficult in that way, the overriding difficulty is cultural, especially in terms of vernacular, cultural reference, and social context. Nonstandard, vernacular, slang, or accented language in a poem, which is to a fundamental formal device of much 20th

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<sup>①</sup> "This city is not about other people or buildings or streets but about your mental structure. If we remember what Kafka writes about his Castle, we get a sense of it. Cities really are mental conditions. Beijing is a nightmare. A constant nightmare." See <http://www.thedailybeast.com/newsweek/2011/08/28/ai-weiwei-on-beijing-s-nightmare-city.html> Newsweek.

<sup>②</sup> *Selected Language Poetry*, trans. Zhang Ziqing and Yunte Huang (Sichuan Art and Literature Publishing House, 1993) "A Test of Poetry" was collected in *My Way: Speeches and Poems* (University of Chicago Press, 1999); web version is at: <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/archive/poem.html?id=181126>.

century American poetry, loses its meaning when translated for the lexical or word-for-word meaning.

In the case of my work, I often distort my cultural references, making it almost impossible to look up what the "original" reference is: a daunting problem for the translation. In one poem I refer to "Fat-bottom boats" – an oblique reference to glass bottom boats, but with the added slang of a "fat bottom" – meaning a person with a large behind – and then whatever association I intended by the reference to fat-bottom boats in the first place (a memory of a childhood vacation in Florida). Zhang thoughtfully queried a another phrase of mine – "caucus of Caucasians" – whose meaning is not the literal one of a white race party but rather a sarcastic remark on the way Americans mark all groups except the dominant one, whites; so this phrase would never be used in everyday language.

My best example, from a poem not yet translated into Chinese, is "going cold turkey or luke-warm tongue." This combines Jewish deli meats (why Jewish? since turkey and tongue and even pastrami are not necessarily ethnically marked, and yet I would say they are in this line), with the slang expression for heroin withdrawal, with a pun on tongue meaning language, so a brain-tongue twister. Add to that – we say insult to injury! – the line is a bad grammatical construction, an example of catachresis, which increases its wackiness quotient.

More than the dictionary, data searches on the web provide the best reference for such colloquial and cultural specific references and uses. Restrictions on the ability to search or access the entire internet are often justified by political reasons. But are these political reasons worth the potential loss of maximizing our dialog through poetry? [Pause.] Yes, that is meant to be comic: what government cares that much about poetry? But if I risk becoming a latter day Don Quixote for a moment, a culture's language is one of it's greatest assets and the more we acknowledge that, the richer we will be.

There is much discussion about Chinglish, but in traveling in China I found many of the Chinglish signs totally delightful and indeed poetic: they marked, even if unintentionally, real cultural barriers to translation and in that sense were for me sites of dialog, an opening into difference, rather than into the void space of sameness. A sign that warns against climbing over a fence says "Prohibition of surmounting" (禁止跨越) which I find quite beautiful (in American English, we surmount psychological obstacles but not physical fences); a sign in a hotel elevator touches on the magnificent impossibility of literal translation: a food dish is labeled,



Jellyfish with Jew's Ear (醋椒海蜇头) – something I would like to use as the title of a poem I like it so very much.<sup>①</sup>

Language is never simply technical nor ever basically literal. Even business language or public signage requires a poetics. This is why CAA emphasizes not just the study of the Chinese or American language in the abstract but rubbing up against the way the language is used, its vernaculars and particularities, through the study of literature and language, not just language instruction on its own. Perversely, perhaps, studying extreme forms of language use, such as in poetry, may be the best exercise a student of English can have if her or she wants not just to register the words spoken but grapple with the meaning. Language instruction requires literary study, let's call it poetics; it is indispensable. And that is a lesson for the U.S. and for China: technical efficiency in language instruction may sacrifice far too much. It may enable some level of communication, perhaps, but not dialog. In this sense the radical translation practices from Chinese to English of Xu Bing, Yunte Huang, and Jonathan Stalling have much to teach us, in the U.S., about Chinese poetics.<sup>②</sup>

My remarks here are in part occasioned by the release this week of my selected poems in Chinese, translated by Profs. Nie and Luo, and soon my selected essays. This is a daunting, some might say impossible task, so I am so very grateful to both of them for undertaking it, and very honored by the publications. While Professors Nie and Luo and their associated have worked now for years on these translations, trying, pragmatically, to do the best job possible, and they have truly succeeded, doing an even more perfect job than I could have imagined possible. But still, I hold out as a matter of principle that such a translation project needs to necessarily include wrong translations along with right and it is the wrong ones that will do the most to provoke dialog. As we say about free speech: the cure for "bad" speech is more speech not correct speech. Translation can also be done under the sign of moral perfectionism: if we ever arrive at the correct translation then we have entered

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<sup>①</sup> I have made a collection of these signs at:

<http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/bernstein/blog/archive/china-signs-2007.html>.

<sup>②</sup> Yunte Huang's *SHI: A Radical Reading of Chinese Poetry* (Roof Books) provided a radical translation of Chinese classical poetry, bringing into the American a sense of the linguistic structure of the Chinese written character as presented in the poems. While this mode of translation may at first seem literal, its originality is that it brings over the linguistic materiality of the source poems, character by character. In *SHI*, Huang transforms our sense of "Chineseness" by replacing the Orientalized scenic and stylistic tropes of traditional translations with multilevel encounters with the Chinese language. Jonathan Stalling's *Yinglish* (Counterpath, 2011) is an uncanny homophonic translation: Chinese characters read aloud are heard as English, creating double poems, one in Chinese and one in the American.

a void, a dead space. Otherwise we are in process with one translation, like one possibility, provoking another. For every solution requires another solution.

For a dialog to take place between our cultures, open exchange across digital networks is fundamental. At PennSound we have thousands of readings by poets, from the Wuhan group to William Carlos Williams. Hearing recordings of this work gives up dynamics not accessible in text versions of the poem: tempo, pitch, accent, timbre, tone, and rhythm. Here the internet offers possibility to dialog across the world, China to America, that was not conceivable in the past. It is a gift to us all.

We are gathered here today in Wuhan to celebrate Marjorie Perloff. In her keynote address yesterday, she made a strong case for a socio-historical and aesthetically formal close reading: where we listen closely to cultural specificities of a poem and read those as guides to culture. Of American scholars and critics writing about 20th century and contemporary poetry and poetics today, Marjorie Perloff most fully embodies the values I am exuberantly espousing today. She is not only our leader in a context-dense, culturally-embedded close reading. She is also our hero for the way she has championed new poetry and new poets, against all odds. I know I will never be able to thank her enough for her generous support. But I will say it hear as clear as I can: Thank you, Marjorie. Thank you ever so much.

A few days ago, on the drive from Xianyang to the Wudang mountains, there was a sign posted on the road:

### **Curve Continuously**

Something in America we would have said in a far less poetic way, *Caution: Road Curves*. And I thought, yes, this is my aversive poetics: *curve continuously*. When we got to the Wudang mountains, the trip to the highest summit was not easy. We struggled with the steep ascent. And I thought of Langston Hughes again: "Life ... ain't been no crystal stair": my own personal journey, Hughes's racial mountain, the mountain that separates one towering culture from another, as the U.S. and China. The view from the top of the Wudang mountains, at the Golden Palace, was no better than the views below, all were sublime. What distinguished the view from the top was the difficulty getting there. "Life ... ain't been no crystal stair." The difficulty of the journey overwhelmed the destination, which became a pivot, a place to turn around and go back down the mountain or up to another peak. Our journey was not over; it was always just beginning.

Sometimes a correct translation is less significant, less generative, than a "wrong" one that marks a clash of signs, of cultures, of language, of values, of metaphors: such accented translations are a mark of intercultural production rather than mimicry. This is what makes so many of the Chinese signs I've mentioned poetically striking. The clash of signs is a manifestation of points of contact; awkward, perhaps, but the beginning of a dialog, which is a kind of journey without summit, without end, without destination.

Yunte Huang, in his provocative and brilliant book about Charlie Chan, Chinese-American novel and movie detective, focuses on Chan's delightfully poetic aphorisms as just the kind of cultural mark I am addressing here.<sup>①</sup> This is pure product of America, as William Carlos Williams figures it in "For Elsie." For the pure product of American is always impure, a mixture, a sign swerving from its destination.

Charlie Chan says, "Chinese funny people; when say 'go,' mean 'go.'"

Charley Chan also says, "Every fence have two sides."

This Charley says: Jew's ear like motor car in lake: learn to adapt.

When we got to one of the many peaks in the Wudang mountains, a place that is the living home of Daoism, we saw all around us other peaks, other troughs, other paths.

We were one among many.

*In unum pluribus*

In one many.

Out of one, many.

Not a destination but a weigh station, a place between the peaks.

Life ain't been no crystal staircase, not the life of the poetics of the Americas nor the relation of American poetry to Chinese poetry.

Curve continuously.

*Edited by Li Zhimin*

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<sup>①</sup> Yunte Huang, *Charley Chan: The Untold Story of the Honorable Detective and His Rendezvous with American History* (Norton, 2011).



## Poetry and Sympathy: An Example from Coleridge \*

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**Abstract:** This paper presents analysis and commentary focussed on a 'conversation poem' by S.T. Coleridge, 'This Lime Tree Bower My Prison', in the context of a specific episode in his personal and social life, examining the poem's style as an experimental hybrid between informal reflection and the more elevated manner of the pindaric ode. Each stage of the poem's composition, its language and state of consciousness, is discussed in close detail, against a theoretical background of "sympathy", a current idea at the time, as a framework for projective thought and emotion in the poet's inner life.

**Keywords:** S.T. Coleridge, 'This Lime Tree Bower My Prison', conversation poem, pindaric ode, landscape description, sympathy, Charles Lamb.

### This Lime-Tree Bower my Prison

#### ADVERTISEMENT

In the June of 1797, some long-expected Friends paid a visit to the Author's Cottage, and on the morning of their arrival, he met with an accident, which disabled him from walking during the whole time of their stay. One Evening, when they had left him for a few hours, he composed the following lines in the Garden-Bower.

Well, they are gone, and here must I remain,  
This Lime-tree Bower my prison! I have lost  
Beauties and Feelings, such as would have been  
Most sweet to my remembrance, even when age  
Had dimmed mine eyes to blindness! They, meanwhile, 5  
Friends, whom I never more may meet again,  
On springy heath, along the hill-top edge,  
Wander in gladness, and wind down, perchance,

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\* The notes are prepared by J.H. Prynne.

To that still roaring dell, of which I told:  
The roaring dell, o'erwooded, narrow, deep, 10  
And only speckled by the mid-day Sun;  
Where its slim trunk the Ash from rock to rock  
Flings arching like a Bridge; -that branchless Ash,  
Unsun'd and damp, whose few poor yellow leaves  
Ne'er tremble in the gale, yet tremble still, 15  
Fann'd by the water-fall! and there my friends  
Behold the dark green file of long lank Weeds,  
That all at once (a most fantastic sight!)  
Still nod and drip beneath the dripping edge  
Of the blue clay-stone.

Now, my Friends emerge 20  
Beneath the wide wide Heaven -and view again  
The many-steepled tract magnificent  
Of hilly fields and meadows, and the sea,  
With some fair bark, perhaps, whose Sails light up  
The slip of smooth clear blue betwixt two Isles 25  
Of purple shadow! Yes! they wander on  
In gladness all; but thou, methinks, most glad,  
My gentle-hearted Charles! for thou hast pined  
And hunger'd after Nature, many a year,  
In the great City pent, winning thy way 30  
With sad yet patient soul, through evil and pain  
And strange calamity! Ah! slowly sink  
Behind the western ridge, thou glorious Sun!  
Shine in the slant beams of the sinking orb  
Ye purple heath-flowers! richlier burn, ye clouds! 35  
Live in the yellow light, ye distant groves!  
And kindle, thou blue Ocean! So my Friend  
Struck with deep joy may stand, as I have stood,  
Silent with swimming sense; yea, gazing round  
On the wide landscape, gaze till all doth seem 40  
Less gross than bodily; and of such hues  
As veil the Almighty Spirit, when he makes

Spirits perceive his presence.

A delight

Comes sudden on my heart, and I am glad  
As I myself were there! Nor in this bower, 45  
This little lime-tree bower, have I not mark'd  
Much that has sooth'd me. Pale beneath the blaze  
Hung the transparent foliage; and I watch'd  
Some broad and sunny leaf, and lov'd to see  
The shadow of the leaf and stem above 50  
Dappling its sunshine! And that Walnut-tree  
Was richly ting'd, and a deep radiance lay  
Full on the ancient Ivy, which usurps  
Those fronting elms, and now, with blackest mass  
Makes their dark branches gleam a lighter hue 55  
Through the late twilight; and though now the Bat  
Wheels silent by, and not a Swallow twitters,  
Yet still the solitary humble Bee  
Sings in the bean-flower! Henceforth I shall know  
That Nature ne'er deserts the wise and pure, 60  
No Plot so narrow, be but Nature there,  
No waste so vacant, but may well employ  
Each faculty of sense, and keep the heart  
Awake to Love and Beauty! and sometimes  
'Tis well to be bereft of promised good, 65  
That we may lift the Soul, and contemplate  
With lively joy the joys we cannot share.  
My gentle-hearted Charles! when the last Rook  
Beat its straight path along the dusky air  
Homewards, I blest it! deeming, its black wing 70  
(Now a dim speck, now vanishing in light)  
Had cross'd the mighty Orb's dilated glory,  
While thou stood'st gazing; or when all was still,  
Flew creaking o'er thy head, and had a charm  
For thee, my gentle-hearted Charles, to whom 75  
No Sound is dissonant which tells of Life.

SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE (1772-1834), poem composed in July 1797 but not published until 1800 (without named author, in revised form), then collected in *Sibylline Leaves* (London, 1817); the text here, from Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Poetical Works, I: Poems* (Reading Text): Part 1, ed. J.C.C. Mays (Princeton, N.J., 2001), pp. 350-54, follows that of *Sibylline Leaves*, with 'tract' (line 22) preferred for 'track'. The annotations to the Mays edition provide invaluable information, for which grateful thanks and acknowledgement are here expressed; but I have altered his line-numbering, to provide a more simple match to the state of the poem as given here.

During the spring of 1797 Coleridge, age 24 and already married, had become close friends with William Wordsworth and Dorothy his sister; Coleridge had become acquainted with Wordsworth when they were both students at Cambridge University; the Wordsworths were now living at Race-down in Somerset, only a few miles from the village of Nether Stowey where Coleridge lived with his wife and child from 1796 to 1798. For the first time, Coleridge found himself in the close company of a poet whose powers matched or even exceeded his own; and who shared his pro-found interest in the beauties of external nature, the mystery of man's internal nature and the life of human emotion, and the relation of these to the place of human kind in the larger universe as a whole. The theme of the 'one life', that all nature including man composed a single united and living whole, had been pre-occupying him since at least 1795, and poems by both him and Wordsworth during this time shew how they both shared the 'one life' interest (there is a good brief account of this background, to which acknowledgement is gratefully made, in John Beer, ed., Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Poems* [London, 1993], pp. 138-42).

Wordsworth and Coleridge collaborated over their joint composition of *Lyrical Ballads*, the collection of new poems first published (anonymously) in 1798, and during this period Wordsworth was forming his ideas of a new language of poetry, that should be simple and natural, spoken in 'the real language of man speaking to men'. These ideas are fully described in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, which reveals the distinct influence and co-operation from Coleridge. At the same time Coleridge was moving away from the influence of Milton's grand style and developing a more freely-spoken idiom for poetic composition, what he called his 'conversation poems' (he gives this term as a sub-title to his 'The Nightingale', composed in 1798). The conversational mode is to be personal and spontaneous,



as natural speech between friends or in improvised letter-writing, including descriptions of scenes, deep thoughts and reflections, memories and passages of emotion, even passing moods. The form is relaxed, following along with its own threads, without elaborate verse structure or artificially grand language: the manner is deliberately to be a new, 'natural' way of tracing out the emotional contours of thinking and feeling, in composing a poem which moves between perception and memory, from outside observation to exploring inward thoughts. 'This Lime-Tree Bower' is a prime example of this new manner.

At the same time, this poem contains passages composed in a much grander and more elevated style, consciously 'poetic' in choice of words and manner of expression. These features display the continuing influence of the *Pindaric Ode*, first brought into English literary practice by imitation from ancient Greek poetry. In this tradition the extended *ode* is a more formal poem in strong personal voice, sometimes in an idiom of apostrophe or address, sometimes directed to a person but also sometimes to a personified abstraction ('Ode to Evening', 'To Autumn', 'Mont Blanc', etc). In the Romantic period (approx. 1790-1820) the ode became a highly flexible hybrid form, supporting the more elevated Pindaric style and also the 'conversational' mode being developed by Coleridge. The interaction between these two contrasting modes of composition gives 'This Lime-Tree Bower' a very distinct energy and life of its own.

## I. EXPLANATORY NOTES AND COMMENTS

**ADVERTISEMENT:** the preliminary note addressed directly to the reader is in relaxed but formal written idiom and performs two functions. First, it situates the poem as in some sense recording a real-life event in the life-experience of the poet, as a first-person narrative. This aspect justifies the generally prevailing use of present-tense verbs, as an account of actual occurrence within the time-span of the author's composing his poem. And second, it indicates briefly a distinctive circumstance (the accident in the kitchen) which explains the division of this domestic visit into two temporarily separated pathways: the outward excursion, and the staying-at-home. Coleridge explained the mishap in a letter to Robert Southey: his wife Sara on the first morning of the visit 'accidentally emptied a skillet [= cooking pan] of boiling milk on my foot, which confined me during the whole time of C. Lamb's stay'. This is by no

means an epic or grand theme, but domestic and highly personal: so that if the poem is in some sense an *ode* it is also in the nature of a memoir or a reminiscence. The term 'long-expected' signals a certain eager looking-forward to the free enjoyment of company, in the event somewhat frustrated by the effect of the last-minute injury.

**Well,** (1): this is a colloquial opening, deliberately not in a grand or elevated manner, to set the effect of a speaking voice in reverie or reflective mood, the sign of a 'conversation' poem. The commas in the central part of this line emphasise the hesitating movement of thinking aloud, not in worked out and deliberate syntax. The cadence of this word may also contain an undertone of resignation or disappointment, at the consequence of the recent domestic accident.

**they are gone,** (1): observe the difference between 'they *have* gone', and 'they *are* gone', in the opening line. The first of these would report the point-of-view of the now departed visitors; the second alternative reports instead the point-of-view of the person left behind, almost his mock-bereavement. The effect of implied contrast is very delicate, and fully conscious.

**and here must I remain** (1): the normal word-order would be, 'and I must remain here'. To place *here* first emphasises that the speaker does not have choice of location, he is *here* and must remain so, because his injury has temporarily deprived him of his freedom. In this way he is physically restricted, but his mind (thoughts and feelings) is free to roam across his memories of the landscape all around him, in compensation for his captivity. Also by this inverted word-order the pronoun *I* is displaced from what would have been a metrically unemphasised position ('*here I must remain*') to a position of emphasis, so that *I* is in marked contrast with *they*; thus, *they* are free but the *I* is not.

**This Lime-Tree Bower** (2): a *bower* is a comfortable out-door place, of seclusion, in a garden, doubtlessly with a convenient seat and covered over with leafy branches to provide the comfort of shade; likely to be a favourite place to sit and enjoy the atmosphere of reflective ease. It is more

informal and 'natural' than a room inside the house, closer to the open air; and yet the word *bower* is also somewhat poetical (importantly used by Edmund Spenser, 1552?-1599) so that the word itself is not quite part of natural speech. Coleridge was consciously following Spenser's example when he wrote: 'For strait so fair a Form did upwards start / (No fairer deck'd the Bowers of old Romance)' ('In the Manner of Spenser' [1795], 34-35).

**my Prison!** (2): there is a gentle irony in describing this comfortable domestic location as a prison, normally a place of more harsh punishment; this is the local reason for the exclamation-mark. And yet the poem contains many exclamation-marks, of which this is only the first. Such punctuation indicates something surprising or remarkable, so that what is a mere observation becomes lifted up, more conscious and maybe also more grand. This is what might be called an exclamatory style, and it is typical of the Pindaric Ode. Thus the colloquial manner of the poem's opening is balanced in contrast with these touches of grander poetic idiom, to create an underlying contrast of treatment, sweetly humorous and with a hint of reaching out to an adventure of mental amusement, though not without deeper feelings in prospect.

**I have lost** (2): to pause here at the line-ending gives dramatic effect to the potential seriousness of a personal loss, which turns out to be not so much of an affliction, but which introduces the contrast with the easy freedom of his visitors, whom he has sent off to make a walk even though he cannot accompany them. In this way, the freedom that he has lost can be retrieved in his mind by imagination, by following their progress in his thoughts through the various stages of their walk which he knows so well and can freely remember. They have freedom to walk; he has freedom to compose: both acts are kinds of *excursion*.

**Beauties and Feelings** (3): he hopes deeply and generously that his visitors will respond with uplift of spirit to the beautiful sights and sounds of Nature all around them, so that the constantly unfolding prospect of beauty shall provoke a feeling of delight in due proportion: this is all fresh and new to them, and profoundly familiar to the poet who is left behind. In this way,

the feelings of admiration and gratitude are themselves part of the sense of beauty, of its sweet power, and thus inwardly part of beauty itself. The close link between 'Beauties and Feelings' is marked by the inconspicuous but important word *and*, which is also emphasised by the initial capital letters for these two nouns. This feature (the capital letters) represents *personification*, a figure of speech in which some abstract quality or idea or prominent element in the grammar of a sentence is made to seem as if an independent agency or presence, almost like a person. Coleridge is not consistent in his use of this traditional figure: sometimes he uses capital letters, sometimes he doesn't, this being all part of his relaxed informal style of writing.

**such as would have been** (3): the tense here is what may be called pluperfect conditional, representing the sense of frustration at an experience looked forward to but then cancelled at the last minute. The shifts of tense in this poem are subtle and complex, most ingeniously controlled and expressive, because there are two main parallel narratives: the sequence of what the visitors can be imagined to be experiencing; and the sequence of imagination and memory in the mind of the poet. These two threads are frequently merged or inter-crossed, but are kept distinct by appropriate tense-forms. There is also an implicit further narrative which is the experience of the reader: we hear all the time the voice of the musing poet, but also through his powers of imaginative description we are able to be virtually present on this walk, knowing all the while that the poet cannot be with us in person out there even though we never lose his voice; so that we are virtually present with him too.

**most sweet to my remembrance** (4): here the musing speaker is once more both a natural person, with loved family and loved friends, and also by temperament and profession a conscious poet, with resources of imagination and powers of expression. Here are two more parallel narratives: the human being has lost what the poet can restore, while he reflects on the potentially sweet memories which he could have added to his personal storehouse of remembered happiness, as a refreshment of spirit that would have the power to stay with him and give constant repeated pleasure of recollection: this is a Wordsworthian theme, and in

some deep aspects this poem is a response to Wordsworth and part of a continuing exchange of ideas between the two poets. In the fact of the actual occurrence this sweetness is the more sweet because it is lost; and yet a lost sweetness, freely and enrichingly imagined, may be even yet more sweet in mental experience, even onwards into a much later stage in the poet's future by which time he will likely have lost his own powers of keen and clear sight.

**They, meanwhile, (5):** this new sentence returns to the narrative of those who are gone on this delightful excursion; the usage of 'meanwhile', separated off by commas before and after, represents their easy freedom of movement. The sentence form both displays this un-confined space and also confers it upon them, as the poet's special gift to his dear friends; and thus, also, as a gift to himself and to his readers.

**whom I never more may meet again (6):** there is a touch of sweet humour in this exaggeration (*hyperbole*), because there is no strong reason to think of this temporary parting as permanent separation. The mind senses a shadow of deeper loss but is refreshed by the thought that of course the visitors will soon return, with tales to tell of their pleasure and refreshment. Yet the underlying sense, that any and every parting may indeed be final, reveals a strain of potential (and hence actual) melancholy within these prospects of joy. Poetical melancholy is a familiar theme in Romantic poetry of this period.

**On springy heath, along the hill-top edge (7):** here is the first part of a landscape description which is drawn from the poet's memory, of repeated visits to these favourite spots. He knows that the heather plants under foot are wiry and not so pliant, and he knows that his friends will sense this through their footsteps just as he has so often done himself. 'springy' is part of his internal knowledge, stored in tactile memory, just as the narrow ridge of the hill-top implies exertion and balance at a high point and also open views into the prospect all around and below. All this he carries in memory, which is revived in his now imagining these experiences as new and delightful for the visitors. He donates these very specific pleasures

to them, by anticipation, and they in turn are the agency which restores the same pleasures to him, in shared sympathetic imagination.

**wander in gladness** (8): now we are in the present tense of the visitors' experience: 'wander' is unconstricted free movement, and 'gladness' is the (imagined) response to this pleasurable freedom. Once again the poet brings into his mind this freedom for them, and projects his own feelings into theirs by merging the tense-structure of his poem with the imagined present-tense of their excursion. He has outlined the directions of this walk for them, before they set out, and so he knows just where they will be and what they will see and sense all around. Their gladness is in this way his gladness also, both *for* them and *in* himself, through the operation of sympathy.

**wind down, perchance**, (8): again here is used the same present-tense of what the poet foresees as the progress of this small journey of ease and pleasure; from a high point at the hill-top the path now makes a roundabout descent, to a special spot already recommended to them by the poet-speaker during the preparations for the outing. (Perhaps also to be noted is that *wind* as a verb of motion shares its word-origin with *wander* [lines 8, 26].) And yet, since the poet cannot be sure of the exact route taken, he opens the grammar of the sentence with another provisional adverb enclosed by comma-pauses before and after: ', perchance,' which is closely similar to ', meanwhile,' (line 5) and ', perhaps,' of line 24.

**To that still roaring dell** (9) : this is the special place or spot that represents the inner point of this circular excursion, that will concentrate their sense of nature's intimate presence and the many rhythms of generative life that cross over and reflect each other. The *dell* is a small deep valley or hollow place, usually part-covered with trees and vegetation; and if there is water there, it will be cascading or tumbling down the banks into the deepest level below. Here it is *that* dell, Coleridge has visited this particular spot many times before, with an evidently deep affection, and indeed it echoes many features of his leafy bower back in the cottage-garden (though it is possible that on this occasion the actual bower was in a neighbour's garden adjoining his own). This idea of a 'special spot' or locality is in the earlier tradition of 'picturesque' travel, in which

attractive 'views' or 'prospects' are commended and sought out as of special interest: not merely *beautiful* in a generally grand sense but also appealing through some odd or curious features that can make the encounter more personal and surprising. Yet the close insistence on the inner spirit of this place gives it a meaning for Coleridge beyond the appeal of the merely picturesque, and it's this meaning that he hopes his visitors will encounter and themselves fully experience. The quality of incessant sound here, that is so active in his own memory ('still roaring' and not at all *still* in the sense of with-out motion), follows the track of the visitors who as they approach its source will hear the unexpected loud noise before they catch sight of how it is produced. Coleridge *wants* them to be surprised, as he has so often himself been on his repeated visits; he wants them to discover how this concentration of natural energy can be like a birth-moment for them, a disclosure of strong new life that will refresh their spirits and reveal deep unspoken meaning in the accidents of appearance.

**o'erwooded, narrow, deep** (10): here the concentration of enclosure and inwardness is emphasised by these words that arrest the grammar of the sentence, just as the features which they describe arrest the travellers, to take in the little shocks of perception that will allow them to discover and recognise the meaning of their own experience. The *dell* is repeated, again to hold up the travellers; the *dell* is *still* because permanent and unshifting, but also continually ('still') expressive of the many forces of natural life.

**only speckled** (11): the sun mostly cannot directly reach this place hidden by high banks and leafy foliage, except partially at noon when the sun's rays are near-vertical. The place is thus almost-hidden and secret, to be found only by those responsive souls who know how to interpret its significance, by those who have been guided to discover it. This play of light and shade, constantly in motion from the stirring energy of the air-currents, again expresses a rhythm of appearance (compare 'dappling', line 51), like a world in miniature. The *-le* suffix in both verb-forms (speck/*le* and dapp/*le*) indicate smallness, usually viewed with affection; compare the same effect in litt/*le*, gent/*le*, tremb/*le*.

**the Ash** (12): because there is so much moisture here but relatively little sunlight, this solitary ash-tree has grown up thin and lax; its slender branches splay out across the rocky bank. The effect is described with dramatic energy ('flings arching'), and the limited foliage resulting from restricted growth (even suffering from lack of full green colouration) trembles constantly, as if stirred by the breeze. But in fact not so, because the leaves are stirred into motion by the rush of water from the waterfall, the air-currents which it produces! The surprise of this recognition is again acknowledged in the exclamation-mark. Thus the energies of air and water mimic each other, in a kind of natural interplay of life-forces that is quite paradoxical: the leaves do *not* tremble, and yet they *do*: we transfer an expected but wrong interpretation of this motion to a more surprising but correct insight.

**like a Bridge** (13): here is the link for this transfer, and for many others throughout the poem. The experience of natural objects and agencies makes links and connections, so that amongst contrasts of appearance there are deeply shared inner features, in the sense of life and beauty and friendship which are woven together in the 'one life' of organic Nature herself. This bridge reaches across a gap or separation, to carry energy and movement; human communities construct solid bridges to assist travellers, but Nature has contrived this 'bridge' from the branches of a not very strong ash-tree because it does not need to bear the weight of actual bodies: it is an idea-bridge, like metaphor and figurative language, allowing the mind and feelings to cross from one mental footing to another, just as the sounds and letters of *ash/arch/branch/ash/* make their own bridging connection.

**whose few poor yellow leaves** (14): Coleridge may be part-remembering Shakespeare's Sonnet 73: 'That time of year thou mayest in me behold, / When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang / Upon those boughs which shake against the cold ...' The season of the year is different, but in each case the leaves shake and tremble as a figure expressive of human life in sensitive, vulnerable aspect. Yet unlike Shakespeare here, Coleridge is optimistic that joy and friendship can survive accidents of injury; his ash-tree suffers a hunger for light and air that has restricted its growth, but



this very restriction allows it to reach out with clearer meaning for those who view it with full understanding.

**Ne'er tremble in the gale** (15): to *tremble* is to make small repeated movements as if in expression of agitation or vulnerable emotion, almost as if this was a human feeling; thus when the leaves of a tree tremble when stirred by the wind this may seem expressive of transferred emotion in the viewer (what is sometimes called the 'pathetic fallacy', a term coined by John Ruskin, the nineteenth century art critic). Here the wind is described as 'the gale', not because it is a strong or violent movement of air but because 'gale' is a traditionally poetic word for any kind of wind. And here in this dell the normal breezes cannot reach down to create these expressive effects; and yet the leaves *do* tremble, because of the currents of air stirred up by the downward rush of the waterfall.

**fann'd by the water-fall!** (16): here is a delicate and rather beautiful play on words: the air-currents cause the leaves to open out and spread like a *fan*, and also the motion of the air *fans* the leaves to cool and refresh them, as a fan would do; again this is a light touch of the pathetic fallacy. The effect is also surprising, when closely observed; the agency of wind is replaced and mimicked by that of water: hence once again the exclamation-mark. The reader understands how Coleridge has often noticed this special effect, and now his wish is to donate this delicate pleasure to his visitors, so that they will share it; just as the reader will also. In this way the small party of visitors acts as proxy observers for the poet, just as we his readers compose another similar party, guided by him through this animated description of natural beauty.

**my friends / Behold** (16-17): the word *behold* implies more than just looking at or seeing something; it implies a more fixed and held gaze, as if in awe or struck by beauty so that the friends halt motionless to take in the sight. The verse movement delicately catches this momentary pause: not 'his friends behold' but 'his friends / behold', the line-break makes the pause for the reader to sense and perform.

**the dark green file** (17): this is the first part of a strange and even exotic description.

The downrush of the waterfall over rocks creates long strands of water-weeds, which because permanently soaked in water will indeed be dark green in colour; these strands don't grow upwards like normal plants do, they hang downwards, in an ordered rank ('file'). The unsunn'd ash is slim and upward-growing: these weeds are also slim ('long lank') but in the opposite direction.

**that all at once** (18): again the effect is not various and shifting, as up in the open air such motion would be, but uniform and constant: all these strands of weed move together in the current of water, as if alive by virtue of an organic rhythm that brings them into unity, all moving in unison as if by one life. It is 'a most fantastic sight!' because so unexpected and yet so completely natural when fully understood. Here also is maybe another deferred play on words (*pun*): the friends have *wandered* to this place, and now they shall *wonder* at it, gazing in wonderment.

**(a most fantastic sight!)** (18): once again here is the exclamation-mark of surprise and astonishment; but whose surprise is this? Coleridge has seen this strange wonder of nature many times, so that it is by now hardly surprising to him. Yet he can expect and wish, by projective imagination, that the sight will be fantastic to his friends who see it for the first time; and by this means Coleridge can re-imagine his own first experience of it, his initial wonderment. In this way a complex interactive agency is formed: in seeing and hearing through their eyes and ears Coleridge revives his own memories, into a parallel renewed life, which in turn can be shared with the readers of his poem who will never directly experience this actual location. We the readers form the outermost shell of this community of friends; and yet the projective imagination can reach out to include us too, in these feelings of surprise and wonder. That is, the brackets around the phrase 'a most fantastic sight' represent the poet speaking personally to himself in recollection of a private past; but also they designate an aside spoken to the reader of the poem, as well as a marker for the experience of those in the middle of this interactive exchange: the small band of visitors who are the proxy eyes and ears for

the whole constructed and remembered incident. The brackets form a little inside *dell*, as might almost be said.

**Still nod and drip** (19): this is the final confirming description of the dell and what happens there, both apparently motionless (still), but also in perpetual (still) small fluttering oscillations. The weeds nod by swaying as if making a tacit gesture of acknowledgement, perhaps towards us who are drawn into this circuit of exchange between the observers and the observed (another moment of pathetic fallacy). Yet again the surprise is that human beings nod their *heads*, but these files of weeds make their expressive gestures with the tips of their lowest parts, where the down-flowing water drips off in a flutter of spray and droplets. All here is suffused with water, life-giving to animate nature, full of motion and energy.

**the dripping edge / Of the blue clay-stone** (19-20): it might be carelessly thought that Coleridge mentions the colour *blue* only as an enriching contrast with the yellow and green also present nearby. But Coleridge has lived already for a fair while in this neighbourhood; he is an acute observer and also he is knowledgeable about the world around him. It is reasonable to suppose that he well knew that "blue clay-stone" is a correct and technically familiar geological nomenclature: 'blue clay-stone is found at various depths in beds of clay of the same colour, and, being disposed in layers of from four to ten inches thick, is useful for building' (Samuel Lewis, *A Topographical Dictionary of England* ... [4 vols, London, 1831], II, p. 237). If these beds of hard shale-like rock have formed horizontal ledges which interrupt the downflow of the water, there will indeed be dripping edges, as here described. The sound-value of *edge* makes an echo-play with 'the hill-top *edge*' (line 7), and *bridge*, and looks forward to 'the western *ridge*' (line 33); these edges are links to the active boundaries of natural forms.

**Now, my Friends emerge** (20): here the poem opens a new paragraph, which is not a systematically repeating verse-division, as would divide one strophe from another in a formal ode; this is a conversation poem and so the structure is more like that of a notebook entry or a familiar letter to a

friend. This unit of composition was much used also by Wordsworth, to open up and shape the larger rhythm in the sequence of blank verse. And yet, there are three such paragraphs in the final version of Coleridge's poem, as by tradition in the pindaric ode there was division into three stages or movements (*strophe*, *anti-strophe*, and *epode*). Thus here from a dense block of descriptive writing an open space allows the party of friends to come back out into clear open air and to take in the expanse of a grand prospect. This too is part of a tradition of landscape description which both Coleridge and Wordsworth inherited (from e.g. the minor poet William Bowles); but this case is more complex and interesting because we are concerned with the psychology of consciousness and memory in the three participating points of view: the poet-host, his visitors, and we the outer community of readers. The word *now*, at this point, refers to a stage in the excursion of the visitors, as imagined by the poet, it is their time-scale which by projective imagination is now his, and thus now also the framework for us as readers. *Now* carries all these values and links them together as a form of shared present-tense or presence: these links share and diffuse emotions of primal joy at delight in nature, and secondary joy at delight in friendship and human connection. In continuing the narrative of this walk in the present tense ('emerge') Coleridge in his mind continues to trace out their route as following the track which he had commended to them.

**Beneath the wide wide Heaven** (21): this word-repetition for emphasis and poetic effect is found elsewhere in Coleridge: compare 'Alone, alone, all all alone / Alone on the wide wide Sea' (*The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere* [1798], IV.224-5).

**and view again** (21): to speak of 'viewing' a scene, especially the prospect of an extended landscape, is another traditional element in 'picturesque' description; Coleridge is dividing the stages of this excursion into imaginary pictures, drawn from his own memory. Here the scene is spread out to a distance that includes the view of several villages each with its own church and steeple, of cultivated fields and open meadows running right across to the sea in the far distance. The steeples are religious landmarks, catching and reflecting the sunlight as centre-points

in their village communities; but the pattern is visual rather than devotional.

**With some fair bark, perhaps,** (24): like 'perchance' in line 8, Coleridge cannot be sure that their view of the ocean will at this very moment for them include a passing boat (*bark* a poetical word for *boat*), and so he employs another provisional adverb: this boat is only a possible part of the view, but in imagination and memory its sails can throw back a gleam of reflected sunlight. This image is stored in Coleridge's memory, the colour values very distinct, his enthusiasm for this virtual reality ('two Isles / of purple shadow!') once again justifying the exclamation-mark as signalling a small moment of poetical rapture. There may be a latent pun on *Isles/Aisles*, which adds a sense of near-religious grandeur to this perspective.

What is not part of this scene is the question of British contest for control of the sea-lanes, the commercial and trading aspect of marine traffic, the relation of naval shipping to international power and defence of the realm. All of this is excluded by the close personal and domestic aspects, the link between nature and spirit which takes no account of nature's part in the human and social economy; the exclusion is marked by preference for this 'poetic' image, the sailing *bark* with shining sails. These indeed are issues 'in the great City pent', and not part of the dell's natural virtue. Thus, the word *fair*, here, does not resonate with questions of equitable fairness or justly sharing resources; it is a word commending beauty of distant appearance. Even to raise or mention these questions is to step outside the chosen range of interests developed in this poem, where the ash-tree is real but the sailing bark is not. Likewise, distance prevents any recognition of whether these serene 'fields and meadows' are fully cultivated within a system of tenancy and agriculture.

**Yes! they wander on / In gladness all** (26-27): the exclamatory 'Yes!' is pure enthusiasm and delight, Coleridge now caught up in his own projection: he so warmly imagines their gladness at the scene which he has invented for them that it confirms his own mood and becomes his own sympathetic gladness, on their behalf and thus also on his own, and on ours. *Yes* is

conversational and as if a spoken expression, but it is also pindaric in the sense of uplift and outcry. In this way, the exclamation-mark here represents not his own surprise directly, because he has so often viewed these familiar sights, but his conjecture of the surprise *for them*, at this for them first sight; and thus by transfer their surprise can be the renewal of his, too. The exclamation-mark of delighted recognition thus belongs to a complex of shared and reciprocated responses, within the whole of this little community; for which at this moment the poet is the recorder and scribe (for himself and for the reader), as well as a kind of spirit-director and an immobilised but active participant.

**But thou, methinks, most glad** (27): here the general address of the poem as a spoken monologue is specifically directed to Charles, because as we shall discover he is carrying severe wounds to his spirit most in need of restorative joy and pleasure: offered by these presences of innocent Nature, full of life and beauty and sweetness. Again 'methinks' is enclosed in these conversational commas, to represent the delicate hesitancy of not wishing to intrude too far into private feelings by maladroit conjecture.

**My gentle-hearted Charles!** (28): Charles Lamb and Samuel Taylor Coleridge had been fellow-students at Christ's Hospital (Bluecoat School) and were very close friends thereafter. Lamb recounted in an essay of 1820 his memory of Coleridge as a schoolboy 'reciting Homer in his Greek, or Pindar' (*Essays of Elia: First Series*). In a letter of November 1791 Coleridge, then already a student at Cambridge, described his current enthusiasm: 'I am reading Pindar, and composing Greek verse, like a mad dog. I am very fond of Greek verse ...' (*Letters*, ed. Griggs, I, p. 17). The reason for Lamb's being called 'gentle-hearted', here, is perhaps on account of his sweet nature but in particular because of his tender care towards his deeply troubled sister (see below). Yet Lamb himself was not amused at this description of himself and complained that it should not go into print.

**pined / And hunger'd after Nature** (28-29): Coleridge imagines the loss of easy and close connection with Nature, as the intimately inclusive world of living natural things and agencies, to be a kind of prolonged starvation ('many a year'). The verb to *pine* is a doublet in origin with *pain*

(compare line 31): it is painful to be deprived of what confirms man's humanity by the experience of active life such as in all these links and aspects to be experienced in this miniature excursion. This is not a merely picturesque idea, because the picturesque traveller was always at a distance from the changing prospect, always carrying his own life within as a different world from what is displayed outside; these travellers by contrast are caught up in roaring sounds, gleaming flashes of colour, strong motions like 'flings' and 'fann'd', trembling and nodding and dripping. This is a world of sights and energies that fully includes the inner mental world of memory and feelings and conscious thoughts, because all are to be part of the 'one life' that shares animation with all things.

**In the great City pent** (30): Lamb held a very humble post as clerk in the India House, in London, of low status and low income; he was bound to this post by his sense of duty to help support his impoverished family. 'wining thy way' describes the daily struggle of his effort to make a bare living, which deprives him of opportunity for contact with natural beauty so that he 'hunger'd after Nature'. Thus just as Coleridge at this moment is temporarily confined to a sweet and comfortable prison (his 'bower'), so Charles has been pent up in a way of life making him permanently a captive to duty. It is this parallel of ideas which makes the 'roaring dell' an image that joins (bridges) these two imprisonments: the dell is a closed space, deeply confined and walled in by rocky barriers, and yet it can be freely entered and freely enjoyed, as a place of pleasure rather than of penalty or punishment.

**With sad yet patient soul** (31): here is further testimony to Charles' gentle spirit under burdens of affliction, which he endured steadfastly and without complaint. The word 'soul' here is derived from Christian language and belief, and yet it is not God, exactly, but Nature that provides reassurance of a grand and cherishing design in the world of all things. 'the Almighty Spirit' (line 42) is for sure religious language, but this is perhaps the supreme ministering Spirit of Nature as much as a theological identification. (Later in his life Coleridge's religious beliefs became much more orthodox.)

**through evil and pain / And strange calamity!** (31-32): in the poem Coleridge will not say more about this oblique reference to a dreadful happening; but his close friends well knew the terrible facts. On 22nd September 1796, less than a year before the date of this poem, Mary Lamb, the much older sister of Charles, gave way while at home with her family to a sudden and violent fit of insanity, in which she attacked and killed her invalid mother with a knife and then wounded her elderly father, in the presence of her brother Charles (then aged just 21) who witnessed everything but was not quick enough to prevent the attack. An inquest was held, and a coroner's jury delivered a verdict of temporary insanity; she was at first to be confined in a mad-house, and then restored to the custody of Charles, who was to spend most of his adult life caring for her. Charles too had himself experienced a brief fit of madness ('frenzy') in 1795-6, and was confined. Charles used the word *calamity* in writing of 'the terrible calamities that have befallen our family', in a letter to Coleridge written five days after the shocking event. Coleridge describes the calamity as 'strange!', to say no more of it there, because it seemed to have been completely without motive or apparent cause, not recognisably a human action. All this must have been fresh in the minds of those involved in the domestic episode of this visit, as reported in this poem, bringing out Coleridge's deep sympathy for the wounded spirit of his special friend. One of Coleridge's evident hopes is that the peace and beauty of rural nature may help to soothe the memories that were haunting Charles, and doubtless further threatening his peace of mind.

**Ah! slowly sink ...** (32): the lines following here (32-37) are a passionate hymn to the vibrant beauties of Nature, intense in expansive feeling and marked by constant exclamation. The colours are now not *poor* and *dark* (as earlier) but vivid and rich, as with the approach of evening the sun's powerful radiance gives brilliance and shining colouration to all around it. This is full pindaric rhapsody, called into being as a scenic culmination to the actual evening walk. Psychologically it follows after the mention of *evil* and *pain*, to lift up the spirit and find overflowing compensation from simple glories in the atmosphere, in thought and memory. The Sun is the central power in this natural world, just as the Almighty Spirit presides



over the spiritual realm; both agencies give ardent expression to the inherent powers of poetic imagination. We should note that every uncombined appearance of the word *sun* in this poem carries an initial capital-letter, like a proper name. In detail, 'Ah!' is an exclamatory utterance immediately followed by its exclamation-mark; the splendour of this moment is to be held steady in the mind's eye ('slowly'), just as the sun in glory seems to be encircled by a shining halo or nimbus that revives the specialised sense of 'glory', as a ring or halo of light placed by religious painters around the head of a sacred personage. Note too that the pronouns here have become less colloquial and more formally 'poetic': *ye, ye, ye; thou, thou*. Yet this prospect is to be intensified in colour and emotion not by a self-centred imagination only, but once again by sympathetic projection for his friends. This is the climax of beauty that he wishes into being on their behalf, so that they shall be the ones to have this exalted experience; he is to be the poet *for them*, he wishes this *for them*, and this gives back to him unselfishly what he by tender generosity wishes them to have: gladness and joy. By this intense reciprocation this poem is also able to draw in the reader, by extending the interchange even though we are double-distant from what is described here. The visitors share in Coleridge's store of memory-images directly, by modest travel to the actual landscape places; but we depend completely on the narrative of imagination, expressed dramatically through these proxy visitations.

**thou glorious Sun!** (33): this is direct address, in full pindaric, ode-like manner; and of course this sun is not here and now seen by the poet, only remembered; maybe in memory rather than by direct observation he can feel more free to rise to elevated heights of imagination and eloquence. Yet the active link is that by recourse to this memory he can imagine the radiant and direct impression for his friends, who will often have witnessed splendid sunsets, but maybe not by such a sudden transit from a confined and darker space (the dell) outwards and upwards into a wide-open prospect suffused with majestic sunlight, on the very verge of its own disappearance. The poet in full flight of impassioned address calls on Nature to reveal to the walkers her finest splendours, which by energy of secondary transferring imagination come fully back to him also and into

his poem. *glorious* is a word normally with three syllables, here powerfully contracted into almost two.

**richlier burn, ye clouds!** (35): this is the spectacular sunset spread like fire through the surrounding clouds. The rhythm of invocation is pressed forward by these poetical intensities; the idea of 'more richly' is compacted into a near-unprecedented and beautiful word, 'richlier', perhaps on the model of Edmund Spenser in *The Faerie Queene*: 'Much fairer, then the former, was that roome, / And richlier by many partes arayd' (III.xi.51.1-2); and compare *boldlier* in Coleridge's 'The Aeolian Harp' (1795).

**ye distant groves!** (36): irradiated by the brilliant slant rays of the setting sun, a few innocent clumps of trees become transformed into 'groves', an older formal word designating the sacred dwelling-places of the gods of nature. The trees are brought to restored power by revealing their connection with ancient spiritual values, these values now *distant* from modern life. In this perspective both the poet of this poem and the visitors to his landscape all are set at distance from this earliest poetic truth-value of 'groves!'; and yet the strong intensity of the poetical exclamation-mark can revive this ancient link, to the world of the pindaric ode and its original glory.

**And kindle, thou blue Ocean!** (37): here the exclamation-mark is especially deserved, as it marks a powerfully mixed metaphor. *kindle* describes some matter set on fire and bursting into flame, yet the *ocean* is water that will not and cannot literally burn. And yet as shafts of orange-yellow sunlight flash upon the blue water and strike up reflected brilliance it may seem as if the water is on fire; Coleridge does not merely describe these effects, but actively provokes them by his use of commanding, imperative verbs: *sink, shine, burn, live*, culminating in *kindle*. Again this is not so much picturesque as pindaric, or even Homeric, on the model of Spenser, *Faerie Queene*, III.xi.41, hardly at all conversational (seven exclamation-marks in six lines of verse!); and yet the words are mostly simple, not suffused with high-toned Latinate abstraction.

**So my Friend** (37): after the previous visionary invocation of power and beauty in the grandeur of the sunset, concluding with the exclamation-mark after

'Ocean!' the poem returns to 'Gentle Charles': at this calmer turn in the direction of address, the word 'So' carries all the force of excitement, over and forward to be bestowed upon the friend, now amazed in silent contemplation.

**Struck with deep joy** (38): with almost unconscious skill the poet restructures the expected normal emphasis of this phrase, not 'Struck *with deep joy*' but '*Struck with deep / joy*', which slows down the movement just as Charles will have slowed down under the deep impression of joyfulness. Coleridge has allowed himself to become possessed with imagined power of emotion, based in his own memory, to be transferred through this very swerve of emphasis into a gift which he can re-experience and thus re-assign.

**May stand, as I have stood** (38) : here is how the transfer is carried out. *may* represents grammatically both possibility and desire. This horizon of spectacle is now possible for the motionless group: perhaps they might *not* thus stand, but if all goes well they *will*. The reason is the optative sense of *may*, that the poet wishes and desires this moment *for* them, enabling them to have it, strongly calling it down upon them as an opportunity now fully open, a kind of natural blessing by which for Charles his life may even be transformed and restored. '*may stand*' renews the change of emphasis in the metre, so that both these words carry stress: *may / stand*, giving added controlled force to the meaning here. The way in which *I* (the poet) has so often stood when coming to that place, is the authority of memory as precedent for the power of sympathetic imagination, once more to donate this experience to them and in particular to Charles. *may* because Nature allows and occasions and bestows itself upon all thus attuned to the 'one life' of all things: the possible shall become the actual, with full force of recognition and acceptance; which means again that the poet can (may) rediscover his own shared human feeling and wonderment.

**Silent with swimming sense** (39): because all is fluid and beyond restrictions of physical human movement, their perception and inner feelings are all blended and fused and released, as if in a medium of shared consciousness, like swimming free and uplifted in an ocean. Normally separated bounds

of individual being are joined poetically by the alliteration upon *s* and the repeated transfer of expected metrical stress: not *Silent* but *Silent*. Thus too the reader is included in the moment of transformation, because it is performed for us in the verse movement, to apprehend the experience of swimming in the flux of these moving and turning verse lines. Coleridge wrote in a letter of 14th October 1797, having quoted lines 38-43 from an earlier draft of this poem: 'It is but seldom that I raise & spiritualize my intellect to this height' (Coleridge, *Letters*, I, p. 350).

**yea, gazing round** (39): the emphatic and confirming word *yea*, with the comma after it holding the pause of affirmation, continues the effect of *So*; the word *yea* is without disguise a grandly poetical utterance, almost biblical in power, sharing this feature with *yes!* (line 26) and *ah!* (line 32). Again the stress is strongly altered, from '*yea gazing round*' to '*yea / gazing round*': the eyes scan the full range of the open prospect spreading in all directions as if momentarily now giddy with the completeness of outlook, as if out of their own bodies; or, they are transformed *within* their own bodies.

**Less gross than bodily** (41): by the merged sense of spirit and body together, because the 'one life' can keep body and soul in unison, as united and transformed. The human body is the link between material nature and the domain of inward feeling; it establishes the values of community and personal affection, gentleness and human love, just as it can also sustain injury from unfortunate accident.

**such hues** (41) : again the metrical stress is altered, to continue the emphasis of powerful description: *such / hues*. The varied colours of natural appearance conceal (but only partly) the inward presence of the 'Almighty Spirit', almost now an acknowledgement of a single god-head within the multiple aspects of external colouration. This may be an allusion to the Christian God *of* nature, but it may also allude to a god *in* Nature, a pantheist spirit of universal power because connecting and expressing the inwardness of all things, able to guide human beings, when uplifted into the mood of spirit, to recognise this underlying unity as present to and within human experience.

**the Almighty Spirit** (42): by a traditional poetic elision of metrical stress the reader here is to apprehend 'th'Almighty', as three stresses rather than four because the two next-door vowels are run together, to maintain the prevailing iambic pentameter rhythm. This is a feature of latinate verse construction, strongly adopted by Milton, so that the normal habits of natural speech are again altered, in the direction of elevated utterance (ode-like and pindaric); compare Andrew Marvell, writing 'On a Drop of Dew': 'Congealed on earth: but does, dissolving, run / Into the glories of th'Almighty Sun' (39-40; published, 1681). The effect of a quasi-divine agency is felt even though partially concealed from view: *yet* has the sense here of 'even though' (despite being veiled). This section of the poem was much revised in Coleridge's various drafts, reflecting his serious doubts about how explicitly theological he should allow it to be. It's also of interest that Lamb claimed to be not impressed by this 'unintelligible abstraction-fit about the manner of the Deity's making Spirits perceive his presence' (quoted in Stillinger, *Coleridge and Textual Instability*, p. 46).

**A delight / Comes sudden on my heart** (43-44): now a second paragraph-break commences the third and final movement of the poem, as an ode-like division of its form. The narrative returns from the travelling visitors to Coleridge's own personal station (within the lime-tree bower) and to the inward consciousness of his own horizon of experience. What has been the outward flow of the sympathetic imagination now makes a returning reflex movement, back into the place of his own feelings ('my heart'). This uplift of spirit that he has wished for as gift to them now suddenly flows back to him, as a more than full compensation for the set-back of being left behind. Their joy is now, even unexpectedly, his own joy also: because all is able to be shared.

**As I myself were there!** (45): the exclamation-mark again acknowledges the surprise of the discovery, that he has been as if transported to the very scene of these occurrences. This is maybe a key phrase in this poem's idea of how human feeling works or can work; that by imagination the experience of separate selves can be transferred and thus shared, that what you give you also receive and in full measure. Poetry is a way of

claiming for the imagination benevolent powers which can then be re-experienced by the poet himself. *were* is in subjunctive mood (grammatically), as traditionally representing the conjectured rather than the actual; but it carries on the optative desiring force of 'may stand' (line 38), wishing and hoping that this self-relocation may be real in spirit even if not actual in body.

**Nor in this bower** (45) : 'nor' has the sense of 'even within the confinement of this place'; even though poetic consciousness cannot take part directly in these current experiences, by resource of memory and imagination it can fully do so. 'This bower' is a pointing phrase indicating the pleasure of the place but also its restriction: '*this* bower' is after all his prison; and yet now it is hardly a prison but a place of intense sympathetic delight.

**have I not marked / Much that has sooth'd me** (46-47): to *mark* is to observe with insight and understanding, to recognise and place in memory-store the lessons of perception. 'have I not marked' has the sense of 'have I failed to mark'. The poet acknowledges that his agitations of spirit (even, his sense of loss at the disadvantage of his injury) can be calmed by remembrance of previous delight. But the word 'sooth'd' contains also deeper insight, because the earlier meaning of *sooth* was *truth*, truth of knowledge and of fulfilled prediction. So what calms him is not just random fancy but deeper and more durable poetic truth; this it is that will carry him beyond the limits of confinement as he observes and understands the full beauty of where he actually now is, as well equal to the wider excitements of the travellers because part of the same world of spirit-feeling.

**Pale beneath the blaze / Hung the transparent foliage** (47-48): as the sunlight slants down into his bower it illuminates the lower leaves of the trees around him, reminding of the 'few poor yellow leaves' of line 14 but here transformed into life by the blaze that has already revealed its power to 'kindle' the ocean. That the leaves are 'transparent' ensures that they will not block his vision but rather give it radiance and maybe glory. It's to be noted that 'hung' is in the past tense of repeated memory, and this past

tense continues until it is overtaken by actually present experience, 'which usurps' (line 53).

**and I watch'd / Some broad and sunny leaf** (48-49): now in memory his gaze is steadily fixed upon a single leaf, to apprehend not a wide expanse but a particular detail, rich with its own meaning. In this way a present small thing compensates for many absent larger things, representing the many by the one because patient observation can find the full spirit-truth of even confined experience (compare 'narrow plot', line 61). In a letter of 10th September 1802 Coleridge wrote: 'Nature has her proper interest; & he will know what it is, who believes & feels, that every Thing has a Life of it's own, & that we are all *one Life*. A Poet's *Heart & Intellect* should be *combined, intimately combined & unified*, with the great appearances in Nature' (*Letters*, II, p. 864, italics original). Here the broadness of the single leaf mimics the large expanse of the more distant view. Across this extended leaf-surface viewed from the seat below there are moving shadows of the leaf immediately above, which intercepts the sunlight and creates a rhythmic movement of light and shade.

**Dappling its sunshine!** (51): *dappling* is the vivid name for this special effect (compare *speckled*, line 11), and the poet loves the memory of it as a form of contrast within unity, unity within contrast: marked as a moment of watchful perception by the grateful exclamation-mark. Also the usual iambic stress pattern has again been reversed, with the strong emphasis on the first syllable (*dap-*), to promote further the surprise and delight of finding a power of dynamic thought and feeling in this one single object of nature. Again also here the trembling play of one form, by light and shade with the effects of other forms, indicates the *bridging* of energies mutually responsive and interacting: even in miniature the one life of Nature is joined up by links not of mere mechanical cause and effect but by analogies of sight and vision, performed by observed optical effects.

**that Walnut-tree / Was richly ting'd** (51-52) : as the sun's lowered rays spread across the trees and plants all around the description observes each form of leafy growth catching the light and glowing with scattered radiance, both dark and brilliant, because this is a community of shapes and living

things; the content of past memory glides inwards into present imagination, so that the verb-forms slip into the immediate present tense: from *was* and *lay* to *usurps* and 'now ... *Makes* their dark branches gleam'. Thus each separate growing thing shines with the one life that they share, and that we all share with them. The tree is *that* one because he knows it so well, he can see it from where he sits and as he writes: compare 'This little lime-tree bower' (line 46), 'Those fronting elms' (line 54). Perhaps incidentally to be noted here is that the walnut is not a naturally-occurring tree in Britain; this one will have been planted for its crop of nuts as well as maybe for its shade, natural growth and human purpose co-operating together.

**Makes their dark branches gleam** (55): continuing the play of light and dark noticed in *dapple*, this power of sunlight to transform natural appearance, from dark to light, black to radiant, demonstrates a natural transformation which is echoed in parallel by the power of poetic imagination to discover these agencies and mimic their effects, by shaping them out of the latency of remembered perception. As the ocean was kindled (line 37), so these branches gleam and catch fire in lighter colours (*hues*, the same word as in line 41) and in deeper radiance, 'richly ting'd' (or maybe even *richlier*, as in line 35).

**Through the late twilight** (56): the variation of metrical stress-pattern is again devised to shape the movement and rhythm of this phrase. The motion of sense is to be slowed down, ready for a shift from plants to animal creatures, and so the stresses are first, \x for x\, then \\\ for x\, where x marks an unstressed syllable and \ marks a stressed one (this is *trochee* substituted for *iamb*, then *spondee* substituted for *iamb*, to use the traditional terms). The present-tense verbs are continued and the shift to here-and-now is marked by repeated use of *now* (lines 55, 57); the sympathetic imagination has made a bridge from memory to immediate experience, 'As I myself were there!' (line 45).

**now the Bat / Wheels silent by** (56-57): if there was one bat there were probably several, but a single instance introduces the conventional figure, of the bat at evening, as the sky darkens and the poet's thoughts turn inwards. But



there is a cumulative tendency to pay attention to single forms of being, not (or not merely) because they are traditionally typical, but because they dramatise the interplay between the one and the many, the singular and the universal.

**not a Swallow twitters** (57): the bat is silent because that is its nature (its sounds are too high-pitched for humans to hear); but the swallow is silent, its twitter-sounds unheard, because it is absent from the scene, having already gone to rest. This is an effect famously repeated by Keats in his ballad-poem 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci' (written in 1819): 'The sedge has withered from the lake, / And no birds sing! (3-4)' Since there are no birds present they cannot be heard to sing, and yet 'sing' is the sound that they would make if they were there, and the word 'sing' makes the sound present to imagination and to the reader's imagined hearing; just as 'twitters' also does.

**the solitary humble-bee / Sings in the bean-flower!** (59): here the bee which is normally a sociable creature is out of the hive later than usual; yet the cottage-garden evidently includes a planting of beans for the kitchen, and these flowers now in season (Coleridge does not merely invent any of these details) attract this late-foraging single bee in search of honey. This is not just *any* bee, an object of fancy, but *the* bee, specific because within sight and sound-range of the composing poet, and distinctive because it's the last one for this day (like the 'last rook', line 69); the same distinctiveness marks 'the Ash' (line 12), 'the leaf' (line 50), 'the ancient ivy' (line 53), 'the bean-flower' (line 59), and so on. The bee makes a droning or buzzing sound, but in this poetic mood all creatures sing their own proper song, just as the poet will sing this ode-like song for his gentle friend; maybe the bee is foraging for sweetness in nature just as Coleridge and his friends are doing also. Again the stress-pattern is altered, to shape the rhythm of this small culminating moment: not 'Sings *in*' but '*Sings* / in': the bee is not *still* but in constant motion, and yet persistently ('still') he goes about his task: it is a sweet surprise that still so late he does this (thus calling for yet another exclamation-mark).

**Henceforth I shall know** (59): at this point the poem switches from close lyrical description to a more generalised perspective: to gather up understanding from observation. However confined and cut off may be particular circumstances, a person who has knowledge and sincerity ('wise and pure') will find Nature and its present life all around on all sides, a constant companion to stimulate awareness of Love and Beauty. Love is the motive that finds and responds to natural beauty, and beauty is what provokes and sustains love (compare 'Beauties and Feelings', line 3). This is the 'lesson' that the poet has taught himself through following the sequence of his own poetic thoughts; it is a particular lesson for Charles, who hungers for it in the waste of his damaged personal life, and it is a lesson already deeply understood by William and Dorothy Wordsworth who were his companions on the walk. Nor is this lesson something preached or schoolmasterly, or sentimental: it is a discovery made by the sympathetic imagination working at the height of its powers and in full generosity of shared spirit.

**the wise and pure** (60): this is a rather naked idealism, especially in view, for instance, of current events in France; but *pure* marks a simple trust in the goodness of Nature, of which common humanity is a part, and *wise* because understanding these things is to esteem by patient experience a deep truth. And yet in 'Fears in Solitude: Written in April 1798, During the Alarm of an Invasion', Coleridge opens his poem with 'A green and silent spot, amid the hills, / A small and silent dell' (1-2), and it's this 'quiet spirit-healing nook' that he fears may be violated and overrun, despoiled also by internal corruption; 'Remembering thee, O green and silent dell' (229) is a concluding moment of heartfelt but fragile defence.

**no plot so narrow** (61): a *plot* is a small piece of assigned land, perhaps a modest cottage-garden, here so narrow as hardly giving space to breathe or to cultivate the companionable forms of natural growth; and yet even within such restricted horizons the arousing power of Nature is not prevented from guarding and guiding the human heart.

**be but Nature there** (61): the role assigned to Nature is to console by awakening the best human feelings, to guide and keep the heart steady, to protect

against unhappiness and desolation. This role closely resembles the Christian understanding of God's ever-present and protective care for his creatures; but significantly here that spiritual agency is assigned to Nature, or to a kind of God-in-Nature, since in the workings of this poem the quasi-divine spirit of highest joy is intimately linked to the smallest things of natural reality on the ground: leaves and rocks, fields and birds as true to themselves while also links in the unity of being that connects man to every part of his own nature, to all Nature. The sun pours its life-giving energy into every aspect of this world, as a kind of visible agent for Nature's less directly visible operation. This is a central Romantic scheme of what could be called 'natural theology'; but unusually here this narrative of experience is not devised for the poet's own interior fulfillment, nor merely as a proxy experience to be communicated to the reader; it is devised consciously as an offering to a heart-wounded friend who is stationed within the poem as part of its action: so that he may have a new positive inspiration, to re-connect to the fullness of life. This is the primary generosity of the poem's foremost purpose, so that the poet's own intense feelings of shared joy come almost as an afterthought, a benefit not deliberately sought for; and this unselfish motive in the poet allows his own joy to be a constant surprise, signalled throughout by the alternation of past with present tense, and the many exclamation-marks.

**'Tis well to be bereft of promis'd good** (65): here is a brief account of the poet's own discovery in working this poem, that loss of present happiness may raise our consciousness to contemplate a no less active joy in the life of others, in their own world such that we cannot immediately share in it. We are to recollect here that the friends are free to wander through the scenes of beauteous nature, while the poet is confined to his bower: he is prevented from sharing their discoveries and their joy, even though he has devised the schedule of their journey and can re-visit in memory what he hopes will be their own responses. *bereft* is a strong word for acute disappointment, to be endured with fortitude, and it introduces this corrective moral sentiment, not to be greedy for joy as applicable only to our own case. For the author of this poem the lesson has already been learned, since rather than pine after the free access to nature in all its wide expanse, as enjoyed by the visitors, he has turned his attention to what is

immediately close to him, and has found a no less enriching world all within and about his bower. Through his power of sympathetic imagination the experience of others can, by vivid and projective contemplation, become real to his own experience as well. Compare this thought included in a letter to William Sotheby of 13 July 1802: 'It is easy to cloathe Imaginary Beings with our own Thoughts & Feelings; but to send ourselves out of ourselves, to *think* ourselves in to the Thoughts and Feelings of Beings in circumstances wholly & strangely different from our own ... who has atchieved it? Perhaps only Shakespeare' (*Letters*, II, p. 810). To 'lift the Soul' is what in course of this narrative he has already learned to do, by borrowing from his own memories as given over to his friends and then received back from them. Afflicted by a grief quite as severe as that suffered by Charles, Coleridge wrote in his 'Dejection: An Ode' (finally in *Sibylline Leaves*, 1817): 'O Lady! we receive but what we give, / And in our life alone does nature live' (47-8); and yet later in that same poem, constantly re-drafted, the speaking poet recovers his own joy by wishing the sweet benefit of such joy upon his beloved companion. Wordsworth made a similar impassioned wish for the joy of his dear, dear Sister at the close of his poem on Tintern Abbey, also an ode in all but name.

**With lively joy** (67): to describe joy as *lively* is to call up multiple possibilities of sense: chiefly, active and vigorous; or, sharing the character of life itself. Both senses are joined, but the second gives strength and maybe also a more universal dignity to the first. A joy able to contemplate its own knowledge even when denied its actual enjoyment relieves the intelligent mind of disappointment and self-pity.

**When the last Rook / Beat its straight path along the dusky air** (68-69): another single and solitary creature; as the evening draws on close to nightfall and the poem winds down towards its conclusion; the word *last* takes on a certain resonance, as maybe an omen of finality. He cannot write '*this* last rook' because though he has himself often seen such a lone bird in the darkening sky, he cannot identify the particular one that Charles will or may see (have seen), nor can he know that any one rook would be the last

one *for them*; we are returned to the past-tense narrative ('beat') which is derived from the poet's own memory-store.

**Homewards, I blest it!** (70): at this final stage all creatures make tracks for home, the place of return to a domestic settled location. Here again is a close blend of spirit-abstraction, Nature as man's rightful home and proper place, expressed in and by the actual cottage, the actual bower, surrounded by these real trees and real bean-flowers, none of them merely invented as poetical devices but true to perception and memory and real-life encounter. Rooks nest gregariously, in colonies, and so at evening when they take flight back to their collective roosting-places, that is home for them. Just in case this flight could convey a possibly darker undertone of meaning, the poet speaks a spiritual reprieve or declaration of innocence, to confer a signifying power upon this bird as a benevolent sign. Coleridge does almost slip into the role of a priest of Nature, here, but the function of a Christian celebrant pronouncing a sacramental blessing is only obliquely imitated. At a moment of perhaps comparable intensity in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* the speaker of that poem describes the water-snakes all around their motionless ship: 'A spring of love gushed from my heart, / And I bless'd them unaware!' (V.276-7).

**deeming, its black wing / ... Had cross'd the mighty Orb's dilated glory** (70, 72): here the language becomes even more saturated with borrowed sacral images and echoes. In Christian symbolism the orb represents the created world that God appoints for man's dwelling-place, and the cross (as in 'cross'd') represents Christ's sacrificial mission, to redeem man's spirit from the sins of his fallen nature. *deeming* allows the poet to devise this imaginary moment of perception by poetic licence, and also to assign implied meanings to natural events (to *re-deem*). The outstretched wing-span of the bird does make a sign of the cross against the very orb of the setting sun, just as the sun's glory (line 33) is a reminder of that use of a shining halo or nimbus in early paintings to surround the heads of sacred personages. All this is close to being a divine moment of vision, the sacred no longer *veiled* (line 42) but fully visible and almost fully declared. And yet the reality is the shining sun and a flying bird; *mighty* echoes the earlier use of 'Almighty' (line 42) but it is only an echo, and quite what

may be resolved in Charles' mind at this moment cannot be fully known, only supposed. The world of Nature is palpably close to the world of the divine, but is not swallowed up by it.

**(Now a dim speck, now vanishing in light)** (71): these brackets enclose this moving image as like some astronomical transit, glimpsed through a lens, the dark and the light in vivid contrast; the bird's silhouette almost vanishing in the blaze (compare line 47) but then flickering back into sight (*dim / speck*). The use of *now ... now* creates a small drama of appearance and power, as active in our immediate proxy consciousness even though the main narrative is still in the past tense.

**While thou stood'st gazing** (73): again a reminder of the earlier moment of powerful illumination (lines 39-40) where the verb *gaze* signifies intense and fixed vision, arresting all other motion and mental activity. To *stand* in this sense is to come to an astonished standstill, suffused with the power of the moment, its power to arouse meanings and images of meaning or even the sense of being present to meanings that cannot be identified. *stood'st / gazing* is metrically intense also, the two stresses pressed together against the more normally relaxed flow of blank verse. A great swirl of imaginative conjecture is here, strongly focussed in the sun's visible image, but carried across from Coleridge's memory to what he imagines for his visitors, and what he re-imagines that they themselves will imagine, which he can then re-experience and re-express in order to carry this across to the reader of his poem. The dark pulsing movement of the bird is the overt expression of muscular life and body-energy, small but intense, beating across this mighty screen of power up in the sky and not deflected from finding its way back to its natural home.

**or, when all was still, / Flew creaking o'er thy head** (73-74): in case this final culminating moment should dissolve into a sacred parable or theological abstraction, this solitary rook is imagined to be audible in its wing-flaps, a real bird, and Coleridge subsequently adds a note to his poem to record his pleasure at discovering observational confirmation for his use of *creaking*: 'Some months after I had written this line [line 74], it gave me pleasure to observe that Bartram [in his *Travels through North & South Carolina*,

1791, 1794] had observed the same circumstance of the Savanna Crane. "When the Birds move their wings in flight, their strokes are slow, moderate and regular; and even when at a considerable distance or high above us, we plainly hear the quill-feathers; their shafts and webs upon one another creek as the joints or working of a vessel in a tempestuous sea".

**and had a charm / For thee** (74-75): *charm* is an ingeniously chosen word, because its sense ranges from a relaxed minor pleasure of appearance and enjoyment, to a magical entrancement almost supernatural in force (derived from Latin *carmen*, 'song, poetic chant'). It is not a word that makes any kind of preaching point, about redemption or divine mercy, because it can be quite well understood as domestic and relaxed, even at home in conversation. At the same time the sense of latent supernatural power in natural images like this one is well established in *The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere*. Elsewhere Coleridge wrote of 'the sudden charm, which accidents of light and shade, which moon-light or sun-set diffused over a known and familiar landscape' (*Biographia Literaria*, II, Chap. 14). The ode-like and thus pindaric elevation of this poem is coming down towards its conclusion now, and yet the effect of this *charm* is concentrated upon Charles, out of the three visitors, as likely to be most responsive to an experience so unfamiliar to him, as one most in need of natural consolation, and thus most dear to the poet in this moment by the power of sympathy and long-standing friendship. It might also be noted that the word *charm* contains the word *harm* and subdues its potential damage, here. There is a touch of humour, too, in *charm*, because the rook's noisy flight strikes a note of amusing contrast with its impressive setting, that may also excite whimsical affection.

**No Sound is dissonant which tells of Life** (76): this final movement does not need an exclamation-mark, because this conclusion is not surprising but is the truth discovered and revealed by the whole experience. Coleridge also used the word *discordant* in a similar way: the power of imagination 'reveals itself in the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities' (*Biographia Literaria*, II, Chap. 14, again). All the individual forms of single and separate life in this poem, all the distinct moments of

encounter with the near and the far, the small and the large, the light and the dark, things in motion and also still, express their connecting unity in the One Life idea, of Nature that includes human nature and is joined in such unity by a central purpose of its own being, to give meaning to separate life and to celebrate indwelling principal values like truth and beauty and inspirational human joy. This idea which he shared closely with Wordsworth at this time is not anywhere directly proclaimed, here, but runs latently throughout like a connecting thread. Coleridge is already by this time somewhat anxious and doubtful whether this belief can be adequately reconciled with orthodox Christian faith, and later he more or less suspends the whole project; though traces of it survive in both Coleridge's and Wordsworth's later works. But at the conclusion of this poem any apparently stray or odd or discrepant feature of natural appearance can be recognised to belong within the unity of Nature and its inclusive, joined-up meaning. The strange creaking sounds of a rook's wing-beats might be considered an anticlimax, an interruption to the solemn mood, but the grand and the small, beautiful and oddly picturesque, all belong together. This is the overarching encounter which Coleridge so ardently desires for his visitors, and especially for Charles, and it is his power of imaginative sympathy which directs the narrative to this unitary conclusion.

**tells of Life** (76): the compound verb *tell of* in this closing line again produces a delicate play of meanings: it carries the sense of 'report, and thus 'confirm', as endorsing by evidence; but also it carries the sense of 'recount the story', 'tell the tale'. In Coleridge's poem both senses are active; his narrative is his personal story told from life (the domestic 'conversation poem'), and is also the evidence of his story's deep underlying truth (the implied pindaric ode), of his hope that each aspect may support and fulfill the other. In more theoretic terms Coleridge explains this hoped-for balance thus: 'To know that we are in sympathy with others, moderates our feelings as well as strengthens our convictions: and for the mind, which opposes itself to the faith of the multitude, it is more especially desirable, that there should exist an object out of itself, on which it may fix its attention, and thus balance its own energies' (Coleridge, *The Friend*, Number 8, 1809, ed. Rooke, II, p. 113).



## II. BACKGROUND, POINTS OF VIEW

- (a) As we have no immediate experience of what other men feel, we can form no idea of the manner in which they are affected, but by conceiving what we ourselves should feel in the like situation .... Though our brother is upon the rack, as long as we ourselves are at our ease, our senses will never inform us of what he suffers. They never did, and never can, carry us beyond our own person, and it is by the imagination only that we can form any conception of what are his sensations. Neither can that faculty help us to this any other way, than by representing to us what would be our own, if we were in his case. It is the impressions of our own senses only, not those of his, which our imaginations copy. By the imagination we place ourselves in his situation, we conceive ourselves enduring all the same torments, we enter as it were into his body, and become in some measure the same person with him ....

Sympathy, however, cannot, in any sense, be regarded as a selfish principle. When I sympathize with your sorrow or your indignation, it may be pretended, indeed, that my emotion is founded in self-love, because it arises from bringing your case home to myself, from putting myself in your situation, and thence conceiving what I should feel in the like circumstances. But though sympathy is very properly said to arise from an imaginary change of situations with the person principally concerned, yet this imaginary change is not supposed to happen to me in my own person and character, but in that of the person with whom I sympathize.

ADAM SMITH, from *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759); ed. D.D. Raphael and A.L. Macfie (Oxford, 1976), Part I, Section I, Chap. I: 'Of Sympathy', p. 9; Part VII, Section III, Chap. I: 'Of those Systems which deduce the Principle of Approbation from Self-Love', p. 317. The editors comment: 'Sympathy is central in Smith's account but is itself more complex than Hume's concept of sympathy. For Hume, sympathy is a sharing of the pleasure or pain produced in a person affected by an action. For Smith, sympathy can be the sharing of *any* feeling and its first role in moral approbation concerns the motive of the agent. The

spectator who sympathizes with the agent's motive approves of the action as proper. Sympathy with the feelings of the person affected by the action comes in to help form the more complex judgement of merit. The judgement of merit expresses a double sympathy, both with the benevolent motive of the agent and with the gratitude felt by the person benefited' (Introduction, p. 13).

- (b) The night was winter in his roughest mood;  
 The morning sharp and clear. But now at noon  
 Upon the southern side of the slant hills,  
 And where the woods fence off the northern blast, 60  
 The season smiles, resigning all its rage,  
 And has the warmth of May. The vault is blue  
 Without a cloud, and white without a speck  
 The dazzling splendour of the scene below.  
 Again the harmony comes o'er the vale; 65  
 And through the trees I view th'embattled tow'r  
 Whence all the music. I again perceive  
 The soothing influence of the wafted strains,  
 And settle in soft musings as I tread  
 The walk, still verdant, under oaks and elms, 70  
 Whose outspread branches overarch the glade.  
 The roof, though moveable through all its length  
 As the wind sways it, has yet well suffic'd,  
 And, intercepting in their silent fall  
 The frequent flakes, has kept a path for me. 75  
 No noise is here, or none that hinders thought.

WILLIAM COWPER, from 'The Winter Walk at Noon', Book VI of *The Task, A Poem, in Six Books* (London, 1785), lines 57-76. This is the narrative not of projective imagination but of a fully interior alternative. Cowper's landscape view and the soothing influence of hearing the church-bells from nearby are gathered into his inward consciousness; the path here is for him, and then only secondarily for the reader: the poet is solitary at the centre of his world. Cowper is protected by the covering

of leafy trees, as was Coleridge in his garden bower; as readers we are allowed glimpses of this prospect and the feelings stirred by it, but the sympathetic harmony of parts joined to a whole is muted and private, not shared with any other human agency within this world.

- (c) When once we have entered into so auspicious a path as that of disinterestedness, reflection confirms our choice, in a sense in which it never can confirm any of the factitious passions we have named [e.g. avarice, rather than benevolence]. We find by observation that we are surrounded by beings of the same nature with ourselves. They have the same senses, are susceptible of the same pleasures and pains, capable of being raised to the same excellence and employed in the same usefulness. We are able in imagination to go out of ourselves, and become impartial spectators of the system of which we are part. We can then make an estimate of our intrinsic and absolute value; and detect the imposition of that self-regard which would represent our own interest as of as much value as that of the world outside. The delusion being thus sapped, we can, from time to time at least, fall back in idea into our proper post, and cultivate those views and affections which must be most familiar to the most perfect intelligence ....

We are so accustomed to fix our attention upon agreeable sensation that we can scarcely fail to recollect, at every interval the gratitude we shall excite, or the approbation we shall secure, the pleasure that will result to ourselves from our neighbour's well-being, the joys of self-applause, or the uneasiness that attends upon ungratified desire. Yet, after every deduction that can be made, the disinterested and direct motive, the profit and advantage of our neighbour, seems to occupy the principal place.

WILLIAM GODWIN, *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice and its Influence on Modern Morals and Happiness* (1798); ed. Isaac Kramnick (Harmondsworth, Mddx, 1976), Book IV, Chap. X: 'Of Self-Love and Benevolence', pp. 381, 384. Against the apparently overwhelming claims of a system of human self-interest in choice of voluntary action Godwin counter-claims for the unselfish pursuit of justice towards others

and the 'beauty of virtue' (p. 386); compare Smith, 'a new beauty in virtue' (*Moral Sentiments*, p. 316).

- (d) Any impression made on another can neither be the cause nor object of sensation to me. The impressions or idea left in my mind by this sensation, and afterwards excited either by seeing [an object] in the same state, or by any other means[,] is properly an idea of memory. This idea necessarily refers to some previous impressions in my own mind, and can only exist in consequence of that impression: it cannot be derived from any impression made on another. I do not *remember* the feelings of any one but myself .... On the other hand if I wish to anticipate my own future feelings, whatever these may be, I must do so by means of the same faculty, by which I conceive of those of others, whether past or future. I have no distinct or separate faculty on which the events and feelings of my future being are impressed beforehand .... I can only abstract myself from my present being and take an interest in my future being in the same sense and manner, in which I can go out of myself entirely and enter into the minds and feelings of others. In short there neither is nor can be any principle belonging to the individual which antecedently gives him the same sort of connection with his future being that he has with his past, or that reflects the impressions of his future feelings backwards with the same kind of consciousness that his past feelings are transmitted forwards through the channels of memory.

[WILLIAM HAZLITT], from *An Essay on the Principles of Human Action: Being an Argument in Favour of the Natural Disinterestedness of the Human Mind* (London, 1805), italics original [first published anonymously], pp. 112-4. As Hazlitt summarises this view at the start, 'The imagination, by means of which alone I can anticipate future objects, or be interested in them, must carry me out of myself into the feelings of others by one and the same process by which I am thrown forward as it were into my future being, and interested in it. I could not love myself, if I were not capable of loving others' (p. 3). This claim concerning the interests of the sympathetic imagination mounts a radical argument against an existing consensus, asserting that rather than memory of the

past it is the indeterminate future of human social existence that mobilises projective sympathy, just as for Hazlitt the field of action within which imagination has its sway is not (principally) the retrospect of memory and landscape but the personal, social and political domains of ethical choice and shared participation.

### III. SUPPLEMENTARY TECHNICAL NOTE

This poem, 'This Lime-Tree Bower my Prison', exists in a number of variant and earlier draft forms, some of them showing quite significant changes. For fundamental documentation see first J.C.C. Mays (ed.), Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Poetical Works, I: Poems* (Reading Text): Part 1 (*The Collected Works*, 16; Princeton, N.J., 2001), pp. 349-54; and in the same series, *Poetical Works, II: Poems* (Variorum Text): Part 1 (Princeton, N.J., 2001), pp. 480-7.

The textual evolution is fully described in Jack Stillinger, *Coleridge and Textual Instability: The Multiple Versions of the Major Poems* (New York, 1994), pp. 43-52, 148-53.

There have been many textual and critical/interpretative studies of this poem, among which are the following:

Durr (R.A.), "'This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison" and a Repeated Action in Coleridge', *ELH*, XXVI (1959), 514-30.

Rudrun (A.W.), 'Coleridge's "This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison"', *Southern Review* (Adelaide), I (1964), 30-42.

Haven (Richard), *Patterns of Consciousness; An Essay on Coleridge* (Amherst, Mass., 1969), pp. 63-75.

Parker (Reeve), *Coleridge's Meditative Art* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1975), Chap. 1, pp. 17-60.

Mellor (Anne K.), 'Coleridge's "This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison" and the Categories of English Landscape', *Studies in Romanticism*, 18 (1979), 253-70.

Engell (James), 'Imagining into Nature: *This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison*, in J. Robert Barth, S.J., and John L. Mahoney (eds), *Coleridge, Keats, and the Imagination: Romanticism and Adam's Dream* (Columbia, Mo, 1990), pp. 81-96.

Magnuson (Paul), 'The "Conversation" Poems', in Lucy Newlyn (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Coleridge* (Cambridge, 2002), Chap. 2, pp. 32-44.

Burwick (Frederick), 'Coleridge's Conversation Poems: Thinking the Thinker', *Romanticism*, 14 (2008), 168-82.

*Edited by John Wilkinson & Xu Sha*

## **Editorial Memoir: In Company with Poetry**

A star comes from far.

A seed  
storm pushes the door open  
life called up  
in Spring.

A seed  
thunder cuts it into two halves  
it opens up  
a completely new world.

with pain  
yet with pleasure  
one has to suffer  
to grow up.

challenge  
ever charging  
never better  
always more beautiful.

one breaks up into two halves:  
an earthly self and a heavenly self  
to watch each other  
smiling...

no Grail is found  
yet you grow green  
one poetry  
is created.

A star  
shining afar.

Li Zhimin  
March 1, 2012



## **Some Notes on *EPSIANS***

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Editor-in-Chief

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